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## **Chinese Students' Attitudes toward African American Standard and Vernacular English**

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### **Abstract**

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first sociolinguistic matched-guise experiment that examined Chinese students' attitudes toward African American English in both its standard and vernacular variants. This pilot study explored Chinese students' implicit bias—if any—toward African American English compared to white American English. For this purpose, seventy-two undergraduate Chinese students pursuing their studies in the US rated standard and vernacular English recordings of a White American female speaker and an African American female speaker. To optimize the validity of this experiment, two non-guises were included as distractors. The findings suggest that the participants held a more positive attitude toward White American English. Interestingly, female respondents rated the African American guise slightly higher than their male counterparts. Finally, when the African American speaker's teaching-related traits were rated, participants favored the standard over the vernacular recording. In sum: the findings suggest that respondents might have an existing/emerging implicit bias toward the African American speaker.

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## 1. Introduction

In our globalized world, where English is increasingly becoming the lingua franca of business and communication (Crystal, 2003), higher education discourse, and communities are also being influenced by these changes in the linguistic landscapes of college education around the world. Closely related is the notion of *native speakerism*. In this view, the debate over native and non-native English-speaking teachers is still receiving ample attention from schools, language centers, educators, language learners, and parents around the globe. While the majority of English, English as a Second Language (ESL), and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers worldwide remain non-native English speakers (NNESs), many EFL recruiters have been explicitly seeking to only hire native English speakers (NESs). A preference that recruiters often justify by the demands of schools and language learners in places like China, South Korea, Japan, and the Middle East. Arguments, such as students need teachers who are Native English Speakers (NESs) to learn *good English* or NES teachers are better cultural informants are all too common. However, there is little research to support this alleged "superiority" of NESs over NNESs as far as language teaching is concerned. Nonetheless, NNES teachers are often expected to emulate the NES model to gain credibility and visibility (Holliday, 2005). For instance, Tajeddin, Atai, and Shayeghi (2019) noticed that NNES teachers lacked confidence and thought their NES peers were superior as far as teaching English is concerned. The study noted, however, that panel discussions between NES and NNES teachers helped NNES teachers to shift their self-perception toward an appreciation of their strengths that are in part related to their NNES status.

This debate raises a few more questions. Who is this typical *NES teacher*? What does he/she look like? Is being a white NES more valued and accepted by schools and language learners than being a minority NES (i.e., Asian, Hispanic, African American)? While the above discussion depicted an uneasy debate over NES and NNES teachers and the questionable, sometimes discriminatory, recruitment practices in favor of NES teachers,

there is also another delicate but important debate within this very NES teacher community. In other words, is there a difference between how students perceive white NES teachers and NES teachers of color like English teachers of Hispanic, Asian, and African American descent? In this view, this small-scale pilot study proposes to examine how a sample of Chinese international students perceive African American standard and vernacular English in general (personality-related items) and as far as teaching-related terms are concerned. For comparative purposes, the experiment asked the participant to rate the personal and teaching-related traits of white American English in its standard and vernacular variants as well. Accordingly, this study used a sociolinguistic matched-guise experiment to test the hypothesis that white NESs are viewed more positively by English language learners than their African American counterparts.

This matched-guise experiment examined evaluative and subjective attitudes of Chinese students toward recordings of a White American and an African American speaker to investigate how the participants perceive African American English in its standard and vernacular variants. Of equal importance is how participants perceive standard and non-standard variants of English as they relate to these two groups. Most importantly, this study proposes to examine Chinese students' implicit biases toward African American English/speakers, and they relate to personality and teaching-related characteristics. Additionally, particular attention was given to how the respondents perceived standard and vernacular English variants of each speaker and across all recordings. Finally, this matched-guise experiment attempted to shed light on potential discrepancies between male and female participants' attitudes toward African American English, and so, this study contributes to the existing literature on international students' attitudes toward English variants. In this respect, this study offers a comparison of this component in relation to a similar study conducted by Marn, Ramirez, Na, and Tan in 2015, in which the authors set forth to report on implicit attitudes of international and American students toward black and white teachers. And so, this matched-guise experiment investigated the

evaluative and subjective attitudes of Chinese students toward recordings of an African American female speaker in comparison to those of a white American female speaker. The primary focus was on eliciting the participants' perceptions of the two speakers and their language attitudes toward the speakers' standard and vernacular English variants. In sum: this paper aimed at answering the following questions.

1. Do L1 Chinese students have an implicit bias toward African American English? If so, are there notable discrepancies between male and female respondents' attitudes?
2. Do L1 Chinese speakers have similar attitudes toward standard and vernacular African American English as far as personal and teaching-related traits are concerned?

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. The Matched-Guise Technique

Wallace Lambert was the first to introduce the sociolinguistic matched-guise technique in the 1960s to evaluate French bilingual Canadians' attitudes toward French and English speakers. This technique consists of evaluating listeners' subjective attitudes toward a language, dialect, or accent (Lambert, 1967). Typically, the matched-guise experiment uses a quantitative approach to examine language attitudes, although a few experiments combined quantitative (survey-based experiments) with qualitative methods (interviewing a sample of participants). Additionally, the matched-guise process varies according to the nature of the study. In general, the experiments usually consist of one speaker being recorded using two variants of a language or different speakers using different languages, dialects, or accents of the same language. To avoid skewed findings, respondents are not provided with any information about the speakers or the nature/purpose of the experiment. And so, the matched-guise technique offers a wide array of possibilities to examine attitudes toward foreign languages, accents, standard versus non-standard language variants, high versus low prestige accents, native versus non-native speaking teachers, stereotypes toward certain speech, and the rest. (Gaies & Beebe, 1991). Likewise, Gaies and Beebe (1991) enumerated a few sociolinguistic and educational uses of the matched-guise technique, such as

evaluating attitudes toward foreign language learners, teachers, linguistic varieties...among other things.

The matched-guise requires controlling variables such as tone, volume, age of speakers, gender of speakers, length of recordings and the rest.. At the same time, conducting a matched-guise experiment requires a meticulous selection of speakers. Hence, recordings typically involve speakers of the same generation (age range) and gender. That being said, the sociolinguistic matched-guise experiment presents a few limitations. For instance, respondents' attitudes toward the accent or language they hear may be due to other factors other than the presented audio (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Producing speech samples for respondents to listen to runs a risk of inauthenticity: i.e., exaggerated, overly enunciated recorded speeches (Hudson, 1980). More specifically, Andrews (2003) provides the following definition of the matched guise technique.

The traditional technique for the analysis of linguistic prejudices is a subjective- reaction test in which evaluators listen to a series of recorded voices, some of which use a stigmatized speech variety and others the corresponding prestige variety. The listeners rate each voice on a numerical scale for various specified attributes.

### 2.2. Language Attitude Research

As discussed above, the matched-guise experiment conducted by Lambert in 1967 revealed a few interesting findings. For instance, his experiment concluded that French Canadians rated English speakers higher than French speakers. Lambert emphasized the role of stereotypes and socioeconomic factors in shaping French Canadians attitudes toward English speakers. At that time in Canada, it was believed that Anglophones had a better socioeconomic status than Francophones (Lambert, 1967). Another well-known study was conducted by Purnell, Idsardi, and Baugh in 1999, where Baugh conducted telephone interviews using African American English, Chicano English, and Standard American English. He played the role of a prospective tenant and called landlords using different dialects. Results indicated that African American English and Chicano English were

discriminated against, especially in majority-white neighborhoods, while the Standard American English speaker maintained a 60% to 70% chance to secure an apartment viewing appointment regardless of the demographic of the neighborhood.

Alford and Strother (1990) examined the attitudes of NES and NNES university students toward selected regional accents of English in the US. Their study revealed that NNES students were able to recognize the differences between English dialects in the US. Regarding the teaching and learning of English in China, research offers conflicting findings about Chinese students' attitudes toward NES teachers and Chinese English teachers. In this view, Jin (2005) noted that NES teachers were viewed favorably in China, but, at the same time, the author observed that his participants became more accepting of non-standard variants of English, including English as an international language and China English. Reflecting on Chinese students' attitudes toward American English, British English, and Chinese English, Xu, Wang, and Case (2010) observed a notable preference for NESs; however, their findings were inconclusive as to which of the American or British English was viewed as more popular. Along similar lines, He and Zhang (2010) found that standard English and native speaker-based norms and models remain highly desirable within the context of English classrooms at the tertiary level in China. In contrast, He and Miller (2011) reported that Chinese non-English-major students preferred being taught by both Chinese English teachers and NES teachers. And so, the study recommends that local universities use a combination of both Chinese and Native English speakers to teach college English. Likewise, He and Li (2009) indicated that Chinese university teachers and students tend to view American English as the norm. This study raises another valid point: "The attitudes of mainland Chinese learners and teachers of English seem to be shifting toward accepting 'China English' as a legitimate, indigenized variety" (p. 86).

A concrete example of the ambivalent perceptions of native and non-native English-speaking teachers expressed by ESL/EFL students can be found in (Todd &

Pojanapunya, 2009), where Thai university students showed an explicit preference for NES teachers. At the same time, they felt warmer toward NNES teachers. And so, on the one hand, there are studies that reported positive attitudes of NNESs toward NESs (Butler, 2007; Ladegaard, 1998; Starks & Paltridge, 1996; Zhang & Hu, 2008). To illustrate, Zhang and Hu (2008) investigated Chinese students' attitudes toward three English variants (American English, British English, and Australian English). The participants were enrolled in graduate degree programs in American universities. The findings indicated that the participants showed favorable attitudes towards the varieties of English they were familiar with. That is, American and British English. On the other hand, other studies revealed a more nuanced and even favorable attitude toward NNES teachers in studies that examined the language attitudes of university students in Japan, Vietnam, Hong Kong, and China (Jie-yin & Gajaseneni 2018; Ling & Braine, 2007; Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014). In this view, Ling and Braine (2007) reported that university students in Hong Kong had favorable attitudes towards their NNES teachers. Interestingly, their study noticed a discrepancy between the attitudes of third (final) year students and freshmen, with the former group showing a more favorable perception of NNES teachers.

Regarding attitudes toward standard and non-standard variants, McKenzie (2004) reported that Japanese nationals showed a preference for standard over non-standard Scottish English. In a different context, Marn, Na, Tan, and Ramirez (2015) examined implicit attitudes of international and American students toward black and white teachers. Their findings revealed that international students expressed a *moderate* preference for white teachers while American students showed a *slight* preference for white teachers. It is noteworthy that their study concluded that international students "associated black teachers with negative attributes more than American students" (Marn et al., 2015, p. 130). Most importantly, their study noted that both female international students and female American students had weaker biases toward black teachers compared to male international and American students. In a similar fashion, Cargile, Takai, and Rodriguez (2006) evaluated

the attitudes of Japanese college students toward male and female African American Vernacular English speakers. They wanted to know whether Japanese students' attitudes toward African American Vernacular will differ from the ones expressed in the US. Their findings revealed that the attitudes of Americans and Japanese toward African American Vernacular English was almost identical.

In another study, Cross, Devaney, and Jones (2001) evaluated 111 Alabama student teachers' attitudes toward five readers representing common regional dialects. The authors concluded that respondents did take race into consideration when evaluating the regional dialects: "white respondents were most favorable to white speakers and least favorable to black speakers, and black respondents were most favorable to black speakers and least favorable to white speakers" (p. 211). Newkirk-Turner, Cooper Williams, Harris, and Whitefield McDaniels (2013) investigated pre-service teachers' attitudes toward students' use of African American English. They observed that the majority of the participants preferred Standard American English and believed that African American English use adversely affects African American students' learning, especially in Language Arts and Writing. Chakraborty, Schwarz, and Chakraborty (2017) found that despite the multicultural sensitivity training that American speech-language pathology students received, they maintained some biased beliefs about speakers with an accent.

### 3. Methodology

Seventy-two Chinese undergraduate students at a Midwestern American university listened to tape-recordings in standard, and vernacular English of a white female speaker and an African American female speaker then completed a matched guise survey (*appendix A*). In order to optimize the validity of the results, recordings from two NNEST female speakers were also included in this experiment as distractors. In total, this experiment included four speakers and six tape-recordings. Participation was on a voluntary basis. There was no financial reward or incentive provided to the four speakers and the seventy-two respondents. Another key element that served the purpose of validating the findings was the

use of a unique script. That is, speakers recorded the same short text. The discrepancies in recording lengths were one to two seconds maximum. At the same time, voice quality variables (i.e., volume, pitch, and intonation) were controlled.

#### 3.1. Participants

The total number of participants was 72 ( $N = 72$ ). They were Chinese undergraduate students aged between 17-20 and enrolled in an academic writing course at an ESL Department in a Midwestern University in the United States. The average age of the participants was 19.02 years old, and the sample included 32 female students and 40 male students.

#### 3.2. Instruments

There was a total of six tape-recorded scripts. As mentioned earlier, the script was identical, and the recordings ranged in duration between 19 to 21 seconds. The African American female speaker recorded a standard and vernacular version of the script. The white American female speaker also recorded a standard and vernacular version of the same script. Both speakers were college-educated ESL instructors with graduate degrees in TESOL. They were in their late twenties. The study included two non-guises/distractors. These were two separate non-native English female speakers who recorded one version of the script each. These two speakers were graduate students in their mid-twenties. One spoke French-accented English, and the other one spoke Spanish-accented English.

#### 3.3. Procedure

Six identical scripts were recorded. These included a recording of the White American female using standard English and another recording of the same speaker using White American Vernacular English and a recording of the African American female using Standard African English and another recording of the same speaker using African American Vernacular English. Two more tape recordings were included in this experiment as distractors (non-guises) that included a speech in English by a French female bilingual speaker and another speech also in English by a Spanish

female bilingual speaker.

The four speakers were emailed a short script describing how teachers can build rapport with their students. Guises were controlled for tone, volume, pitch, and length. When recordings were ready, a matched-guise survey asked the 72 participants to rate each guise on **5 personal traits**—confidence, looks, friendliness, honesty, and open-mindedness—then on **5 teaching-related traits**—creativity, fairness, flexibility, organization, and passion for teaching. Each of the 10 traits was rated on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 being the lowest possible rating and 5 being the highest possible rating. Before listening to the first guise, participants read the survey then listened to an explanation of what each trait meant to minimize the likelihood of arbitrary ratings. Each recording was played once with a two-minute interval between recordings to allow respondents to complete the survey.

To facilitate data analysis, the survey asked participants to answer one nonidentifiable item regarding their gender. Participants did not know the purpose of the study, neither did they have any information about the four speakers they listened to. The order of the recordings proceeded in a way that minimized the likelihood of respondents identifying patterns between speakers and across recordings. Accordingly, no two standard or vernacular English recordings were played one after the other, and no two recordings of the same speaker were played one after the other. For the sake of distraction, the two non-guises were played in between the four main guises. And so, the recordings proceeded according to the following order.

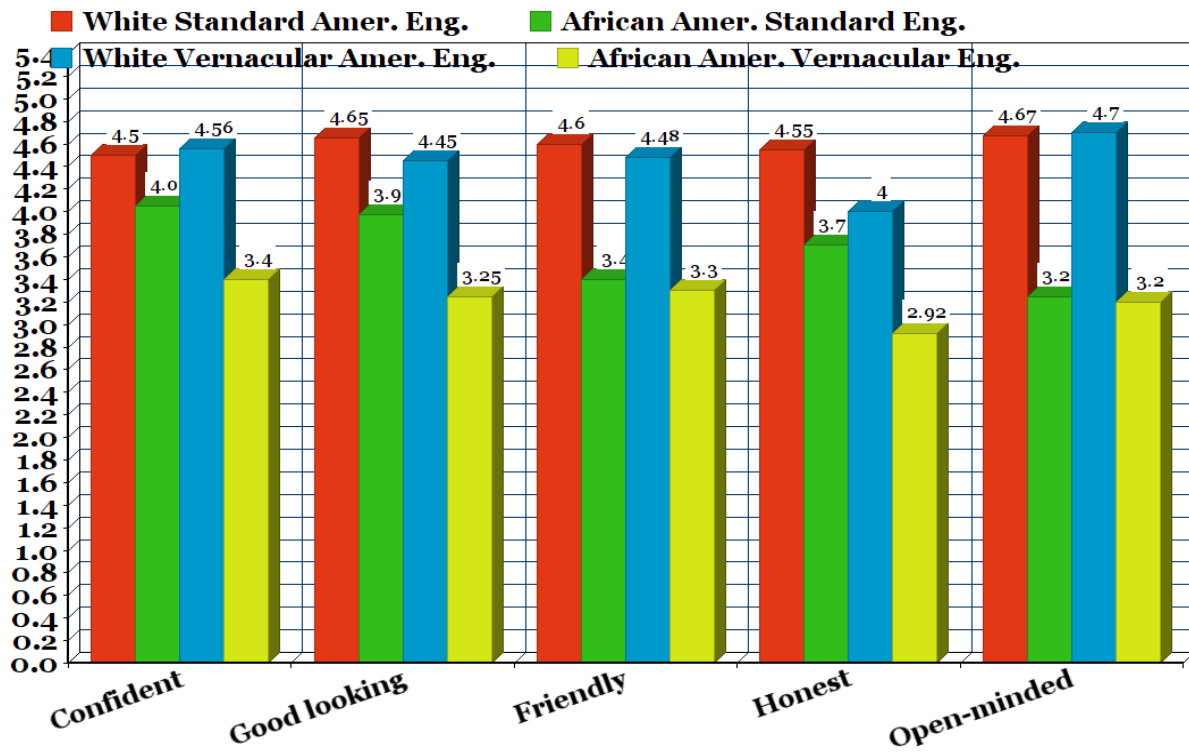
- **1<sup>st</sup> recording.** White standard English
- **2<sup>nd</sup> recording,** African American Vernacular English
- **3<sup>rd</sup> recording.** Non-guise 1 (French-accented English)
- **4<sup>th</sup> recording.** Non-guise 2 (Spanish-accented English)
- **5<sup>th</sup> recording.** White American Vernacular English
- **6<sup>th</sup> recording.** African American standard English

## 4. Results

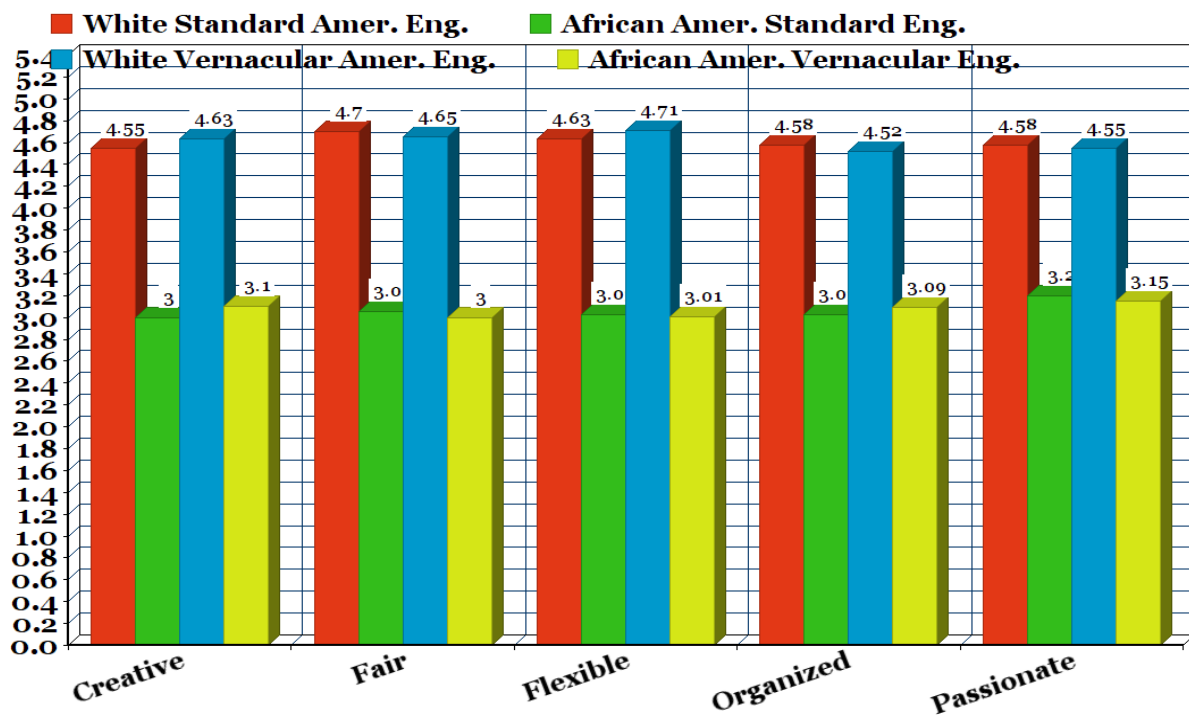
### **RQ#1. Do L1 Chinese students have an implicit bias toward African American English? If so, are there notable discrepancies between male and female respondents' attitudes?**

As illustrated by the charts below, participants have shown a notable degree of implicit bias toward African American English, especially when the participants rated the African American speaker on teaching-related traits. In this sense, the mean ratings of the African American speaker's personal traits were 3.75/5 for the standard guise 3.30/5 for the vernacular guise. When evaluating the African American speaker on teaching-related traits, the mean scores were much lower in both variants (standard: 3.05/5 and vernacular 2.88/5). In contrast, the participants showed positive attitudes toward the white American speaker as reflected by their mean ratings of her personal traits (standard: 4.67/5 and vernacular 4.47/5) and teaching-related traits (standard: 4.47/5 and vernacular 4.65/5).

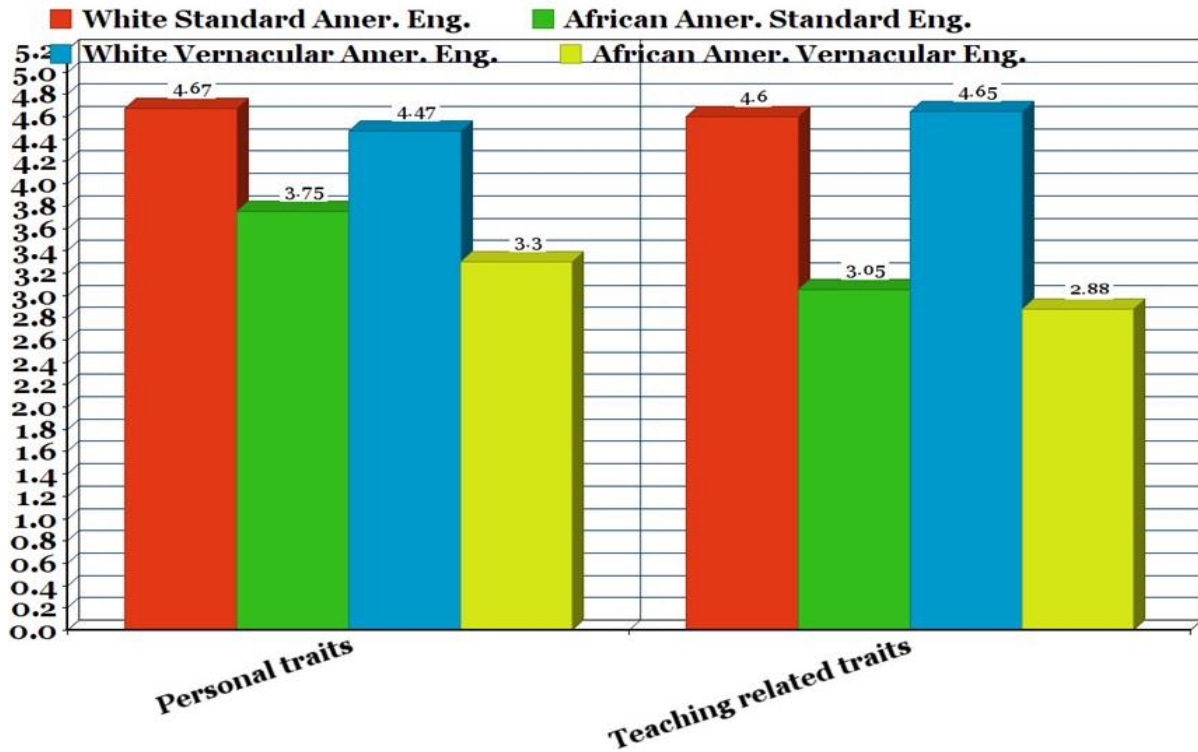
And this leads to the second item of the research question, namely, ascertaining whether male and female attitudes toward the African American speaker were fairly consistent. Likewise, the data indicated a nonsignificant discrepancy in the way male and female respondents perceived African American English. More specifically, female respondents were slightly less biased toward both variants of African American English. This finding is consistent with Marn et al. (2015), who found that their international and American female respondents were slightly less biased toward African American teachers than their male peers. However, "international students associated black teachers with negative attributes more than American students" (p. 130). At the same time, the authors also observed that female international students had a weaker bias toward black teachers than male international students. The same pattern was noticed with American students: female American students showed less bias toward black teachers than male American students.



**Figure 1**  
*Attitudes towards Personal-Related Traits*



**Figure 2**  
*Attitudes towards Teaching-Related Traits*



**Figure 3**

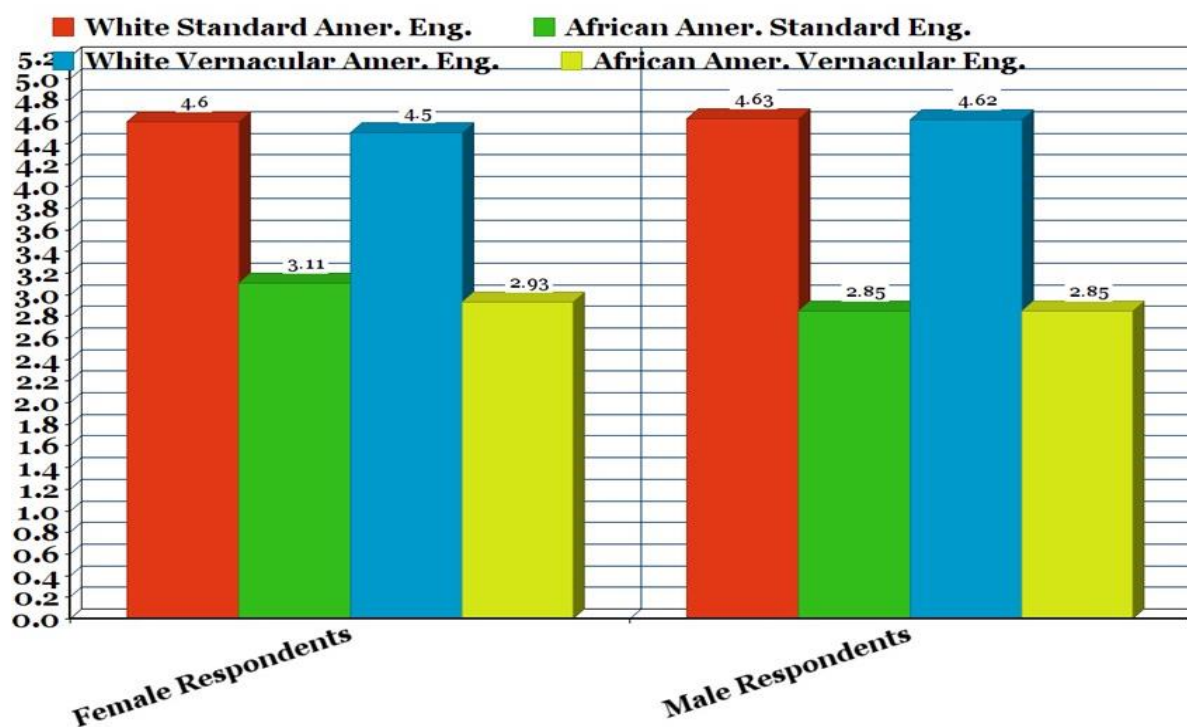
*Mean Scores of Personal and Teaching-Related Traits*

**RQ#2. Do L1 Chinese speakers have similar attitudes toward standard and vernacular African American English as far as personal and teaching-related traits are concerned?**

Survey data revealed that respondents rated White standard and vernacular English significantly higher than their African American counterparts. On the one hand, the standard English recording of the white speaker was rated higher than the vernacular recording in terms of looks, friendliness, and honesty—open-mindedness received the same rating—. Interestingly, the White American vernacular recording was rated higher than the standard in confidence and in teaching-related traits. This might be due to the respondents' lack of exposure and acculturation to the nuances between standard and vernacular

English. On the other hand, respondents' ratings of the African American speaker did not follow the same pattern. Specifically, the standard African American English recording was rated higher than the vernacular recording in all five personal traits. In light of these findings, we could argue that the respondents had a favorable attitude toward White American English and a less favorable attitude toward African American English. Most importantly, standard African American English was rated higher than the vernacular in all ten traits included in the matched-guise survey. Remarkably, this preference for standard African American English over its vernacular variant was especially notable when respondents rated the African American speaker on teaching-related traits.





**Figure 4**  
*Male and Female Respondents' Ratings of Teaching-Related Traits*

**Non-guises.** (Check appendix b and appendix c).

The non-guises (distractors) were comprised of two recordings in English by an L1 French speaker and an L2 Spanish speaker. In this respect, the findings revealed that respondents rated the French-accented English recording higher than Spanish accented English recording in all ten traits included in the matched-guise survey. More specifically, the respondents' preference for the French-accented English speaker was especially notable in rating personal traits related to looks and friendliness as well as teaching traits related to fairness and flexibility. Overall, the way respondents rated the two non-guises was similar to their attitudes toward the White and African American speakers. In other words, while the respondents indicated a clear preference for the white American speaker and the French-accented English speaker, the findings indicate the existence of implicit bias toward the Spanish accented English speaker and the African American speaker. We might argue that race could have been a determining factor in this respect.

## 5. Discussion

Research on international students' implicit bias and overall attitudes toward minorities in their host countries—particularly in the United States—received scant attention. In this view, this study aimed at contributing to the emerging sociolinguistic research strand that examines international students' perceptions of racialized minority groups. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that explored how Chinese students pursuing their undergraduate studies in the US perceived African American English in both its standard and vernacular variants. Closely related to this language attitude experiment is the issue of race. More specifically, this experiment suggests that the respondents' attitudes toward African American English might have been informed and shaped by their existing and, or emerging views of African Americans as a racialized and stigmatized minority group within the fabric of the American society.

There is scope, then, for future research to continue to explore how international students in the US perceive racialized groups—

Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, African Americans, Arabs, Indians etc.—to further understand the nature, scope, and rationale behind implicit biases towards these groups. Ascertaining these parameters would necessarily involve a language attitude survey in addition to semi-structured interviews with a sample of participants. This experiment seems to support the idea that international students might have already adopted the racial hierarchies that characterize American society and higher education. Since this study did not include semi-structured interviews with participants, it was not possible for us to determine the extent to which some participants came to the US with already established notions related to race and racialized groups in America. There are several reasons why our Chinese respondents were explicitly in favor of the white American speaker and implicitly biased toward the African American speaker, especially as far as teaching-related traits are concerned.

The US media, film industry, public schooling, and higher education remain predominantly white. For instance, Cherng and Halpin (2016) reported that 81% of K-12 teachers in the US were white. In like manner, the percentage of white faculty in American universities and colleges ranged between 76% to 84% (Davis & Fry, 2019; Lynch, 2020). In this sense, it is likely that international students rarely encounter minority professors during their studies in the US. And so, they might expect or even associate being a professor in the American higher education context with being white. Another factor that might explain the respondents' implicit bias toward the African American speaker relates to their national and cultural background. Unlike the heterogeneous, multiethnic, and multicultural American context, the demographic in China remains predominantly homogeneous. In addition, China is not known to be a destination for immigrants and international students. In this sense, our respondents' exposure to diverse and multiethnic groups before coming to the US might have been very limited.

As *Figure 4* suggests, this experiment revealed similarities between the way male and female respondents perceived the white and African American speakers. There is, however, an

indication that female respondents showed a slightly weaker bias toward the African American Speaker compared to their male peers. Marn et al. (2015) observed the same tendency of female international and American students being less biased toward African American teachers compared to male students. To date, very little research has been done to illuminate how gender comes to play in shaping international students' racial, cultural, and linguistic attitudes toward minority groups. Future research should, therefore, examine how the gender variable informs and shapes international students' perceptions and attitudes toward different minority groups and languages. Ideally, this can be achieved by adopting a mixed methods research design combining both matched-guise surveys and qualitative interviews. Most importantly, approaching the role of gender in language attitudes would require having a fairly large sample of participants. There is, finally, a need for future research to explore how international students perceive standard and vernacular English. This experiment suggests that the distinction between the two English variants might not have been salient enough to most respondents.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: The Matched Guise Survey

- a) **Please indicate your sex by circling the right choice:** Male - Female
- b) **After you listen to the recording, rate each personal and teaching-related trait.**  
**5 = the highest possible rating      1 = the lowest possible rating**
- c) **Do you think the person you listened to is...?**

Confident	1	2	3	4	5
Good looking	1	2	3	4	5
Friendly	1	2	3	4	5
Honest	1	2	3	4	5
Open-minded	1	2	3	4	5

- d) **If this person was a teacher, how would you rate them on these traits?**

Creative	1	2	3	4	5
Fair	1	2	3	4	5
Flexible	1	2	3	4	5
Organized	1	2	3	4	5
Passionate	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix B

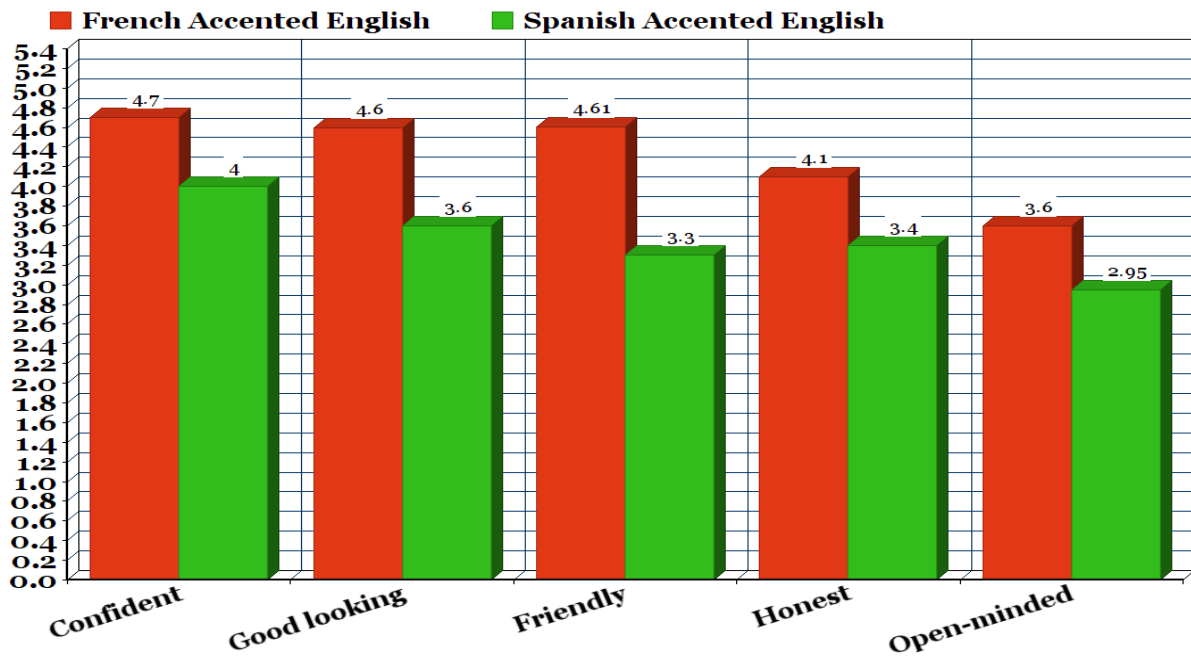


Figure 5  
Non-Guises: Attitudes towards Personal-Related Traits

Appendix C

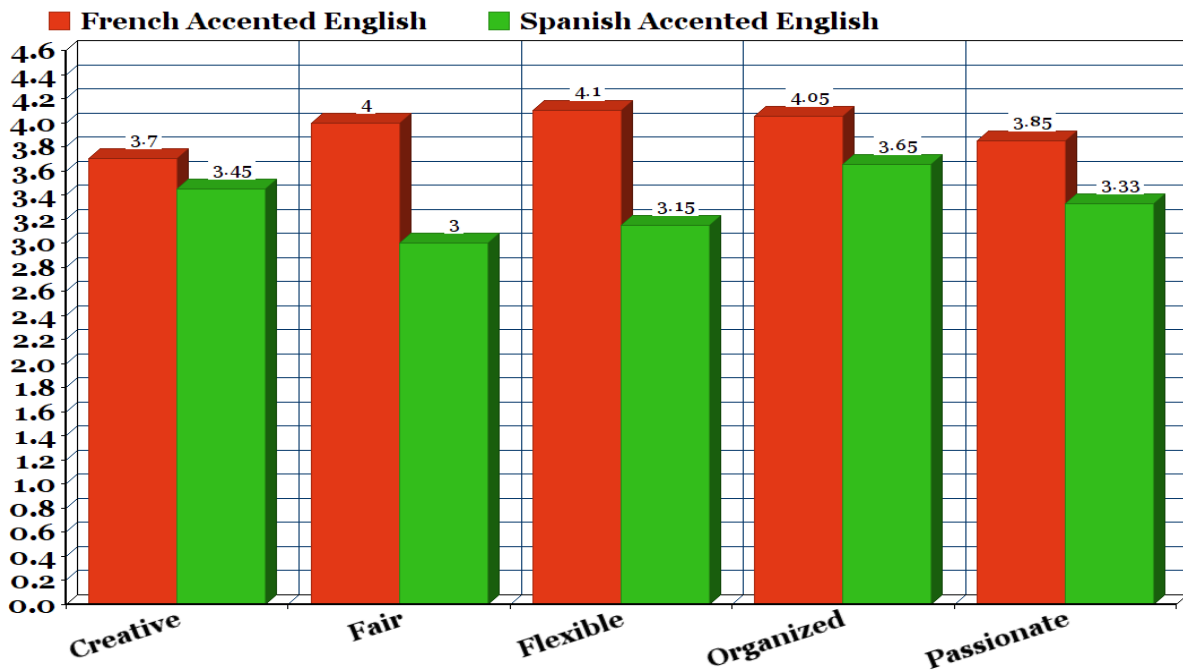


Figure 6  
Non-Guises: Attitudes towards Teaching-Related Traits