

# *Gaps in framing and naming: commentary to "a viewpoint on accent services"*

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## Commentary

# Gaps in Framing and Naming: Commentary to “A Viewpoint on Accent Services”

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** In this commentary, we offer a critique of “A Viewpoint on Accent Services: Framing and Terminology Matter” (Grover et al., 2022). We argue that the authors’ proposal to rename and reframe accent modification lacks criticality, which actually hinders—rather than advances—the movement toward equitable, culturally sustaining, and emancipatory practices.

**Method:** We offer an analysis of the shortfall between the authors’ calls for linguistic justice in “A Viewpoint on Accent Services” and the actual changes they proposed. We break down major gaps in criticality, reflexivity, practice, and vision and discuss their potential for undercutting meaningful progress as it relates to linguistic justice.

**Results:** We found that the frameworks for the pursuit of equity, cultural sustenance, and emancipatory practices were misrepresented in the article in such a way that suggests that these goals could be achieved through superficial changes in terminology and attitudes. “A Viewpoint on Accent Services” upholds a power-neutral frame of operation that does not address the deeper systemic forces that make accent modification problematic. The lack of criticality toward accent intervention fosters complacency toward real transformation.

**Conclusion:** We advocate for a serious and critical interrogation of accent practices and commitment to an emancipatory practice that addresses linguistic discrimination above all else. We emphasize the need to decenter standardized languages and to co-envision linguistic liberation using critical methods in scholarship, pedagogy, clinical practice, and policy.

In “A Viewpoint on Accent Services: Framing and Terminology Matter,” Grover et al. (2022) described the pervasiveness of *accentism*, or discrimination on the basis of a speaker’s perceived accent, within the field of speech-language pathology (SLP) and in society. They argued that the term *accent modification* and other common terminology for speech-language pathologists’ interventions with “accented speakers”<sup>1</sup> are pejorative. In response, they proposed adopting the term *accent expansion* as an alternative and suggested that such a change in terminology would convey and promote an equity-minded, culturally

sustaining, and emancipatory mindset toward “accented speakers.”

In this commentary, we argue that Grover et al.’s (2022) proposal to rename and reframe accent modification emphasizes respectfulness but lacks criticality, which actually hinders—rather than advances—the movement toward equitable, culturally sustaining, and emancipatory practices. We agree that framing and terminology do matter; in that spirit, we offer a critique of “A Viewpoint on

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout the article, the term “accented speakers” will be set in quotation marks to highlight the fact that accents are a perceptual phenomenon with no inherent set of phonetic properties. As such, the so-called “accented speaker” is a perceptual construct that arises only in relationship to listeners and their judgments (Lippi-Green, 2012; Moyer, 2013; Planchenault & Poljak, 2021).

Accent Services” and discuss why appropriating critical terminology in the absence of engagement with critical inquiry and action results in masking a problematic practice. Grover et al. offered a relevant description of the pervasive effects of accent-related discrimination in society and within the field of SLP. Yet, their subsequent proposal fails to recognize that whether framed as “expansion,” “modification,” or “erasure,” accent intervention itself perpetuates linguistic injustice by investing in changing minoritized speakers without countering the oppressive conditions that make the pursuit of those changes necessary. The authors’ call for transformative engagement stands at odds with their actual proposal. We break down these gaps and discuss their potential for undercutting meaningful progress. We advocate instead for a redirection of efforts toward accent advocacy with a focus on disrupting linguistic hegemony within the field of SLP and in our broader society.

## The Gap in Conceptualization

We agree with Grover et al. (2022) that speech-language pathologists need to adopt practices that are equity-minded, culturally sustaining, and that aim to take emancipatory action. We depart sharply, however, from their conceptualization of these stances and the proposed actions meant to embody them. Given the central role of epistemological framing in both their views and our counterinterviews, we feel it is necessary to offer definitions of these terms. By laying out the principles underlying these three concepts, we will demonstrate that the practice of accent intervention does not live up to these aspirations.

Equity-mindedness is a term associated with justice in education. According to the Center for Urban Education (n.d.), *equity-mindedness* refers to the mode of thinking exhibited by practitioners who call attention to patterns of inequity in student outcomes. An equity-minded practitioner is race conscious, is aware of the sociohistorical contexts of exclusion, takes personal and institutional responsibility, and critically reassesses their own practices. To act in accordance with equity-mindedness, practitioners must question their assumptions and understand “inequities as a dysfunction of the various structures, policies, and practices that they can control” (Center for Urban Education, n.d.) and participate in active resistance and transformation. Taking an equity-minded stance on accent requires us to interrogate the ways in which discriminatory perceptions of accent are inseparable from sociopolitical indices like race, gender, and class and to critically assess our complicity with/opposition to the commodification of these injustices.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy is also a construct originating from the field of education. Conceptualized by

Paris (2012), it was meant to extend Ladson-Billings’ (1995, 2021) formulation of culturally *relevant* pedagogy, which advocated for education that builds on students’ prior knowledge and experiences as scaffolds to academic success in dominant ways of learning. A *culturally sustaining pedagogy* takes a strong stance about the value of students’ linguistic competencies. Its aim is to sustain students’ own linguistic repertoires, including accents and language varieties, and cultural knowledges as necessary foundations to pluralism and democracy (Paris, 2012). As such, culturally sustaining pedagogies are not additive in nature; that is, they do not seek to use students’ existing linguistic competencies as bridges for the acquisition of more privileged varieties or as the locus of code switches into White<sup>2</sup> academic or professional English in order to avoid discrimination. At the center of a culturally sustaining stance on accent would be a rejection of the acquisition/expansion of privileged and idealized linguistic skills and celebrating the linguistic practices of minoritized speakers.

Emancipatory practice has garnered significant attention in clinical fields such as nursing. Chinn et al. (2014) defined *emancipatory practice* as forms of practice grounded in a critical theory and aimed at social justice outcomes. It looks “upstream” to address the structural and ideological origins of unjust outcomes and is associated with “actions that seek to change unjust social and political structures and to encourage a community’s capacity to strive toward freedom from unjust constraints” (p. 6). In the context of language and accent, an emancipatory practice is one in which the process of consciousness-raising invites individuals to make visible, name, investigate, and dismantle White linguistic hegemony and institutional policies that reinforce linguisticism (Baker-Bell, 2020; Lippi-Green, 2012). It requires examining the ways in which accent modification lies downstream from and is a symptom of these forces.

In summary, implementation of equity-minded, culturally sustaining, and emancipatory practices requires taking a critical stance, which is to say questioning what is commonly viewed as natural and commonsensical in order to see how those taken-for-granted ways of thinking and doing are maintained by, and feed into, power relationships that privilege certain people over others. Neither accent modification nor its reformulation—accent expansion—fundamentally disrupts the deeper webs of prejudice that drive people to seek new ways of speaking. We believe that between what Grover et al. (2022) claim to endorse and what they ultimately propose lie significant gaps in criticality, reflexivity, practice, and vision that will ultimately result in masking and perpetuating the status quo.

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<sup>2</sup>Consistent with the Diversity Style Guide (Kanigel, 2019), we are capitalizing the word “White” and whenever a color is used to describe race.

## The Gap in Criticality

Grover et al.'s (2022) argument is built on the premise that accent intervention is constructive, except when practiced poorly or from a deficit mindset. They state, "Such services, when framed properly and informed by evidence, can be positive and supportive of speakers learning to communicate effectively while navigating cross-cultural interactions" (p. 646). This assumption is lacking in criticality and does not wrestle with a substantial scholarship that calls the whole of accent modification practice into question (Alim et al., 2016; Lippi-Green, 2012; Ovalle & Chakraborty, 2013; Ramjattan, 2019). Lippi-Green (2012) stated that despite a common stance among providers of accent modification that condemns accent discrimination and espouses linguistic diversity, the service is nevertheless overwhelmingly directed at addressing speakers of varieties of English that are stigmatized by class and race. Similarly, Ramjattan (2019) highlighted the ways in which negative judgments about the accents of workers are racialized and, therefore, not ultimately assuaged by accent interventions, which is essentially a proxy for linguistic Whiteness.

The premise that accent modification is good when it is done right diverts us from having discussions about the real problems that lie upstream, those before and beyond accent modification. It ignores the fact that accent modification, even when it is performed skillfully and graciously from an interpersonal standpoint, cannot escape its role in a linguistic economy that capitalizes on the perceived lack of intelligibility of minoritized persons. A critical inquiry requires us to examine what role accent modification plays in a raciolinguistically stratified society in which minoritized speakers are asked to keep expanding while more privileged others can simply be themselves. The very terminology *accent expansion* reinforces the idea that perceived "accented speakers" and their ways of speaking are not sufficiently expansive, a notion belied by the fact that the very presence of a perceived "accent" indicates an ongoing and active process of linguistic expansion on part of the speaker.

"A Viewpoint on Accent Services" upholds a power-neutral frame of operation that does not address the deeper systemic forces that make accent modification problematic (Yu et al., 2021). People who seek accent modification have good reasons to do so. They face daily discrimination that makes them feel diminished and, as a result, look for the only solutions under their control, which is to change themselves. Whether accent modification succeeds in facilitating that change—and whether they do so with encouraging language—is immaterial from the perspective of equity, because either way, it contributes nothing to challenging the inequities that underlie the need for the practice. Currently, the American Speech-

Language-Hearing Association (ASHA, n.d.) states, "It is not within the scope of the [speech-language pathologist] to identify cases of accent discrimination." An emancipatory practice would open our professional scope and require that we address linguistic discrimination above all else.

The lack of criticality toward accent intervention means that no substantial or meaningful changes can come about. Indeed, Grover et al.'s (2022) four concluding recommendations overlap significantly with the existing stance expressed by ASHA (n.d.) in the online Practice Portal on Accent Modification. For example, Grover et al. recommend that moving forward, "SLPs will affirm that accents are not disorders and are an inherent and welcome feature of speaker differences and global variability among English speakers" (p. 646). This is something that ASHA (n.d.) already espouses, stating, "Accents (regional, foreign, or nonnative) . . . are a natural part of spoken language." Grover et al.'s urging that the "delivery of accent services should be grounded in appreciation of natural cross-linguistic variation" (p. 646) and seeing speakers' languages and English variations as strengths are also consistent with ASHA's current stance, as is the reminder that accent modification must be an elective service. These redundancies indicate that the proposed actions are not actual transformations but simply reformulations that maintain the status quo.

## The Gap in Reflexivity

Some foundational ideas expressed by Grover et al. (2022) are internally inconsistent and in need of critical self-reflection. For example, the authors stated that although it is acknowledged within our field and beyond that every speaker has an accent, not every accented speaker experiences discrimination nor is every speaker advised to undergo accent intervention. The statement suggests a recognition of an unnamed inequity, which is a very productive start for a critical interrogation. If all speakers are accented, then it stands to reason that accent modification (similar to, for example, Toastmasters) should be equally helpful to all speakers. By acknowledging that this is not the case, the authors set the grounds for a potentially critical exploration, which, unfortunately, they did not pursue.

Grover et al. (2022) use the term "accented speakers" throughout the article to refer to only a subset of accent intervention candidates whose first languages (L1s) stand in contrast to a so-called "American English (AE)." It suggests that Grover et al.'s point of view is rooted in the ideology of named, nation-state languages (García et al., 2021). American English from this perspective is not recognized as a site of diversity that naturally

encompasses world Englishes and a plethora of other English variations. It raises questions about whom the authors presume to speak or not speak English like an American. The authors never say what speech repertoire an “accented speaker” is meant to expand into, but the mythical and idealized American English is an unmarked language that requires no explanation (Milroy, 2002). As much as the authors assert that they reject a hegemonic linguistic standard, their discourse suggests otherwise.

Viewpoints are necessarily anchored in particular positional spaces. In their article, Grover et al. (2022) failed to reveal their positionality. This is especially critical if any of the authors holds professional stakes in accent modification. Having a conflict of interest does not necessarily indicate bias, but failure to acknowledge a conflict of interest suggests that the authors have not made the necessary effort to reflect on their own biases and their investment in the maintenance of accent practices.

## The Gap Between Additive and Transformative Practice

Grover et al. (2022) proposed that speech-language pathologists approach accent intervention from the perspective of accent *expansion* rather than *modification* or *reduction*. They state,

This concept of expansion is similar to what is known about expansion of phonetic maps and sound inventories, seen in L1 speakers who subsequently learn to speak a second language or L2. In the example of emerging bilingual speakers, features of an L2 are acquired in an additive manner while retaining the L1 as equally important. (p. 641)

What they proposed above is known as the *additive bilingual approach*, an approach widely adopted in bilingual education throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Under this educational approach, the language(s) of a speaker are viewed as funds of knowledge that must be validated, respected, and affirmed, in so far as they can be a bridge to learn the language of power (Lambert, 1981).

While affirming home language competencies and accents suggests inclusion and equity, additive approaches have been critiqued as nevertheless reinforcing separatist and hegemonic linguistic ideologies that see L1 competencies as foundations for long-term L2 mastery (Baker-Bell, 2020; García et al., 2021). An alternative to conceiving of named codes as unitary objects is found in the work of Ofelia García et al. (2017) on translinguaging. *Translinguaging* refers to the use of one’s entire linguistic repertoire (i.e., communicating in all the named languages and modalities known) to function within one’s social context

(García & Alvis, 2019). Using a translinguaging lens, a speaker’s “accentedness” could be considered a form of resistance to linguistic hegemony. Although Grover et al. (2022) positioned speakers’ L1s as assets rather than deficits, their approach fails to escape the rhetoric of standard language ideology and native speakerism that perpetuates the very kinds of discrimination they purport to resist (Rosa & Flores, 2017).

## The Gap Between Diversity and Social Justice

Grover et al. (2022) argue for the need to nurture linguistic and practitioner diversity in the SLP field. While we concur with the urgent need for both, neither is sufficient for combatting accent-based raciolinguistic discrimination. Without critical consciousness, increased representation of different languages and people would not necessarily (in fact, is very unlikely to) challenge the hegemony of a racialized monolingual American English ideology. Minoritized identities and good intentions do not inoculate us from being complicit in the maintenance of unjust power structures. The perpetuation of systemic oppression requires no overt endorsement—simply the lack of actions aimed at disrupting deeper systemic causes that keep those power relationships in place. The proposal to change practitioner mindsets and to use more positive terminology puts the focus on individual beliefs and behaviors; but, as the authors stated themselves in the introduction, the fundamental problems of accent discrimination are macrosystemic. It stands to reason, then, that they have applied the wrong remedy.

## Conclusions

In this commentary, we offered a critical response to “A Viewpoint on Accent Services” with the hopes of articulating a path toward a critical engagement with linguistic justice in relationship to perceived “accented speakers” that we feel was not addressed by the authors. We echo a sentiment expressed by Gorski (2016) that “how we frame the problem drives what we are capable of imagining as solutions” (p. 255). We believe that the frameworks for the pursuit of equity, cultural sustenance, and emancipatory practices were misrepresented in the Grover et al. (2022) article in such a way that suggests that these goals could be achieved through superficial changes in terminology and attitudes. We assert that this approach lacks sufficient criticality and will, therefore, perpetuate the status quo.

We advocate instead for a serious interrogation of accent practices based on critical language studies and



advocacy for linguistic justice within our field and in the larger society. What if, as a discipline, we replaced accent modification with linguistic advocacy? What if we were to push for new cultural norms in which it is understood that intelligibility is a relational and subjective construct overlaid with racist, classist, sexist, and ableist biases? From this approach, pronunciation teaching and learning would be relegated to a secondary role against a primary framework of accent advocacy. The focus of pronunciation teaching, furthermore, would be reconceptualized as the facilitation of mutual understanding between speakers and intended listeners and not as the acquisition of skills by individual speakers (Ramjattan, 2022). These are the reimaginings available in transformational thinking, but only if we are willing to do more than sanitize our current practices.

## Positionality Statement

The authors of the current article wish to make known the positions from which they offer their commentaries. Although the authors have individual positionalities, due to the constraints associated with word length, a collective statement is provided as a way of making more transparent the influences and potential biases of their arguments. All authors in this article are bi/multilingual speech and language therapists. Some have provided accent modification in the past and others have received them. None have any financial or nonfinancial stakes in the maintenance or termination of accent modification practices in the SLP field. The authors' past and present lived experience within the field have contributed to their commitment toward interrogating linguistic assimilation, colonized monolingual ideologies, and raciolinguistic epistemologies in SLP research and practice. The authors emphasize decentering standardized English and co-envisioning linguistic liberation using critical methods in scholarship, pedagogy, clinical practice, and policy.

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