Middle-class ‘Anglos’ and ‘ethnics’:
Mutual perception and communication in the field of symbolic power

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Abstract
This paper reports preliminary findings of an internet survey of the white collar (mainly professional) sector of the Australian workforce, focusing on two groups, ‘Anglo-Australians’ and ‘non-Anglophone Australians’. The respondents from the two groups were asked about their daily interactions at work and in social settings and their mutual perceptions, as well as about their general perception of Australia as an ethno-culturally diverse society. ‘Non-Anglophone Australians’ are defined as immigrants who arrived in Australia as adults and grew up speaking a language other than English (LOTE), and who therefore speak English with a ‘foreign accent’. ‘Anglo-Australians’ are defined as people born in Australia, who grew up in families/households where only English was spoken and who therefore speak with ‘native Australian’ accent. The survey consisted of two equivalent questionnaires, one for Anglo-Australians and the other for non-Anglophone immigrants. The paper investigates the possibility that the presence of a growing ‘multicultural middle class’ (MMC)—non-Anglophone immigrants in white-collar and professional jobs—may be a force towards a higher appreciation of bi-lingual, multi-lingual and multi-cultural competence—and therefore towards seeing the ‘foreign accent’ as symbolic capital rather than a liability that affects non-Anglophone immigrants.

Key words: diversity, multicultural middle class, Anglo-Australians, non-Anglophone immigrants, communication, symbolic power
**Introduction**

This paper continues our research on ‘multicultural middle class’ (MMC) in Australia. Over the past 3-4 decades, the changes in Australian immigration policy, reflecting economic restructuring in the 1970s, brought to Australia hundreds of thousands of skilled and professional non-Anglophone immigrants (usually referred to as ‘NESB’ or ‘CALD’). The large intakes of educated non-Anglophone immigrants changed the socio-economic composition of the ‘ethnic’ population in Australia (Jupp 2002; Colic-Peisker 2011a).

In the post war decades, non-Anglophone immigrants (most from southern Europe) were typically taking low-skilled manufacturing jobs. In consequence, the linguistic and cultural divide of Anglophone versus non-Anglophone (‘ESB’ vs. ‘NESB’) neatly translated into a gap in occupational status and income; in other words, the labour market was segmented along ethnic lines (Jakubowicz and Moustafine 2010, Colic-Peisker 2011a). At the time, bilingualism was considered a liability, something that impeded assimilation, reinforced the language barrier and was ‘confusing’ for immigrant children. Therefore, non-Anglophones were expected to switch to English *asap* and were often reprimanded if they were heard speaking a language other than English (LOTE) in a public place (Jupp 2002; Clyne 1994).

Once the Australian economy was restructured and became services-dominated during the 1970s-1980s, the immigration program adjusted by becoming increasingly skill-focused (the immigration ‘points tests’ was introduced in 1980). Today the skilled component comprises 2/3 of the planned settler immigration. In consequence, people talking with various ‘foreign accents’, those visibly different from the white majority, and those with non-Anglo names—or any combination of the three—have an increasing presence in the white collar/professional sector of the Australian workforce, where they regularly interact with the Anglo-Australians. In recent decades, non-Anglophone Australians, and especially their children, the ‘second generation’, gained presence and visibility in positions of influence, e.g. as government ministers, media personalities, academics, scientists and businesspeople. However, MMC is still underrepresented in the positions of power, for example in government jobs, which is also reflected in our survey sample. In general, MMC has been created from large skilled non-Anglophone migrant intakes and social mobility of the non-Anglophone second generation but our survey, and this paper, are focused on the first generation immigrants, the ‘real immigrants’: those who grew up outside Australia, speaking a language other than English (LOTE), and who are therefore recognised as immigrants primarily by their ‘foreign accents’.
The starting assumption we test through the survey is that being a non-Anglophone ‘ethnic’, recognised as such through a ‘foreign accent’, may still be a disadvantage, although there are indications that this disadvantage may have lessened as the socio-economic profile of non-Anglophone immigrants in Australia has improved (Colic-Peisker 2011a). An inerasable foreign accent of adult non-Anglophone arrivals is a permanent ‘ethnic’ marker and we know from experimental research by socio-linguists that it still represents a disadvantage. People recognised as non-Anglophones by their accent are judged as less competent in fully anonymous situations (Fraser and Kelly 2012; Eisenchlas, and Tsurutani 2011). Even when non-Anglophone middle class is well integrated and ‘assimilated’, the accent intimates a degree of ‘otherness’ (Colic-Peisker 2002; Eisenchlas and Tsurutani 2011).

In terms of theoretical background, we look at Bourdieu’s (1991) idea that the communication process is structured in the field of power. In other words, communication is not only an overt exchange of information but also a more or less covert exchange in the economy of symbolic power; that is, language is not just a medium of communication but also an instrument of distinction. In the Australian context, the distinction enjoyed by (standard) Australian English compels other cultures and speeches (designated as ‘accented’) to define themselves by their distance from the dominant language and culture (cf. Bourdieu 1991: 167; Piller 2011). In this economy of symbolic power, the non-Anglophone immigrants speaking with a ‘foreign’ accent are allocated lower status. Of course, the significance of this may not be just symbolic: the ‘right’ accent is a point of inclusion or exclusion from the desirable end of the employment market and from the prestigious ‘bridging social networks’. We empirically tested these assumptions through a survey.

Method and sample of respondents
The data were collected through an internet-based survey. We constructed two equivalent questionnaires, one for Anglo-Australians, defined as ‘people born in Australia, who grew up in families where only English was spoken’, and the other for non-Anglophone immigrants (defined above). The survey collected basic demographic and socio-economic information about respondents: age, gender, education, occupation, employment sector, urban/rural residence, and for immigrants also country of origin and length of residence in Australia.

The second part of the questionnaires asked about the level of interaction with the other group, at work and socially, including mixed marriages between Anglo-Australians and non-Anglophone immigrants. The third part of the questionnaires contained about 20 Likert-scale questions (with 5-point scale from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’). These
questions explored mutual perceptions of the two groups and a general perception of Australia as a diverse society. Non-Anglophones were asked about their experiences of being accepted and valued in the employment market, their actual workplace and in social situations where they mixed with Anglo-Australians. The emphasis was on socio-linguistic aspect: their perception of what it meant to have a ‘foreign accent’ in the Australian white-collar workplace and in social life.

We kept the questionnaire short in order to secure a good response rate (34 and 36 questions in two respective questionnaires). The survey was distributed via personal email invitations, including a request to forward the invitation to interested people who matched our sample requirements. We explained what kind of respondents we were after:\(^1\): for example, people who have at least several years of Australian (office) work experience. A large majority of both sub-samples consisted of university-educated people who worked in professional jobs, which allowed us to categorise them as ‘middle class’.

During March and April 2013, 134 Anglo-Australians and 106 non-Anglophone Australians participated in the survey. Several respondents had to be removed from the data because they did not match the required profile. This way we were left with 134 valid responses from Anglo-Australians and 103 valid responses from non-Anglophone immigrants.

The sample of non-Anglophone immigrants was 47 per cent male and 53 per cent female and had an average age of 46 (the age range was 26–63, with a high concentration of people in their 40s and early 50s). This was a highly educated group: of 101 who responded to the education question, 49 people had a university degree, 48 a postgraduate degree (18 with Phds), 3 had TAFE diplomas and only one did not attend university (an outlier who immigrated in 1972). Twenty-two non-Anglophone immigrants in our sample worked in the government sector, 30 in education or health, and 50 in the private sector.\(^2\) The most frequently stated occupations were engineer (18), researcher (12), academic, lecturer and similar (11) and manager (10). About one half of respondents migrated in Australia in the 2000s, and the other half in the 1980s-1990s. Fifty-five respondents in our non-Anglophone sample migrated from European countries, 39 were from Asia and 9 from Africa and South America. Ninety-four per cent lived in metropolitan cities.

The sample of Anglo-Australians was 39 per cent male and 61 per cent female. The age of respondents ranged more widely (27-82) and the average age was 49. This was also a highly educated sample: of 134 respondents, 59 had university degree, 63 had postgraduate education, four had TAFE diplomas and only seven did not have tertiary education. Thirty-
six per cent worked in the government sector, 38 per cent in education or health, and 30 per cent in the private sector (the percentage exceeds 100 because several respondents chose more than one response due to overlapping categories). The most frequently stated occupations were teacher, researcher, manager/public servant/policy officer, academic and engineer. Ninety percent of Anglo-Australians resided in a metropolitan area.

Results: levels of interaction and mutual perceptions
Several survey questions asked about levels of interaction between Anglo-Australians and non-Anglophone immigrants. We asked about mixed marriages, the presence of non-Anglophones in extended families of Anglo-Australians, close friendships, close work colleagues, social interaction and workplace interaction with colleagues and clients.

Twenty per cent of Anglo-Australians were married to non-Anglophone immigrants, and 22 per cent had several ‘ethnics’ in their extended families, while 28 per cent had one or two. Just over half Anglo-Australians had no ‘ethnics’ in their extended families.

The data suggest that more interaction between Anglo-Australians and non-Anglophone immigrants happens at work than in social situations: 52 per cent of Anglo-Australians reported interacting ‘regularly’ or ‘often’ with non-Anglophones in social situations and 62 per cent at work. Forty per cent reported having ‘several close non-Anglophone friends’ and a further 37 per cent reported having at least one close non-Anglophone friend.

Twenty-three per cent of ‘ethnics’ were married to Anglo-Australians and reported having ‘many’ (56%) or ‘one or two’ (38%) close Anglo-Australian friends. Only 6 per cent reported having no close Anglo-Australian friends. Even more participants reported having ‘many close Anglo-Australian work colleagues’ (72%), while only 5 per cent had none. It is significant for mutual understanding and perceptions that, therefore, 95 per cent middle-class non-Anglophones closely and daily interacted with Anglo-Australians.

In the final part of the questionnaire for Anglo-Australians, seven questions gauged their social affinity towards non-Anglophones. The result suggests an overwhelmingly positive picture of attraction towards ‘ethnics’. Strong agreement with statements about communication problems due to foreign accent, English proficiency or differences in values and habits was virtually absent. For example, only 2 respondents out of 134 ‘strongly agreed’ they preferred the company of other Anglo-Australians while 4 people ‘agreed’. 39 per cent and 31 per cent respectively ‘disagreed’ and ‘strongly disagreed’ with this statement, and one quarter of respondents were neutral. This is consistent with their strong agreement (61 per
cent, while a further 29 per cent agreed) with the statement ‘I like the fact that Australia has become such a linguistically and culturally diverse country’. The affinity towards the ‘ethnics’ seemed even stronger in the workplace: 60 per cent of Anglo-Australians ‘strongly disagreed and further 24 per cent ‘disagreed’ with the statement ‘As an employer, I’d give preference to Anglo-Australians over non-Anglophone people with the same skills’. Only 6 out of 134 people agreed with this statement and no-one strongly agreed. However, all but 27 per cent thought that there was some level of employment disadvantage affecting non-Anglophones ‘because of their name or accent even when their English is fluent’. This is a contradiction, possibly stemming from political correctness in responding to the survey, and/or a self selection of the sample which may have disproportionately included diversity-loving Anglo-Australians.

What did non-Anglophone immigrants think about their social inclusion by Anglo-Australians at work and in social life?

From the initial analysis of the data, it seems that non-Anglophones tend to overstate the extent of their linguistic assimilation. It is not surprising that 58 percent of highly educated and gainfully employed ‘ethnic’ professionals ‘strongly agreed’ that their spoken English was fluent, and a further 34 per cent ‘agreed’; the self-assessment of their written English was only slightly lower. However, only 28 per cent and 38 per cent respectively ‘strongly agreed’ and ‘agreed’ that they had a foreign accent, which means the remaining 34 per cent of non-Anglophone immigrants who arrived in Australia as adults did not think that they spoke with a recognisable ‘foreign accent’, which is unlikely to be the case due to neurologically-based ‘maturation constraints’ that affect foreign language learning past puberty (Stevens 1999: 557). It is not clear what the source of this linguistic self-inclusion may be; this will be further explored in follow-up interviews. A possible explanation is that for many non-Anglophones, and perhaps especially professionals among them, the foreign accent represents a symbol of otherness (of not-belonging, not being a ‘real Australian’) that they dislike and tend not to acknowledge, probably encouraged by the ease of communication indicating that their accent is at least unproblematic, and by not receiving any indications from Anglo-Australians that they had a ‘foreign accent’. The question remains, however, whether full (linguistic and social) insider status is granted to people with foreign accents by the Anglo-Australian majority. Perhaps this is the case in an abstract sense, for example such insider status has been granted by the majority of Anglo-Australians in this survey. However, research has shown that non-Anglophones are less likely to get full recognitions when they compete for desirable jobs (Creese 2010; Harrison 2012).
Two statements about general assimilation: ‘I am familiar with Australian social customs and niceties’ and ‘I have adopted many Australian attitudes and behaviours’ were also met with overwhelming agreement by non-Anglophone immigrants: no-one strongly disagreed, and only 7 per cent and 11 per cent of respondents disagreed with respective statements. However, the first statement attracted noticeably more agreement: ‘knowing the Australian way’ seems more widespread than actually ‘doing it the Australian way’.

A very large percentage (48.5 per cent) of non-Anglophones ‘strongly agreed’ and ‘agreed’ (38 per cent) that they had a job commensurate with their qualifications. Only 7 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. This seems to match reality when we look at listed occupations, but the fact that a considerable minority worked in casual (e.g. in academia) and contract jobs (e.g. in the mining sector) seems to be disregarded in this assessment; it is possible that people measured themselves against the insecure labour markets, rather than against their formal qualifications when assessing their job as ‘appropriate’. Therefore, the non-Anglophones’ overall perception of linguistic assimilation and professional transition may be overly positive. When asked whether their ‘foreign name and/or accent are a disadvantage in terms of work promotion’ the response was somewhat less positive: an equal proportion (20 per cent) ‘agreed’ and ‘strongly disagreed’ with this statement, and an equal proportion (26.5 per cent) ‘neither agreed or disagreed’ and ‘disagreed’ with this statement.

The perception of general acceptance that non-Anglophone immigrants enjoyed in Australia (statements: ‘I feel accepted among Anglo-Australians’ and ‘Australia is a friendly and welcoming country’) was strongly positive: only 3 per cent ‘disagreed’ and ‘strongly disagreed’ with the former statement, and 5 per cent with the latter statement. Sixty per cent ‘agreed’ and 19 per cent ‘strongly agreed’ with the first statement and the second statement attracted even stronger agreement. Only 10 per cent of non-Anglophones agreed that ‘in social situations, Anglo-Australians perceive non-Anglophone people as an intrusion’ and 11 per cent agreed that ‘at the workplace, Anglo-Australians perceive non-Anglophone people as a threat’. Responses to both negative statements were strongly skewed towards disagreement, indicating a generally positive feeling, which was somewhat stronger about the workplace than about social settings.

Discussion

Being an English native speaker is significant symbolic capital in the globalised world where English is a lingua franca and the predominant language of the internet. This fact may have
the power to deepen the symbolic power imbalance between Anglo-Australians, the owners of the language, and non-Anglophone immigrants who speak a ‘borrowed language’, which is indicated by a foreign accent (Colic-Peisker 2002; Piller 2011).

The onset of MMC is a significant new stage in the development of Australian ethnic relations which may lead to productive re-articulation of multiculturalism and multilingualism. In other words, the growth of MMC and its intense mixing with Anglo-Australians may gradually lead to a new power deal between Anglo-Australians and ‘ethnics’. According to Forrest and Dunn (2008:11) the policy of multiculturalism has definite ‘negative implications for the former hegemonic status of Anglo identity’. Will Anglo-Australians give away their hegemony willingly? As critical social scientists, we are sceptical towards such an outcome: social power is not usually surrendered without resistance.

When analysing the development of Australian multiculturalism through the changing position of ‘ethnics’ we need to keep in mind a well-known paradox of multiculturalism: a high degree of assimilation is a necessary condition for the structural social mobility of ‘ethnics’. But if we assume the intrinsic value of cultural diversity, we have to ask whether the two aspects can co-exist. In other words, can cultural difference co-exist with socio-economic and structural equality? Can non-Anglophones exist in the ‘third space’ of hybridity, knowing and practicing the ‘Australian culture’ while at the same time maintaining elements of their own, and crucially, integrating their cultural narratives and practices into a changing, multicultural ‘Australian culture’?

An optimistic scenario is that the increased influence of MMC will lead to an increasing recognition of the value of cultural and linguistic diversity in civil society and government. This would have to include new ways of ‘listening between the lines’ and new meanings attributed to foreign accents; the accented ‘Englishes’ would have to be included into the realm of the ‘legitimate language’. In the era of globalisation where cross-cultural communication is a must and everyday practice, bilingualism and multilingualism may become cultural and symbolic capital. In many non-English-speaking countries, it has been so for a long time, e.g. in continental Europe speaking several languages has been considered cultural capital and an important point of social status; equally, most urban dwellers of the Indian subcontinent are bilingual or multilingual. In contrast, in English speaking countries, being an English native speaker is considered an equivalent linguistic, cultural and symbolic capital to multilingualism in many other parts of the world. In a cosmopolitan context
however, in the globalised, interconnected world, bilingualism and multilingualism may indeed become assets rather than liabilities.

An alternative, ‘pessimistic’ scenario is a retreat from multiculturalism as an ideology, as a reaction to the ascent of MMC and pressures of globalisation: a political reflex aimed at maintaining the Anglo-Australian hegemony. This ‘political reflex’ includes calls for assimilation and ‘Anglo-conformity’ and asserting the dominant ‘Anglo-Australian values’ as superior. As we become more accustomed to ethnic diversity and inevitably less sensitive to the embodied difference, it may be that the audible difference—the foreign accent—will become the main site of otherness, due to large influxes of non-Anglophones fluent in English (unlike most of their post-war working-class predecessors who could only speak a ‘broken English’).

There is a global context of the possible power realignment between Anglo-Australian and ‘ethnics’: the end of the ‘American [Anglo] century’. The language of the (still) most powerful country in the world remains the most learnt language and the lingua franca of the contemporary world, but this may change during 21st century.

**Conclusion**

Our data indicate that the foreign accent may be losing its power as an unwanted social marker in Australia. Rather than being a symbol of otherness and non-belonging to the English-speaking nation, it may, at least in the context of MMC, become a symbol of desirable cosmopolitanism and communicative power beyond the traditional Anglo monolingualism (Callan and Gallois 1987; Clyne 1994). Previous research by sociolinguists and sociologists shows that Australians are strongly Anglophile and there is still some way to go towards this utopian point of total acceptance but our survey indicates progress. However, the perception of an ‘accent ceiling’ among a considerable number of middle-class middle-aged non-Anglophones persists, in concert with earlier research showing that ‘foreignness’ was likely to detract from person’s merit in the employment market (Colic-Peisker 2002; 2011b; Hawthorne 2005). The ‘bonus’ linguistic and cultural capital bestowed on native speakers of the global lingua franca influences the balance of symbolic power between Anglo-Australians and non-Anglophone immigrants and creates resistance to further recognising the value of bilingualism, multilingualism and intercultural competence. Of course, not all non-Anglophone cultures and languages enjoy the equal status, but our data indicate that specific ethnic preferences and antipathies may be less pronounced in professional settings. This is a point that deserves further investigation.
On a subtle level which needs to be explored in follow-up interviews, even the fluent-English-speaking MMC is likely to suffer a degree of linguistic, cultural and structural exclusion. The playing field is still not even but this survey indicates that Australian multiculturalism may be becoming more inclusive, perhaps due to rising numbers of professionally employed, educated non-Anglophones fluent in English: the ‘multicultural middle class’. The positive findings of the survey, especially from the Anglo-Australian sample which turned out to be extremely inclusive of non-Anglophones, may be partly due to self-selection of the sample and our targeting of tertiary educated people who have a heightened awareness of these issues as well as high-levels of ‘political correctness’. Nonetheless, the results are encouraging and further research may uncover detailed mechanics of the processes of social inclusion of the MMC in Australia.

References


Jakubowicz and Moustafine 2010 ‘Living on the Outside: Cultural Diversity and the Transformation of Public Space in Melbourne’ *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies* 2(3):55–75


**Notes**

1 The way we defined the two categories—Anglo-Australians and non-Anglophone Australians—excluded the second generation non-Anglophones, those who were born and/or grew up in Australia, in non-Anglophone families. Given our sociolinguistic focus, we considered them an in-between category, neither Anglo-Australians nor non-Anglophones: they speak with an Australian accent, without a recognizable foreign accent, but are from non-Anglophone family backgrounds and often have ‘foreign’ names.

2 We report absolute and relative numbers (percentages) interchangeably for practical purposes. Percentages are usually decimal numbers that need to be rounded, and given the number of respondents (103), if this is the case it is more precise to report the (absolute) number of respondents. The reported numbers do not always add up to the sample size: they can be an under-count because of missing responses and also an over-count because some respondents chose more than one answer.