'Sorry to Bother You' is right — minorities are judged by the sound of their voice, and there's science to prove it

Mark Abadi  Jul. 8, 2018, 6:47 PM

Minorities face discrimination because of the sound of their voice, as a black telemarketer learns in "Sorry to Bother You." Annapurna Pictures

- In the film "Sorry to Bother You," a black telemarketer finds success only after he starts speaking in a "white voice."

- The movie is rooted in science — linguists have long known that minorities face discrimination based on the sound of their voice.

- One linguist tried responding to local apartment listings using three accents — white, black, and Latino — and was offered more appointments when the landlord thought he sounded white.

In the upcoming movie "Sorry to Bother You," a black telemarketer named Cash can't finish a single call without getting hung up on.

But Cash's fortunes change after a colleague instructs him to start calling customers using his "white voice." Suddenly, by changing his accent to that of a white man, he achieves unheard-of levels of telemarketing success.

While "Sorry to Bother You" may be a comedy, its premise is rooted in science. Language experts have recognized for years that people face discrimination not just based on their race but the sound of their voice — especially when they sound like a minority.

John Baugh, a linguist at Washington University in St. Louis, was the first to document the "linguistic profiling" some minorities face over the phone. It started in the late 1980s when Baugh, who is black, said he was discriminated against while searching for apartments in Palo Alto, California, where he was living as a fellow at Stanford University.
Baugh launched an experiment in which he made hundreds of phone calls to landlords who had listed apartments in the San Francisco area. He greeted each landlord with the same line: "Hello, I'm calling about the apartment you have advertised in the paper." But he didn't always say it in the same accent — he alternated between using an African-American accent, a Mexican-American accent, and his natural accent, what he called professional standard English.

He found that in white areas, landlords were far less responsive to him when he used his black or Latino accent. In one predominantly white community, landlords offered to show him the apartment 70% of the time when he used his standard-English voice, but less than 30% of the time when he spoke in a black or Latino dialect.
Baugh's research proved that racism extends further than just face-to-face interactions.

"For people who felt that they had been the victims of linguistic discrimination, they were happy to see it," he told Business Insider. "And it was the kind of affirmation of like, well, we knew this all along. We knew it. We just didn't know that it could be proved scientifically."

**Can you really tell someone's race based on their voice?**

Although language and ethnicity are closely intertwined, the notion that one can "sound white" or "sound black" has stirred controversy in the past. It came up in the OJ Simpson murder case, when Johnnie Cochran memorably argued that it was inherently racist to assume someone's race based on the sound of their voice.

But as Baugh explains, we make inferences from people's voices all the time. We can usually tell when a speaker is a man or a woman, for example, and we can get a sense if they're old or young. Guessing someone's race is the same thing.

"It's not necessarily racist to draw an inference about a person's race from their speech," Baugh told Business Insider. "What is potentially racist is if you act on that inference in a discriminatory way."

Although Baugh's research uncovered a harsh reality for minorities, he said it did little to wipe out housing discrimination for good. Instead, it simply motivated the real estate industry to change its tactics.

Minorities still face discrimination in the housing market, as the Urban Institute think tank has shown. But now, instead of rejecting them over the phone, Baugh said brokers will often go through the process of having them fill out applications and granting them appointments before ultimately rejecting them, making it harder to take legal action.

"One of the unintended consequences of the research was that for those that wanted to discriminate, they realized, 'Oh, I'd better be a little more sophisticated than just simply telling people no.'"

For Baugh, the issue goes far beyond fair housing — it cuts to the heart of the American identity.
"Many of the people who engage in linguistic profiling and linguistic discrimination are descendants of people that came from someplace where English is probably not spoken. And some of their ancestors at one point in time, whether they came from Italy, Germany, Vietnam, or the Philippines, were subject to a form of linguistic discrimination," Baugh said.

"Accepting others who speak different than you do can potentially be a step toward healing divisions in the country."

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