

Typically Italian, isn't it? Accent shapes our perception of a person

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This is Jena psychologist Dr. Tamara Rakic. Credit: Photo: Jan-Peter Kasper/University Jena

The accent someone talks in plays a crucial role in the way we judge this person, psychologists of the Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Germany, found out recently. "The accent is much more important than the way a person looks", Dr. Tamara Rakic sums up one of the key findings of the study, which has just been published in the online edition of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

"I have ready!" With this sentence the FC Bayern Munich coach Giovanni Trapattoni finished a furious rant about his team's performance in 1998. And "Mr Angelo" in a coffee advert points out to his neighbour with a mischievous smile: "I don't have a car at all". In both cases the

Italians are unmistakably recognizable and so the exuberant temperament of the first and the charming way of the second are seemingly "typically Italian".

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"The classification into social categories, like for instance ethnicity, happens spontaneously and helps us to understand and simplify the complex world and to enable us to deal more easily with complexity", Dr. Rakic says. However the psychologist continues, categorizing can turn into unreflected stereotype-based judgment and lead to discrimination. The psychologists from the Jena University investigate the process of person perception in a project, lead by Professor Dr. Melanie Steffens, within the research unit "Person [Perception](#)". In their current studies Dr. Rakic and her colleagues Professor Dr. Melanie Steffens and Professor Dr. Amélie Mummendey tested empirically for the first time the influence of language on ethnic categorization. "With our language we are not only transmitting information. Language itself provides a lot of information about the person speaking", Dr. Rakic says. According to Dr. Rakic one can draw conclusions from the language about the temperament, age or state of mind of a person. "Those who have an accent give away their ethnic background as well."

Previously scientists assumed that visual cues have a priority in categorizing unknown people. "The great majority of studies focused on the looks", the Jena psychologist Rakic says. In contrast the influence of

the language – or more precisely of the accent – has been neglected so far. Wrongly, as the Jena scientists could demonstrate now.

They showed to the participants the photos of German and Italian looking persons together with a written statement of the persons depicted. Then the participants had to assign the statements to the depicted persons. In accordance with earlier findings mix-ups were particularly common within the groups of German and Italian looking persons. Statements made by German looking persons however were not wrongly assigned to Italian looking persons (or vice versa). But it got more interesting when accents were added: Now some German looking persons spoke standard German and some with an Italian accent, (as well as Italian looking people). "The results indicate that the participants orientated themselves nearly exclusively on the spoken accent while categorizing people", Dr. Rakic summarizes her results. The looks which came into the equation by categorizing in the first experiment while no other information was provided were not important anymore. According to Rakic this is proof of the great importance of language as a source of information in the ethnic categorization: this is in accordance with the assumption that accent free [language](#) plays a crucial role in social integration.

More information: Rakic T, Steffens MC, Mummendey A: Blinded by the accent! The minor role of looks in ethnic categorization. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 2010, [DOI: 10.1037/a0021522](#)

Provided by Friedrich Schiller University Jena

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