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**
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 focusing 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
Results: Accent & Age

More Positive Ratings

Less Positive Ratings

[England Listeners only (N=846)]
Results: Intra-speaker Differences

More Positive Ratings

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

**Methods: Intra-speaker differences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Accents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GOOSE-fronting: e.g. ‘through’</td>
<td>all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/l/-vocalisation: e.g. ‘ball’</td>
<td>Working-class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TH-fronting: e.g. ‘theme’</td>
<td>Working-class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DH-fronting: e.g. ‘rather’</td>
<td>Working-class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOOT-fronting: e.g. ‘would’</td>
<td>all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/k/-backing: e.g. ‘contract’</td>
<td>MLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DH-stopping: e.g. ‘there’</td>
<td>MLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOOT-backing: e.g. ‘good’</td>
<td>MLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOAT-backing: e.g. ‘vote’</td>
<td>MLE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MLE: Mark

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

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

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

\[ \alpha = 0.96 \]