
Ethi:CS -- The Weekly Ethicacy

Week #3: Yenmin vs Shana

The AI startup erasing call center worker accents: is it fighting bias – or perpetuating it?

Week #3: Yenmin vs Shana

Summary of issue...

Call centers have been around since the 1950's, but in the early 1990's, India began to see more business. US/UK businesses outsourced call centers particularly in India due to low labor costs, and large English-speaking population, and enough people to work night hours in order to offer service. Recently, a Silicon Valley startup, called Sanas, created an AI program that alters the workers voice in real time.



- ❖ [Watch the magic](#)
- ❖ [Co-founder Interview](#)

Fighting bias...

- ❖ [Watch the magic](#)
- ❖ Purpose is to help call center workers from around the world sound 'westerners' at the exact time when they need it the most during the phone call.
- ❖ This AI program provides a shortcut to the laborious and often unsuccessful 'accent neutralization' training that call center workers receive.
- ❖ Lessens the discrimination that the call center workers receive because of their accent.
- ❖ Boasts confidence of workers to have conversations without the bias of the customer because of their accent. It can be frustrating to not be understood because of your accent.
- ❖ It is optional. Agents can opt in and out at any time they choose.



Fighting bias...

❖ Sanas, is guided by three principles under its detailed code of ethics:

- 1) individual choice (Sanas is speaker-controlled, at the push of a button ensuring no one is forced to use Sanas),
- 2) personal control (Sanas is only operates on outgoing audio, meaning it can never alter the sound of the client), and
- 3) flexibility (Access to a multitude of accents, so you can choose the way you're heard at any given moment. A user can never be forced to sound a certain way.)



What does the code look like...

- ❖ Sample coding of Accent Translation
- ❖ Real Time Foreign Accent Conversion by DongyaoZhu



Perpetuating Bias

Sorry to Bother You (2018) is about a young, black telemarketer who adopts a white accent to succeed at his job. Swept up into a corporate conspiracy, he must choose between profit (personal gain) and joining his activist friends to organize labor.



Perpetuating Bias

Cassius had to sound more white to be "palatable and "soothing" to his customers.

The call center agents and Cassius from the movie both do extreme forms of code switching, a survival mechanism that oppressed peoples must do to assimilate in a Western-centric world.



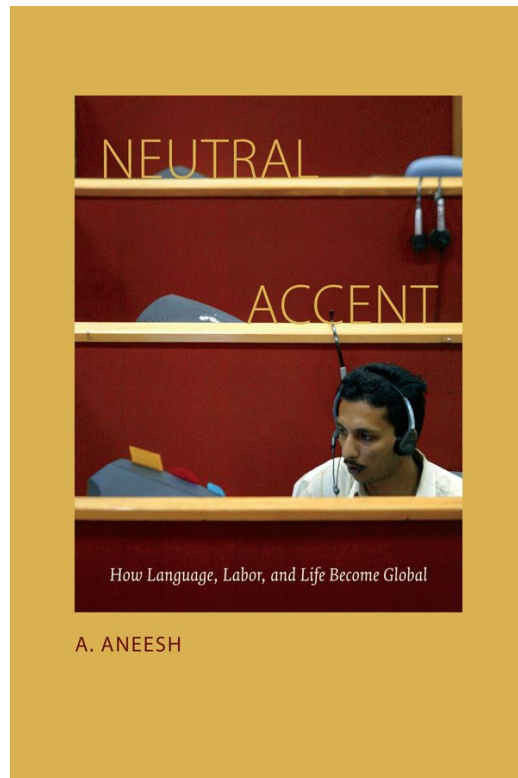
Perpetuating Bias

Call center agents endure racism, prejudice, and xenophobia because of their accents and origins. While they deserve a better life and shouldn't be treated worse because of their non-Whiteness, Sanas' AI software is hardly even a band-aid solution to their problems. **It is a well-intentioned idea that actually capitalizes on and is rooted in xenophobia.**

Perpetuating Bias

“Neutral Accent: How Language, Labor, and Life Become Global” by A. Aneesh

Interviews the call center agents about the challenges they face when bridging cultures, laws, and economies to create a “neutral” environment when it actually costs them more than their customers.



Perpetuating Bias

While on an individual scale, it may reduce bias for the call agent and make their life easier.

However, **sociologically, it is dehumanizing, and encourages the erasure of non-White identity**. Sometimes, their names are changed to be more Western (from “Narayan” to “Nathan”). They must not only learn English, but also the American slang and pronunciations (as opposed to British, which many Asian countries’ version of English is based on.) They have to work graveyard shifts due to the time zone differences, which has negative impacts on their health.

Perpetuating Bias

This AI software encourages Westerners to develop an **“indifference to difference”** by creating a false reality catered to the Western palate, coddling them by only portraying Western perspectives.

This perpetuates bias because it never actually addresses the root of the issue and instead, continues to feed a false narrative that everything is and should be centered around the Western consumer diet.