PEGGED BY AN ACCENT

By Hearn, Kelly

When at work, do you drop your g's, or broaden your a's? Should it matter? Whether it's so-called pidgin English, a foreign inflection, or a distinctive, regional way of speaking, heavy accents get noticed at work. Historically, speech has been a marker of social status, however inaccurate. And in today's highly competitive and increasingly multicultural workplace, accents are receiving added attention as a "soft" business skill - and in some cases as a target for employment discrimination.

A study conducted earlier this year by two researchers showed that a strong regional accent can hurt you at work. Two University of North Texas officials - Patricia Cukor-Avila, an assistant professor of English, and Dianne Markley, director of Cooperative Education - sent identical recorded passages of text, each spoken in a different regional accent by 10 different white men, to 56 human-resource executives in large companies and institutions. It turned out to be a a very telling experiment.

Among other things, interviewers were asked to identify the accent, speculate on the personal characteristics of the applicant, and then place him in a hypothetical job.

The result: Job-seekers with marked accents, such as Southern draws, were frequently stuck in lower-level jobs with little customer contact, while those with less identifiable accents like those of "actors and national broadcasters," says Ms. Cukor-Avila, tended to land higher-contact, higher-profile gigs.

A heavy New Jersey accent was the most disliked in the study, followed by a Georgia accent, while a rubbed-down California and Midwestern accent scored highest. Notably, the two accents most disfavored belonged to the two most highly educated candidates. "It is a form of discrimination, but it's one that's always been there," says John Challenger of Challenger, Gray & Christmas, a Chicago-based human-resources firm. "It's no different than
when George Bernard Shaw wrote about it in 'My Fair Lady.' If you had a Cockney accent, it meant you were lower class. While things are less class-oriented these days, strong accents, whether they're regional or foreign, often cause discomfort between employee and employer."

In Britain, observers say, the old high-brow standard long perpetuated by the BBC radio service has lately given way in business to a more neutral "estuary English," first noticed in southeast England on either side of the River Thames.

In the United States, speech therapists aiming to help soothe accent discomfort are moving to sand down regional speech in the workplace. These "pronunciation consultants" say that while many people seek their services to lose drawls and twangs, clients tend to be highly skilled foreign workers, many of them on H1-B visas, who simply can't be understood by customers and co-workers. "In a tight job market, people are having no problems getting jobs, whether or not they have a foreign or regional accent, but that will change," says Nancy Hayer, a pronunciation consultant with Wisconsin-based Hayer-Vuyk Consulting. When it does, expect accent-reduction programs to expand. Notable companies and institutions are already in the game. The University of Connecticut, for instance, offers an accent-reduction service geared primarily to nonnative speakers of English.

"Heavy accents can hinder a person's ability to communicate with people in their personal and professional lives," reads a university press release that says the hospital's 13-week program "typically yields a 50 percent reduction in ... accent."

And while Texas Instruments, for example, has included accent reduction as part of a cultural orientation program for some foreign employees, most companies send their employees to pros like Diana Canant, a Silicon Valley-based accent therapist and founder of Staff Enhancement Business Services.

Ms. Canant charges about $80 an hour for her services and says her clients, typically from Asia and India, are usually employed at software consulting firms. One client, Kiran Chaudhary, a business-systems analyst from India who now works for a California-based company, says she sought to reduce her accent after a job interviewer several years ago belittled her. "In general I felt nervous whenever I had to communicate at work," she says. "Now I have much more confidence."

Though accent reduction is growing in popularity, some experts say swapping a regional accent or, say, "Black English," for a "neutral" American accent (the so-called standard American English) is both linguistically improbable and ethically suspect.
"For a company to tell someone they have to change their accent is like saying that a part of you, where you come from, isn't good enough," says linguist and author Rossina Lippi-Green. "It's like saying, 'Gee, if only you were a couple of shades lighter.' Besides that, accent, like skin color, is an immutable part of background and personhood that most people can't change."

Even the Texas researchers say their study is not a call for employees to erase accents. The burden of change, they argue, is on the listener. "Our study should make employers aware of the fact that they are discriminating," says Ms. Markley. "When I'm at work, I can be judged by what I say and how well, but my pronunciation pattern itself should not be considered."

But Daniel Dato, a retired linguistics professor in Rockville, Md., who has trained more than 2,000 speech therapists to apply their skills in the workplace, says such outlooks are "narrow." Dato says accents can offend prospective clients and employees can choose to switch their accents on and off when appropriate. It's akin to the use of "high" German, rather than a local dialect, among some Germans and Austrians in business settings. "We call it 'code switching' when a person uses business English during the day and then reverts to their normal accent around friends and family," he says. Dato says he has coached employees of IBM, GE, the World Bank, and the US Department of Immigration, among others.

In the vast majority of cases, however, experts say companies turn to accent reduction when an employee can't be understood, not because their accents are markers for stereotypes.