

**We Teach Languages Episode 141: Accent, Race, Work, and Teaching Pronunciation with Vijay Ramjattan**

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**Stacey Johnson**:  [0:00] This is "We Teach Languages," a podcast about language teaching from the diverse perspectives of teachers.

[0:12] I'm Stacey Johnson, and today on episode 141, I get to share an interview I conducted with Dr. Vijay Ramjattan, a scholar who explores accent, language, and work. I hope this interview will help us all think more deeply about pronunciation, how we perceive pronunciation, and the message we send to our language students about accent.

[0:45] I'm just really excited to talk to you today. There's so many times when I have seen people's work on Twitter or other social media outlets and thought, "Wow. I would love to learn more about that."

[0:59] I always suspect that if I want to learn more about something that people listening to the podcast, [laughs] I would want too as well. I would love it if we could start with you telling us a little bit about who you are and what you study?

**Dr. Vijay Ramjattan**:  [1:12] My name is Vijay Ramjattan. I recently finished my PhD in Adult Education and Community Development at the University of Toronto. My research interest pertains to the intersection of language, race, and work.

[1:26] Recently, I find this notion of accent as a really interesting way of exploring this intersection. You think of accents in terms of how they're connected to racial identities or how accent discrimination acts as a proxy for racism?

[1:42] Accents are also important in a workplace because oftentimes we use accents to determine a person's alleged competence in a job and stuff like that. I feel that accent is a useful way of looking at languages and work.

[1:58] What else about me? I guess lot of my professional experiences in English language is teaching. I taught a lot about pronunciation and accents based on my own experience teaching pronunciation as an elective class in these private language schools in Ontario, Canada. Otherwise, I'm currently on the academic job market, [laughs] and if you're listening....

[2:20] [laughter]

**Dr. Ramjattan**:  [2:21] or looking someone like me, I'm open for opportunities.

**Stacey**:  [2:25] See if we can help. Tell me about your dissertation.

**Dr. Ramjattan**:  [2:31] My dissertation was about the professional experiences of international teaching assistants or ITAs in the local context of Ontario, Canada. Part of the premise of my research was complicating this narrative that we have about international teaching assistants or ITAs. The common narrative that we have is that ITAs come to universities in Canada and the US.

[2:54] They have these so called incomprehensible foreign accents, because of this incomprehensibility. Their students who are mostly these domestic, native English‑speaking students find it difficult to learn from these ITAs, and then the students complain. Those alleged problem creates the need for ITAs to do this remedial language training to correct their accents.

[3:19] For me, I want to complicate this narrative by considering the simple fact that many universities in North America are internationalizing. In the very narrow sense, internationalization just means the increased presence of international students, and faculty, staff, etc.

[3:36] Given the ethno‑racial linguistic diversity that ITAs are working in, I want to understand what do ITAs think is the right type of accent for doing their job? What are the perceptions of a satisfactory accent in those internationalizing university?

[3:52] Were they not linguistically catering only to these white native English‑speaking students, but also to these racially and ethnically diverse international students as well?

[4:03] I also wanted to know, once they articulated a type of accent, how do they practice this accent and narrate it as other professional practices? They talked a lot about race and professions, and how these ideologies get played out in the realm of accents.

**Stacey**:  [4:23] That's really interesting. I have often heard and I don't have any studies up to corroborate, but I've often heard that international teaching assistants have a mark difference in their course evaluations based on their accent in the classroom. What can we do to change this system, so that it's not harming our international teaching assistants?

**Dr. Ramjattan**:  [4:50] We need big structural change, but that's easier said than done. Part of my dissertation was also thinking about the simple fact that ITAs do have these linguistic repertoires, they're successful communicators.

[5:06] In terms of training, a lot of the ITA training is about modifying the behaviors of ITAs in terms of their language and pronunciation, but a lot of times, we don't consider that ITAs have a variety of means to communicate successfully.

[5:23] In terms of practical things, we can teach ITAs to use gesture and different spatial resources to communicate. In terms of bigger structural change, I think we need to focus more on listening as well.

[5:38] When we talk about communication, we always place the burden on the speaker is often stigmatized, but we don't focus a lot on our listening practices. It's easier said than to train listening is. It's something that has to be incorporated in K‑12 education. It needs to be something that's pervasive.

**Stacey**:  [5:59] Just listening to you talk, it occurs to me that people who are used to hearing English as it's spoken in a variety of places. It would not be a barrier for them to have an ITA in the classroom.

[6:13] If the only English you've ever heard is local and you don't have that wide exposure, this is the same thing that...What's happening to, as you would say, so‑called [laughs] native speakers in a Toronto University is the same thing that we talk about all the time in world language classes, which is my field.

[6:36] As a Spanish instructor, I want to introduce lots of different dialects and ways of talking to my students really early on to make sure they don't become fossilized in one way of listening.

**Dr. Ramjattan**:  [6:46] Definitely, exposure is the key thing. The research tells us the more that you're exposed to this linguistic diversity. It's easier for you to understand other people and actually communicate successfully with them. There's definitely a need for exposure.

**Stacey**:  [7:04] I have heard you talk about accent reduction as a problematic practice. I had never even heard the term before I heard you use it. What's accent reduction? [laughs]

**Dr. Ramjattan**:  [7:18] In the very general sense, accent reduction is a practice in which the overall sound of an accent is supposed to be reduced or minimized.

[7:27] If we're talking about so‑called foreign or non‑native accents, the goal of accent reduction is to reduce the foreignness or the non‑nativeness of an accent and make it sound "more native." I'm using air quotes for your listeners. [laughs]

**Stacey**:  [7:43] Yeah.

**Dr. Ramjattan**:  [7:44] Another thing to remember is that accent reduction is actually a misnomer. Because our accents are intimately connected with our overall voices, the only way to reduce an accent is to speak less or just shut up.

[7:59] [laughter]

**Dr. Ramjattan**:  [7:59] A lot of times, instead of accent reduction, you might hear people say accent modification, which is this idea of changing an accent. In terms of why I find the whole thing problematic is...Well, there's a few reasons. I should start off by saying these accent reduction programs are very popular in North America because of increased migration that's happening in the US and Canada.

[8:24] Because we have all of these skilled migrants who are highly qualified, have all of these credentials and experience, but they have these incomprehensible accents, it makes them less employable. The goal of accent reduction programs is just make them more intelligible than they can find a job.

[8:41] The problem with these programs is that they treat accent reduction as this magical cure [laughs] that can fix all their problems. From a linguistic perspective, accent reduction makes these false claims.

[8:54] A lot of the times, these programs are not run by qualified professionals, and so they'll make outrageous claims like saying, "Oh, you can lose your accent in a few weeks, or if you practice this type of technique, you can sound more like a native speaker of English." All of these things are not empirically proven. There's no research to back it up.

[9:18] In terms of my own research, I look at accent or I problematize accent reduction from a critical race perspective. A lot of times, accent reduction upholds various types of racism. In one sense, where we talk about the potential clients of accent reduction, a lot of the times they're recruiting these racialized migrants.

[9:40] The assumption is that if you're coming from a racialized background, your accent is automatically perceived as deviant and in need of correction. A lot of the times, when we talk about the specific phonological features of particular racialized accents, they're not that much different from so‑called whites procedures varieties of English.

[10:01] Another thing with accent reduction programs from the lens of race is that they normalize structural racism. The message behind these programs is about saying if you reduce your accent, then you can become employable and just find your dream job.

[10:18] For a lot of migrants, there's a lot of structural barriers, like getting their credentials recognized, having their prior work experience recognized by their new places of employment. These things affect racialized immigrants more than white immigrants. Accent reduction provides this false hope like, "Oh, if you reduce your accent, you can jump past these barriers," which we know isn't possible.

**Stacey**:  [10:44] What I am understanding is that the idealized English that a racialized immigrant might want to acquire is the one that has this social prestige that's attached with maybe wealthy, white, Six O'Clock News variety of English.

[11:07] It's actually the social prestige that these programs are selling and not the actual pronunciation of English. No matter how the English sounds when it comes out of their body, they're still going to be a racialized minority in their new context.

**Dr. Ramjattan**:  [11:22] Exactly.

**Stacey**:  [11:23] Have I understood it correctly?

**Dr. Ramjattan**:  [11:24] Yeah, you said it. These accent reduction programs is more of a marketing gimmick. It's like, "OK, if you take this course, wow, you're going to be more successful, more wealthy, more socially attractive to people."

[11:38] When we look at these racial ideologies and the racism that racialized migrants face, changing your accent isn't necessarily going to change perceptions of your speech. I'm thinking of the work of Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa in their conception of race in linguistic ideology.

[11:56] They argue that no matter how racialized people speak, their racial positioning in society is always going to construct their language practices as deviant. When we talk about accent reduction, reducing your accent isn't going to make you be perceived as an expert communicator.

**Stacey**:  [12:14] That's really such an important point. I just want to connect it back to my practice as well. I don't teach English. I teach Spanish, but the varieties of Spanish that are typically represented in the curriculum or the textbooks that I'm using, they're typically from a handful of countries.

[12:34] It's the prestige variety from those countries, but there's a ton of pressure, especially at the early levels to really focus on pronunciation instruction. Aside from the accent reduction industrial complex that I have now learned about that I didn't know existed before, I'm wondering how would you problematize just a language teacher of any language?

[12:58] They're teaching their second‑year students pronunciation. How do we need to think about that to not be accidentally reinforcing raciolinguistic ideologies in our classroom?

**Dr. Ramjattan**:  [13:13] A big issue to mention here is how a lot of language teachers in general don't get a lot of training in pronunciation. Oftentimes, teachers are left to their own devices. Oftentimes, what we do is promote change for the sake of change.

[13:29] When I was teaching pronunciation a long time ago, I was kind of those teachers who felt like, "OK, well, you speak this particular type of accented English, so I need to change all of [laughs] these aspects of your speech to make you more intelligible."

[13:47] For pronunciation teachers, we have to remember that we just need to focus on things that really cause genuine communication errors. We shouldn't be focused on changing every single aspect of our students' accents.

[14:01] I'm thinking of the example. In English‑language teaching, for example, we're always caught up with this minimal pair of th‑ and the, the two TH sounds in English. Like theater, a voiceless TH. Then their, a pronoun their, the voiced TH.

[14:20] A lot of the times, these minute things don't really interfere with communication. My parents are from Trinidad. Part of the Trinidadian accent is not really pronouncing...They don't have that, the voiceless TH.

[14:34] When they're telling me their phone numbers or giving me some number, they might say, "Well, it's five, five, five, tree, tree, tree, tree." I understand, from the context of our conversation, that they're saying the number three.

**Stacey**:  [14:47] It would be hard to mistake that as something besides the number three.

**Dr. Ramjattan**:  [14:52] Exactly. For pronunciation teachers, we have to really get beyond this idea that intelligibility is located in particular sounds or particular types of speakers and really opening up to look at how context is really important in how we construct intelligibility.

[15:08] The idea is that no one is inherently intelligible or unintelligible. It's really how we interact with each other and what context we're in that really helps us communicate. That's my main piece of advice [laughs] for pronunciation teachers.

**Stacey**:  [15:22] In our standards documents for world language teachers in the United States, one of the distinctions between the different levels of proficiency is at the lower levels, you can be understood by a sympathetic interlocutor. At the higher levels, even someone who doesn't have experience working with language learners could interact with you.

[15:42] Based on our conversation, I'm thinking actually, we need to be training the listeners to become sympathetic interlocutors...

[15:50] [laughter]

**Stacey**:  [15:51] so that we don't have to rely on that innate sympathy for people to be able to communicate effectively.

**Dr. Ramjattan**:  [15:58] Yeah, exactly. With pronunciation, we treat it as a productive skill, but a major part of it is listening and learning how to adapt to different types of speakers. Yeah, definitely.

**Stacey**:  [16:10] The people who say that international teaching assistants are unintelligible are not voluntarily going to the learning how to understand people with an accent training.

[16:20] [laughter]

**Stacey**:  [16:21] How do we get out the message to them?

**Dr. Ramjattan**:  [16:25] There are these higher education institutions are undergoing these neoliberal and managerial processes and changes. A lot of times, these institutions are not invested in creating programs and stuff like that for listeners. It's simpler and more cost‑effective for them to just have some sort of workshop for ITs and have them nativize their speech and whatever.

**Stacey**:  [16:47] It would be so transformative if, instead of providing accent reduction for ITAs, what if we taught how to interact with people of diverse backgrounds and be more effective listeners to a range of pronunciation variables?

**Dr. Ramjattan**:  [17:08] Also, the thing is we can't just say, "Oh, you're going to be a more empathetic or sympathetic listener from one workshop." A lot of these listening things have to be ongoing. It has to be embedded within the curriculum of different disciplines.

[17:23] One thing too, based on my dissertation work, a lot of the times we have to acknowledge how academic discipline influences professional communication. I interviewed a lot of engineers. With engineering as a discipline, the focus is on the quick, concise type of communication.

[17:41] A lot of the times, the ITAs in my study, they express the idea that accent isn't really important because we're just speaking in numbers or writing a lot of things down a lot of the time.

[17:57] We have to pay attention. When we're designing listening programs or type of pronunciation training in universities, we have to really pay attention to how accent is not always the most salient thing in communication. A lot of the times, we have communicative conventions within disciplines that make our voices not so important.

**Stacey**:  [18:20] Most of us have no ability to affect policies in our departments or at our institutions or in wider society. We can't change the people who are listening. It can be a little bit frustrating. What can I do differently moving forward that would actually put more positive perception of accent, more positive action into the world? Any advice?

**Dr. Ramjattan**:  [18:43] Yeah. What I always tell people, teachers in particular, your teaching is your activism. Sometimes, social change can be in at the micro level, within your classroom. I don't have a good answer...

[19:01] [laughter]

**Dr. Ramjattan**:  [19:01] in terms of that, other than teachers have to know their own context. They have to know when to bend the rules, when to be subversive [laughs] in their own ways.

**Stacey**:  [19:15] I'm all for bending the rules and being subversive. Any example you could give me, I'd latch onto.

[19:20] [laughter]

**Dr. Ramjattan**:  [19:20] A few to think of in terms of what we were talking about, like accent and stuff like that.

[19:27] Also in terms of your materials, when I was teaching pronunciation, even though I was one of those teachers who felt we need to eliminate all traces of a non‑native accent, I began to realize students need to know how to interact with people of different accents and different linguistic backgrounds.

[19:44] Just, like you said, mentioned earlier, bringing in your own materials, bringing in other types of speakers in terms of audio recordings and videos and stuff like that. If you have a official curriculum that that says students need to embrace this idealized native speaker of English, just maybe bring in a small activity. Look, here's a video of some stigmatized accent. Have them talk about it.

[20:11] One thing that I'm thinking about as I'm talking [laughs] now, sometimes it's useful just to have a critical conversation about accents. I remember going to a labor studies conference a few years ago. In labor studies, they don't talk about language [laughs] , especially from a critical perspective.

[20:30] In this presentation, I was just talking about racial linguistic ideologies and all of this stuff, once again. After the presentation, someone came to me and said, "Well, I was always so self‑conscious about my accent, but after hearing you, I feel a little more confidence. I don't feel as apologetic about my accent."

[20:51] For language teachers, just having the conversation about how accent is tied to these larger ideologies pertaining race, etc. is a small but powerful way for students to come to feel better about their accents and their overall voices.

**Stacey**:  [21:06] That's wonderful. From an English teaching perspective also, English is a widely spoken language in so many places.

[21:17] Normalizing Nigerian English and Indian English and different varieties of English that really represent a spectrum of what English sounds like in different communities where it is widely spoken would be so beneficial for people who speak different varieties in my own classroom.

**Dr. Ramjattan**:  [21:35] Exactly, yeah.

**Stacey**:  [21:37] I love that. Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today.

**Dr. Ramjattan**:  [21:41] Thank you so much for having me.

**Stacey**:  [21:45] If you have questions or comments related to today's episode, we would love to hear from you. You can reach out to us multiple ways. All of them are available at our website, weteachlang.com/contact. You can also find us on Facebook and Twitter @weteachlang.

[22:05] We would like to say a very special thank you to the PEARLL Foreign Language Resource Center for partnering with us to provide transcripts and other professional development resources related to the episodes. You can learn more about PEARLL by going to pearll.nflc.umd.edu. Thanks so much for listening. Bye‑bye.

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