

Language Challenges for Immigrants in USA

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Language discrimination refers to the unfair treatment of an individual based solely upon the characteristics of their speech; speech such as, accent, size of vocabulary and syntax. It can also involve a person's ability or inability to use one language instead of another. Because language discrimination is a form of national origin discrimination, the same body of law prohibits it. This type of discrimination generally makes it illegal to prefer one language over another, though there are many exceptions. . . ("Your Rights: Language Discrimination").

I propose to draw the readers' attention to the language struggles that immigrants endure when they leave their motherlands, how they are ridiculed in a "land of the free" for not knowing how to speak English without an accent or understand it when they are spoken to by the native speakers. These immigrants come to America because they are fleeing from persecution, poverty, disease, and are looking for a better life for themselves and their families. They believe that since America is a land of immigrants, they will be welcome despite the language barriers they will face. It is true that learning English is important, but there are many languages and different nations in the world, which makes it impossible for a person to communicate perfectly in all of them. What about the dialects found in some of the same languages? Actually, the British English speakers, consider the American English speakers as speaking with "an accent" and vice-versa. It is also interesting to note that some vocabulary and pronunciation in American English are different from that of British English.

In addition, all human beings deserve dignity, and as people who share the same earth, and similar basic human values, they should not be discriminated on the basis of language "because somebody does not speak the way I do" or "does not comprehend what I say in a different language." It is now the time to promote peace and understanding of language barriers after 150 years of freedom, progress, and reconciliation in the USA. Nevertheless, nobody can deny there are language challenges, but as the two idioms say, "variety is the spice of life" and "where there is a will, there is a way." Moreover, immigrants bring new cultural morals from their traditions, which enrich their new neighbors and communities. Then the people, who continue to discriminate against these immigrants because of their English deficiencies should first reflect on why they migrate, understand their origins, and what they contribute to the American society. However, my interest in this topic developed from conversations about language discrimination I had with some immigrants. Therefore, I got first-hand information from personal interviews that I conducted and from other observations, governmental documents, and some scholars who have written on what I call "a sensitive and a widespread practice." As a result, most of my information comes from the immigrants' interviews, and my major questions include the following: What is it like to relocate to a new country and learn a new language? What kinds of language barrier challenges are encountered in relation to a new language? Is it better to stay in one's native home and not migrate to America? For clarification, protection, and confidentiality, I will give letter- names to the immigrants I interviewed as: A B and C.

My first interview was with Mr. A, a young, handsome man from Spain. He came to America as a child with his family. He was not sure why his folks left the country, but he had to learn English and adjust to the American life style. He learned English in school with a private tutor whom he says, treated him harshly: "this is a country where you learn to write and speak politely, and you will be deported if you fail to learn to speak like the Americans." Mr. A added: "At that time in my life, I thought learning English was the hardest thing I had ever done. I had to learn English to speak politely and to function well in a new environment." Yes, a number of immigrants do their best to learn the language at all costs in order to fit into the American life.

Patreese A. Ingram has quoted Gorman who observes that: “Immigrants who are difficult to understand are taking steps to reduce the problem. Recognizing the need to communicate clearly, with English speakers, many immigrants are investing time and money to reduce their accents. Enrollment in accent-reduction classes has increased significantly over the past few years.”

Next, I asked Mr. A if he had experienced any language obstacles because of his accent or his nationality. He told me that he did, but not so much as a child as when he became an adult. In addition, Mr. A works in two different restaurants, and says this is where he experiences the most language prejudices and comments. He went on to explain how people talk to him as if he were dumb or slow. People say to me: “Learn how to speak English.” He narrated the time a co-worker became angry with him because an order was wrong: “learn to speak English properly, if you cannot speak, read, or listen to English, maybe you should go back to Mexico,” he yelled. Then, I asked his reaction about the comment. He replied calmly: “Her statement upset me but I would not lower myself to her level. What she said was hurtful, but I laughed because I am not from Mexico.” In one section of her paper, “Attitudes Toward Accents,” Patreese confirms my interviewee’s point when she writes: “although we are less likely to directly discriminate against others based on race, ethnicity, homeland, or economics, discrimination based on language seems to be ‘fair game.’ In this country, one’s ability is often judged on the basis of how well one speaks English.” Also, Ryan et al, as cited in Cargile, Takai, & Rodriguez agree that “unintelligence is one attribute that is often assigned to those who speak with a heavy accent.” In fact, according to the courts documents, many people have been sued in reference to language discrimination (*Xieng v. People’s National Bank of Washington*, *Andrew v Cartex Corporation*).

To close my first interview, I questioned Mr. A about his feelings about coming to America and if he prefers to be in Spain rather than stay where his language deficiency is the way other people judge him and his working skills. Mr. A explained: “I have worked hard to learn English and become a good American citizen; I do not miss Spain because I can always visit. I love my life in America, and I have accepted that some people are unkind. It does not make me want to stay here any less. I work very hard to get the things I want for me and my family, and I just want to live a normal life.” I praised his heroic attitude and let him go on doing what he was doing.

My second interview was with Ms. B, a single mother of two girls, and an adult learner at one Community College who moved here from Guam. Like Mr. A, Ms. B also experiences language discrimination at her job at a food service company. She openly told me about her life and her children. The children live in Guam with their father. When I asked her why she came to America, she explained: “Guam is not a bad place to live; I just need to make a stable home and future for my children. I want to be an example for them so that when they see me educated, they will also know the importance of a college degree. They will not depend on me or their father anymore.” Also, she shared with me that she was living with a host family so that she could save enough money to bring her family to the USA.

When I asked her about her challenges with the language barrier and how her English is, she had a very interesting, but sad story to tell. “My English is not that good, and so most of the time people just walk away from me,” she shyly whispered to me. “I guess you can call that rude,” she continued. “I am still learning the language every day, so I guess I tolerate people and they have to tolerate me.” This is very true because one critic emphasizes the acceptance idea when she suggests: “As America becomes an increasingly multicultural nation, the notion of and “accent” may change. It is to be hoped that we, as a nation, will become increasingly skilled in our ability to understand English spoken with various accents and tolerant in or attitudes toward all accents”(Ingram).

After I listened to her sympathetically, I asked the next question: “Would you rather be in Guam where everyone understands the language you speak?”

Quickly, she interrupted: “I love my home in Guam, but life is much better in America. I would rather be here where there is freedom of speech, religion, and government; where my children will dream big and achieve their dreams.”

Next, I questioned her about her college experiences. “Oh!” she gasped, that is another story.” “The students always ask me to repeat what I say and they intentionally make fun of my accent when we are in group discussions.” This reaction from the students is very common, whereby the students forget that communication is a two way process, and where both speaker and the listener have the obligation to listen to each other.

She further explained: “Even my instructor will allow them to mimic my English accent during class time.” I inquired how that kind of treatment makes her feel. She confirmed: “I am not ashamed of my accent, when I read or when I talk to them because I am proud of my good grades. I am always the best writer in my English Composition class. I write well even though I speak with an accent; I tell them . . . many of you cannot even pronounce my name correctly!” he defiantly concluded. I was shocked to hear those remarks from an educational institution. Nevertheless, I credited her good grades and I advised her to stay focused on her college aspirations.

To Ms. B’s college language situation, Ingram comments:

While different or foreign accents can sometimes interfere with the listener’s ability to understand the message, accents can conjure up negative evaluations of the speaker, reducing the listener’s willingness to accept their responsibility in the communication process. Sometimes, it becomes easy to say, “I simply can’t understand you, ‘placing full responsibility for the communication process on the speaker (18).

Patrees goes further to argue that everybody has standards and preferences about the spoken language and certain accents can take more time and effort to understand. It is better to make an effort to hear the content of the message and look beyond the stereotypes associated with the way the message is being spoken. Friedman advocates for several steps when working with someone who is difficult to understand:

- First don’t pretend to understand. Ask the person to slow down a bit because you are having difficulty understanding them.
- Second, don’t rush. Slow down yourself.
- Third, resist the temptation to shout. The speaker is not hard of hearing.
- Fourth, avoid being rude. Ask for help from others if you need it.

Another immigrant, C that I interviewed was a refugee from Ethiopia and he owned a Convenience store and a gas station. He was a friendly, soft spoken, and a well-built gentle man with an extrovert personality. He spoke very good English and aside from his slight accent, one would not be able to tell he is an immigrant. He too was very open with me. He said that he left his country because of bad politics. He was one of the Ministers in the Ethiopian government during a dictatorship regime, and when he opposed the corrupt rule, he was forced and locked in a trunk of a car and finally imprisoned for six years. He managed to escape by the help of his brother who was also a refuge in America. Therefore, he came as a refugee and lived with his brother to make a better life for himself and his family.

Being a store owner, Mr. C faced a lot of language problems. I asked similar questions about how his language problems relate to his business. He said: “most people that come to my store are very good, but the language complication comes in when people come in intoxicated or are talking and texting on their cell phones. They are crazy, he pointed out.” “Sometime people curse at me and howl things like, ‘terrorist!’ “It hurts, but I have a business to run and I do not want to escalate the situation or cause a scene. If I took personally everything someone said to me, I would get nowhere or I will lose my business,” he asserted. I concluded by asking him if he would like to go back home because of the way some people treat him because of his language weaknesses. He responded: “I will never feel sorry for staying here; if I had to go back home after the dictator is overthrown, I would do the same thing all over again: East or West, Home is Best.” “As far as being an American goes, I love it; I own a business and have a wife and two sons. I am free to live my own life and make my own decisions; I am truly free from political torture,” Mr. C excitedly declared. Once again, I had very few comment to make, except to appreciate and admire his good spirit amidst the language discrimination he encounters on a daily basis.

In the three interviews I conducted, there are many similarities. All immigrants come here to improve their lives and they all agree that life is better here than their native lands. Despite the language barriers they are confronted with, especially at the work place, they are happy and grateful to the country where they feel safe. America is a land of opportunity; it is their home, where their dreams and those of their families will come true.

On the other hand, I read some government documents and criticism on the language barriers that those who migrate to USA wrestle with in various places. My research began with “*The Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.*” These are federal laws that protect individuals from discrimination based upon national origin and race that have been established by the Department of Justice’s Civil Rights Division” and help citizens and immigrants better understand and exercise their rights.

One article, the “Federal Protections against National Origin Discrimination” reports: “Laws prohibiting national origin discrimination make it illegal to discriminate because of a person’s . . . , culture or language . . . because . . . they have a name or accent associated with a national origin group.”

Furthermore, the document lists language criminal violations of civil rights in different departments. For example, one language violation in education is when: “*A child has difficulty speaking English but her school does not provide her with the necessary assistance to help her learn English and other subjects.*” It also gives another example on language employment violation: “*A woman who immigrated from Russia applies for a job as an accountant. The employer turns her down because she speaks with an accent even though she is able to perform the job.*” According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), an employer must show a legitimate, nondiscriminatory reason for denying an employment opportunity because of an individual’s accent or manner of speaking. However, the denial to be legal will depend on the qualifications of the person, the nature of the position, and whether the employee’s accent or manner of speaking affected, or would harm their job performance. Requiring employees or applicants to be fluent in English may violate *Title VII* if the rule is adopted to exclude individuals of a particular national origin and is not related to job performance. This is true if the person’s accent does not influence their ability to successfully communicate in English. Likewise, favoring a particular type of accent may also violate the law. For instance, if a person with a Canadian or Austrian accent is favored for a position, while a candidate with Spanish or Indian accents are rejected, the employer may have engaged in unlawful discrimination by showing a bias against the accent associated with some national origins, but not against others.

Again, the document elaborates on police language discrimination misconduct when it states: “*A police officer questioning a man of Vietnamese origin on the street gets angry when that man is unable to answer his questions because he does not speak English. The Officer arrests the man for disorderly conduct.*” Also, if “*police officers constantly pull over cars driven by Latinos, for certain traffic violations, but rarely pull over white drivers for the same violations.*” It continues to comment on the language discrimination in federally assisted programs as follows: “*a local social services agency does not provide information or job training in Korean even though one quarter of local residents speak only Korean*” and adds: “*a hospital near the Texas/Mexico border dresses its security officers in clothes that look like INS uniforms to scare Latinos away from the emergency room. Latino patients are told to bring their own translator’s before they can see a doctor.*” Finally, it points out other language discrimination violations on voting: “*despite requests from voters in a large Spanish-speaking community, election officials refuse to provide election materials, including registration forms and sample ballots, in Spanish or to allow Spanish speakers to bring translators into the voting booths.*” It concludes: “*A polling official requires a dark-skinned voter, who speaks with a foreign accent and has an unfamiliar last name, to provide proof of American citizenship, but does not require proof of citizenship from white voters.*”

However, the federal protections against language discrimination in some cases, only becomes involved in the cases if there is a “pattern or practice” of discrimination. A “pattern or practice” generally means that there is more than a single incident of discrimination, and that there is a policy or repeated conduct that is discriminatory. For that reason, some courts and government agencies have said that discrimination based on language is a form of national origin discrimination because primary language is closely related to the place a person originates from. So if an immigrant is discriminated against for using the native language or because of characteristics having to do with that language, it may be considered.

Throughout this paper, I have discussed what immigrants socially undergo in America because of language barriers, but before I conclude, I would like to briefly discuss some of the most drastic experiences that the victims of language discrimination endure. Some of the victims get fired or are denied employment. Sometimes they are verbally and physically insulted. Other times, they are deported and even locked up because of their inability to understand or speak English in order to defend themselves. Some states have passed laws that allow police to stop anyone who looks foreign and ask them for a Green Card. If they do not have one, they are immediately arrested. This does not sound like the “free America” that the immigrants all believe in, and there is consensus that they are a burden to their communities, even though this country was built on the strength of immigrants.

For many immigrants, it is easier to learn a new language than to suffer all the mentioned types of punishments. Does this mean that the law should require learning a new language? No, I do not suggest so; it would not feel good to visit another country and be told that if one can't speak the native language, one must leave or if the person refused to leave, he/she is beaten, humiliated, and locked up. Learning a new language should be that person's right to choose whether to do so or not. Should all Americans be required to learn Spanish because of the amount of Spanish speaking people in America? I want to stress it again that people should open their eyes to different cultures and languages. It is a gateway to improving one's outlook on the world, and it is beneficial for the intellectual, physical, and social environment of every person. There is a lesson when American parents allow their children to watch movies and cartoons where there is a diversity of the characters who speak with an accent. This teaches them that there is some diversity in the world. Can the language discriminators also learn that everyone should be as much alike as possible?

Finally, it is my hope that after my audience reads this paper, they will pay attention to the language discrimination evils. It is good to remember that African Americans fought hard to protest and enforce the constitutional rights for people of color. What about people who are yellow or red? The bottom line is that God loves everybody, and people should love one another and live in unity. They need to stop living in fear of what they do not understand and try to become familiar with it. Also, being human is a universal quality that all people enjoy. Before discriminating against someone who does not speak the same language, one should ask the following questions: "What is my origin?" "Where am I from?" "Am I really so different?" I believe that only the American Indians should consider themselves American natives because the rest of Americans are all immigrants. Yes, America is a land of immigrants and this is a statement individuals should often think about before they discriminate those who do not speak, read or write the language with fluency.

In her Abstract, "Are Accents One of the Last Areas for Discrimination?" Ingram has the best argument and piece of advice about the language barriers in America when she writes:

The use of language and the ability to speak "Standard English" in America can have serious consequences for [immigrants] . . . in this country. One's intellectual ability is often judged on the basis of how well one speaks English. Foreign accents and accents related to variation in style and pronunciation of native English speech can be subject to negative evaluation and discrimination. As America becomes increasingly multicultural nation, it is to be hoped that we will become increasingly skilled in communication with those who speak English with various accents as well as tolerant in our attitudes toward all accents.

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