

“Understanding Each Other” Abstract

“Understanding Each Other: Accented Communication at Queen’s” is an initiative developed in collaboration among the SGPS, the Human Rights Office at Queen’s University, PSAC Local 901, and other University-affiliated organizations and bodies. Its aim is to address accent-related communication barriers faced by members of the Queen’s community. Its primary aim is to develop a comprehensive list of recommendations for Queen’s administration and equity-concerned bodies to implement, in order to promote effective and respectful communication within Queen’s, which inherently recognizes the diversity of spoken Englishes. Understanding Each Other will also develop a website which will make accented communication resources publicly available, as well as provide information regarding the process of this project.

In order for the recommendations to address the specific needs of the Queen’s community, Understanding Each Other will rely primarily on direct input from individuals at Queen’s – students, faculty and staff. Interaction between community members who choose to be participants in the project and researchers will take two distinct forms, defining the project’s two parts.

In Part 1, all members of the Queen’s community will be invited via email to share anonymously any personal account(s) of experienced difficulties in communication arising from accent and/or discrimination on the basis of accent. These accounts will inform Part 2 of Understanding Each Other, in which some of the researchers will facilitate focus groups, with the objective of determining the specific practices and resources needed in order for Queen’s to become a safer space, in which diversity and difference in spoken English is respected, and in which all members of the community can communicate effectively with one another. Participants for Part 2 will again be recruited through an open invitation disseminated by email, but their participation will involve disclosure of identity to researchers and other participants in their focus group.

Method

Although Understanding Each Other has two distinct parts involving participants, the project involves four research methods, two of which do not involve direct interaction between researchers and participants. All of these are directed towards the ends of developing a set of recommendations for Queen’s and a comprehensive list of resources.

Academic, Legal and Archival Research

We are looking into psychological and sociological scholarship focusing on how individuals process and react to a familiar language being spoken in an unfamiliar way. We can therefore try reading the experiences shared with us through the lens of these academic perspectives, in order to determine which scholarship might be useful to incorporate into focus group questions, recommendations and public resources.

Looking into the archives of SGPS Student Advisor cases, we hope to get a sense of trends in accent-related communication issues and/or discrimination faced by Queen’s community members – specifically graduate and professional students in recent years. Comparing these to the experiences shared by participants in Understanding Each Other will show whether there are trends that persist or seem to have changed over the years.

Learning about legal precedents set in recent years regarding discrimination on the basis of accent within the federal and provincial Human Rights Tribunals, specifically, will provide

insight into trends beyond the Queen's context, and help inform our set of recommendations. Having PSAC Local 901 as a collaborator on Understanding Each Other gives us access to union policy regarding accented communication. Both the legal precedents and union practices will provide us with a sense of how issues relating to accent are treated in non-academic institutions and contexts.

Anonymous Experiential Data Collection (i.e. Part 1)

Please see Letter of Information in section 8.1.1, below.

Collaborative Opportunities

We will be getting in touch with organizations at Queen's who have a stake in resisting discrimination on the basis of accent, such as the Queen's International Centre, in order to raise awareness of the Understanding Each Other project, and to determine what initiatives such organizations might already have in place that our project could draw on. Beyond Queen's, we are looking into whether there are similarly-minded projects being carried out at other academic institutions. Extending our research in this way, we hope to develop Understanding Each Other dialogically into the most effective project it can be, and to be able to link it to projects outside Queen's via the resource website.

Focus Groups (i.e. Part 2)

Please see Letter of Information in section 8.1.2 and Consent Form in section 8.2, below.

At the moment, we anticipate having at least two focus groups: one for individuals who identify as having faced discrimination on the basis of accent, and one for individuals who have faced significant difficulty understanding another individual's spoken English at Queen's, negatively impacting their interaction. The experiences participants share with researchers in Part 1 will determine whether we keep this model, and/or develop other focus groups.

Two very general questions we plan to incorporate into the two anticipated focus groups are:

- 1) How has your experience speaking what is considered an accented English here affected your academic performance at Queen's (teaching or learning)?
- 2) How have you dealt with a situation where another individual's accent has impeded your ability to understand what this individual was communicating in a teaching or learning context?

Notes on the Resource Website

The website will include resources drawn from all the research areas of Understanding Each Other. All of the academic articles and legal precedents we are working with will be available in electronic format wherever possible, accompanied by a summary for each one. Researchers will produce these summaries being attentive to rendering them in non-academic language, so that the information is easily and relatively quickly accessible to anyone. Significant trends from the SGPS Student Advisors archives and the experiences shared by participants in Understanding Each other will also be listed. There will not be any reference to the identity of individuals connected to these experiential trends, unless a participant specifies a

wish for this to be the case (and so definitely not, in the case of the Student Advisor archives section). Finally, the website will include links to organizations within and outside Queen's who are dedicated to resisting discrimination on the basis of accent and/or to promoting effective communication along accented barriers.

The website is being developed privately within the SGPS server by the researchers. It will not be made public until after the focus groups have held all their meetings. There are currently no details regarding if and how this website will be maintained and/or updated; this will depend partly on which server hosts the finished website.