Seeing Asians speaking English

Who of these two men do you expect to speak better English?*

I am very much looking forward to attending the International Conference on Research and Applications of Intercultural Communication in Wuhan next week. By way of preparation, I've googled the conference hotel on tripadvisor and was disappointed to discover that the English-language comments were quite negative. Going by the ratings alone, the Chinese-language comments seemed to be much more positive. So what is it that bothers English speakers about the hotel that the Chinese speakers don’t seem to mind? You guessed it, it's English!

"Its main drawback for western people is the total lack of English information. There is the major signage with English, but few staff have much communication in English."

"Reception staff does not speak English."

"The hotel looks nice and the rooms are ok, however the English spoken is barely average."

"Few staff speak English at all, and none that I encountered spoke it well."

Examples could go on and on and I ended up browsing a variety of hotels in China just for language-related comments. What I discovered was an endless litany of English-related complaints. My impression is (and there’s obviously a research project here) that Western travellers to China mostly care about the English proficiency of staff when they assess the quality of a hotel and they generally assess the English of hotel staff in highly negative terms.

I am not aware of any research into the actual English language proficiency levels of hotel staff in customer service roles in up-market international hotels in China but I’d be extremely surprised if the situation was really as dire as it is presented in comments such as those quoted here.

The situation reminds me of the language panic about Asian teaching assistants that gripped US universities in the 1980s and that inspired the by-now classic intercultural communication research of Rubin (1992) and Rubin and Smith (1990). At that time, there were widespread complaints that American students couldn’t understand Asian teaching assistants and so weren’t learning anything. The researchers wanted to test whether the problem might be due not only to Asian ways of speaking but also to American ways of hearing.

The researchers audio-recorded a science lecture aimed at undergraduate students. The speaker on the tape was a native speaker of American English speaking in a standard American-English accent. The lecture was then played to two different groups of undergraduate students. In one case, the lecture was accompanied by the picture of a Caucasian woman and in the other it was accompanied by the picture of an Asian woman. Thus, the impression was created that a Caucasian woman was speaking in one instance and an Asian woman in another. Both women were shown in the same pose and had been rated as similarly attractive. So, we have
one audio-recorded lecture spoken in Standard American English and two different visual signals: a Caucasian lecturer versus an Asian lecturer.

Can you guess where this is headed? Right!

The students who saw the Asian lecturer heard a ‘foreign’, ‘non-native’ or ‘Asian’ accent although none was present in the auditory signal. What is more, the perceived accent of the perceived Asian lecturer led to reduced comprehension. The students rated the quality of the lecture and the quality of their learning experience much lower when they thought it was delivered by a speaker with a foreign accent.

Is the same going on with hospitality workers now? Western customers expecting they’ll have a hard time understanding Chinese hotel workers? And this expectation becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy? I’ll find out next week, I guess.

If you are interested in learning more about performance and perception in intercultural communication, you could read the chapter about “Intercultural Communication and Exclusion” in my book Intercultural Communication or you could attend the pre-conference workshop devoted to “Why westerners don’t understand the Chinese: Intercultural communication between performance and perception,” which I’ll conduct at Zhongnan University of Economics and Law on Thursday, November 15, or the repeat at the University of Hong Kong on Tuesday, November 20.

* Both men are German politicians and native speakers of German. Phillip Rösler (l.) is Vice-Chancellor of Germany and Guido Westerwelle (r.) is the Minister of Foreign Affairs.