

Inter-speaker variation and the evaluation of British English accents in employment contexts

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“The moment an Englishman opens his mouth, another Englishman despises him.”

(George Bernard Shaw, Pygmalion, 1916)



- Long-standing patterns of **inequality** in professional hiring in the UK (Ashley et al. 2015)
- Accent is a **key signal** of social background and can impact ability to access elite professions
 - e.g. Discrimination against **non-standard accents** in the workplace even when communicative effectiveness not in question (Roberts et al. 1992)
- Specific role of accent in perpetuating unequal outcomes in contemporary Britain **under-explored**



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Does **accent bias** affect public attitudes about a job candidate's perceived suitability for employment?

Are these attitudes affected by **listeners' characteristics** (e.g. age, ethnicity) and **experience**?

Phases of Project



- Verbal guise survey with public, to see accent bias in **nation**



- Testing influence of “**accentedness**” using different measures (cf. speaker effect)



- Verbal guise survey with legal professionals, where **quality** of response is also manipulated



- Examining perceptual ratings in **real-time**

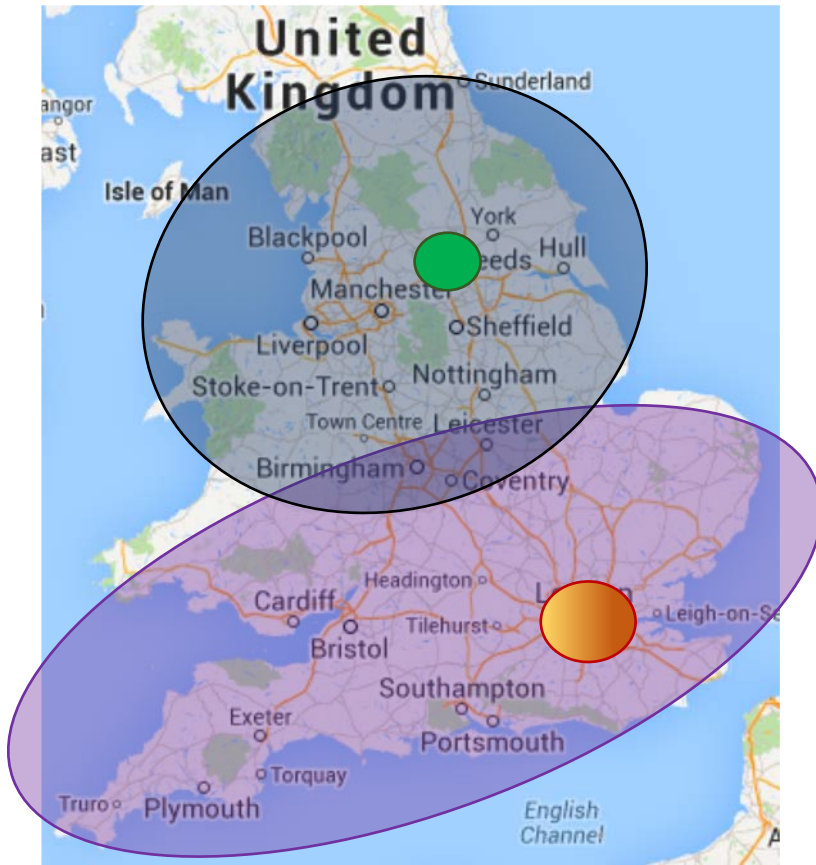


- Designing and testing different anti-bias **interventions**

Methods

- Online verbal guise study with representative sample of UK population (N=1014)
 - not legal professionals
- **Listeners** evaluated interview performance of “candidates” for trainee solicitor position at a corporate law firm
 - e.g. answer, knowledge, likely to succeed
- **Candidates** were 10 young native-accent speaking men of 5 English accents
 - (2 speakers/accent)
- **Stimuli** were audio responses to interview questions, some requiring legal expertise and others focussing on more general professional skills (developed with lawyer consultants)

Methods



- Accents:

- Received Pronunciation (RP): Middle-class, White, Southern
- Estuary English (EE)**: Working-class, White, Southern
- Multi-cultural London English (MLE)**: Working-class, Non-white, Southern
- General Northern English (GNE)**: Middle-class, White, Northern
- Urban West Yorkshire English (UWYE)**: Working-class, White, Northern



RP: Paul



EE: Dean



MLE: Eric



GNE: John



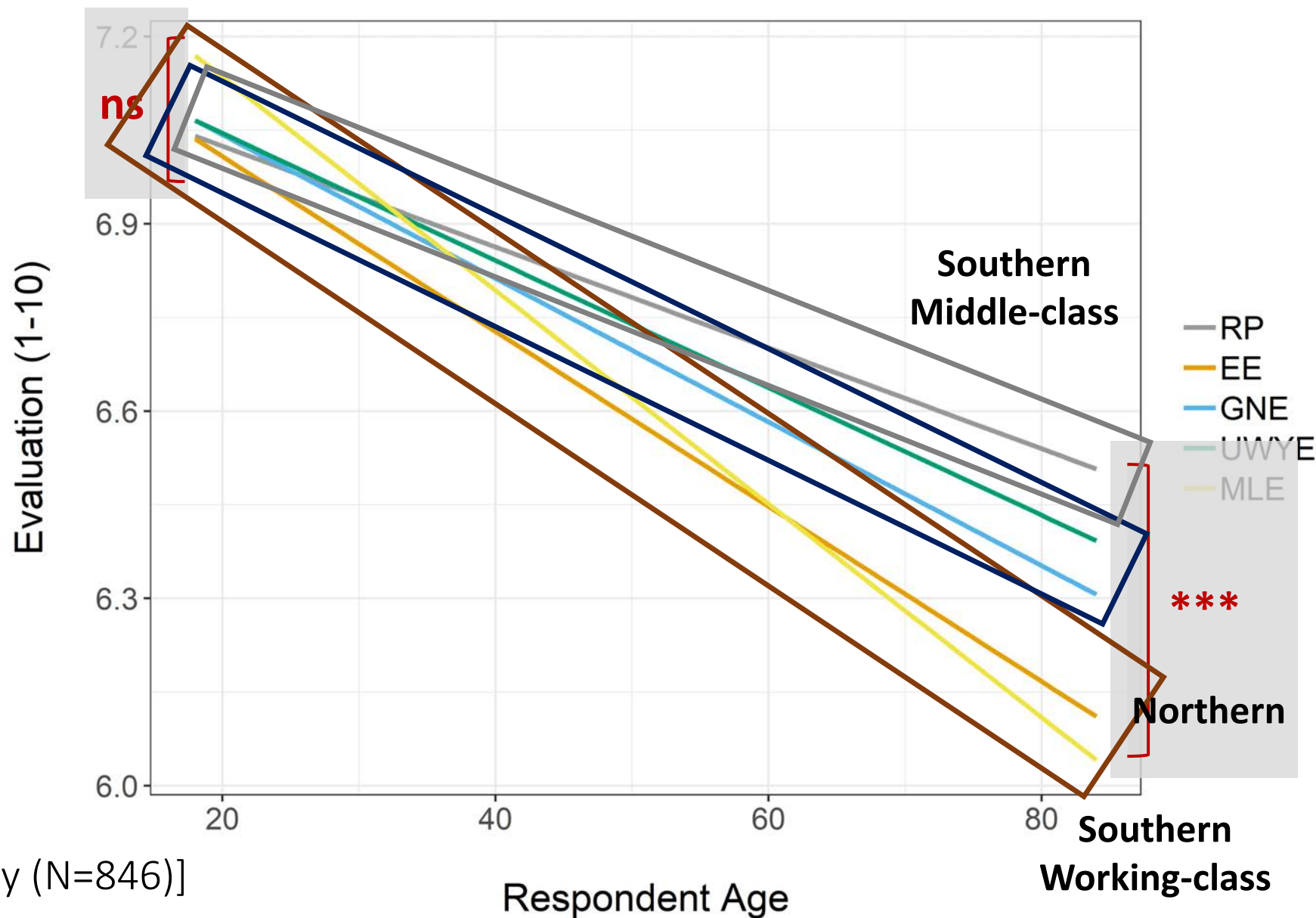
UWYE: Gary

Results: Accent & Age

More
Positive
Ratings



Less
Positive
Ratings



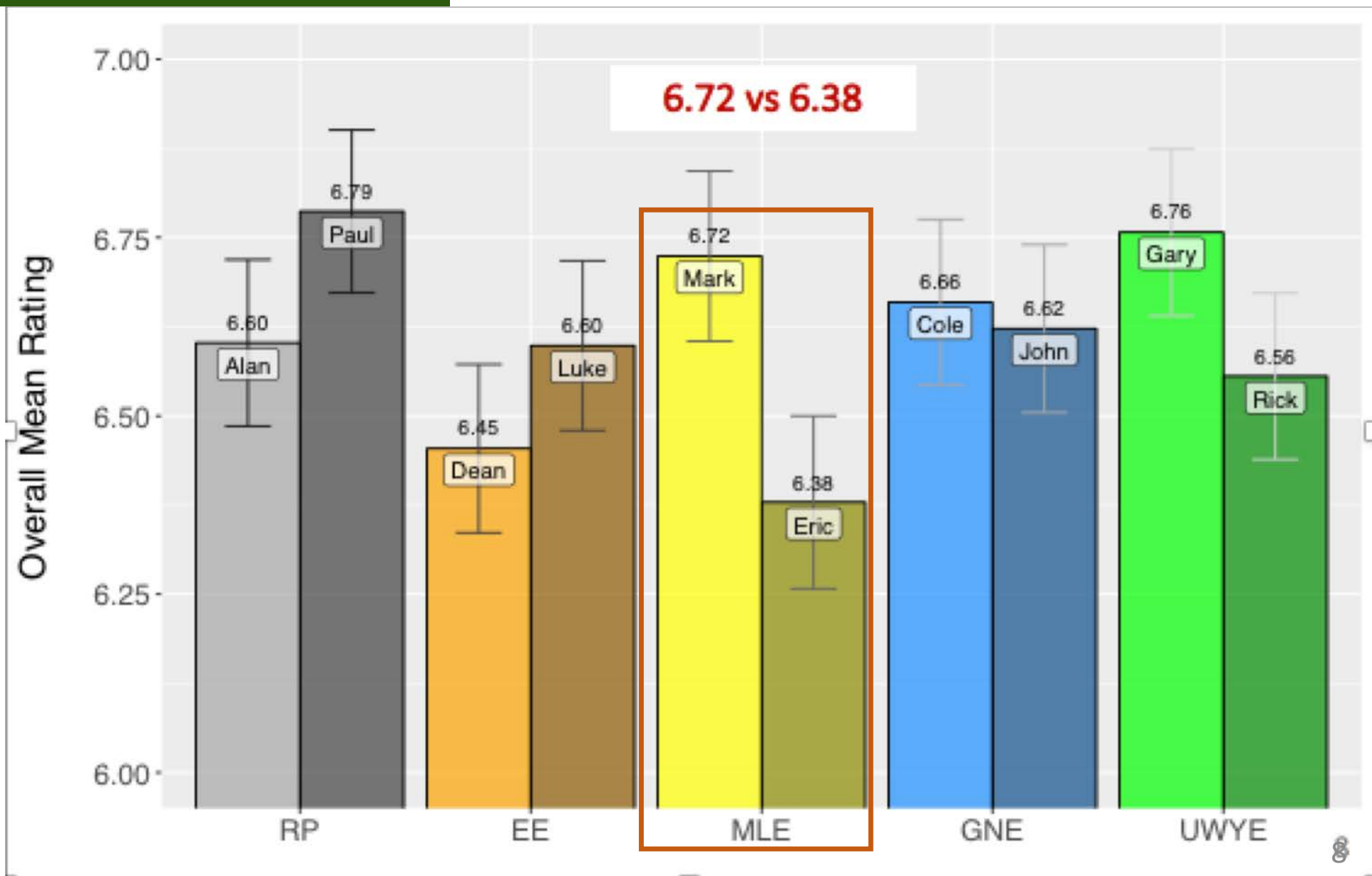
[England Listeners only (N=846)]

Results: Intra-speaker Differences

More
Positive
Ratings



Less
Positive
Ratings



Methods: Intra-speaker differences

- Accent feature chosen based on previous accent descriptions and knowledge of the accents in question (auditory analysis with visual inspection of acoustic properties)

	Accents
GOOSE-fronting: e.g. 'through'	all
/l/-vocalisation: e.g. 'ball'	Working-class
TH-fronting: e.g. 'theme'	Working-class
DH-fronting: e.g. 'rather'	Working-class
FOOT-fronting: e.g. 'would'	all
<i>/k/-backing</i> : e.g. 'contract'	MLE
<i>DH-stopping</i> : e.g. 'there'	MLE
<i>FOOT-backing</i> : e.g. 'good'	MLE
<i>GOAT-backing</i> : e.g. 'vote'	MLE



MLE:
Mark



MLE:
Eric

Results: Intra-speaker differences

- Speaker with more “**MLE-specific**” accent features has lower ratings

	Mark		Eric	
GOOSE-fronting: e.g. ‘through’	21 (46%)		29 (63%)	
/l/-vocalisation: e.g. ‘ball’	64 (93%)		66 (96%)	
TH-fronting: e.g. ‘theme’	4 (44%)		5 (56%)	
DH-fronting: e.g. ‘rather’	4 (4%)		5 (5%)	
FOOT-fronting: e.g. ‘would’	10 (59%)		0	
<i>/k/-backing</i> : e.g. ‘contract’	0		24 (59%)	
<i>DH-stopping</i> : e.g. ‘there’	2 (2%)		58 (56%)	
<i>FOOT-backing</i> : e.g. ‘good’	1 (6%)		10 (59%)	
<i>GOAT-backing</i> : e.g. ‘vote’	1 (4%)		21 (88%)	

Summary

Evidence that Southern working-class accents (Estuary English, Multicultural London English) are **dispreferred** in legal employment interviews

- Effect is moderated by **age** (no accent effect for younger respondents)

Evidence that use of particular accent features may affect candidate ratings

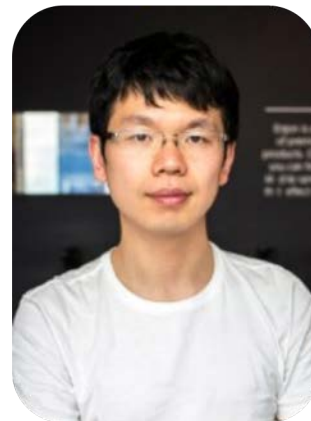
- Other factors may be relevant (e.g. voice quality)

Thank You!



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Methods

- Listeners rated all 10 speakers (each responding to a different interview question):

$\alpha = 0.96$

How would you rate the overall quality of the candidate's answer?

Does the candidate's answer show expert knowledge?

In your opinion, how likely is it that the candidate will succeed as a lawyer?

Is the candidate somebody that you personally would like to work with?

How would you rate the candidate overall?