Accent Bias and Perceptions of Professional Competence in the UK

Erez Levon, Devyani Sharma, Dominic Watt, Amanda Cardoso & Yang Ye

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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
  - Birmingham accent judged less intelligent and less appropriate for job as university lecturer than RP (Giles et al. 1975)
  - English English preferred in employment interviews over standard West Indian English (Kalin et al. 1980)
  - Lowest status jobs are seen as most-suitable for speakers with non-standard accents (Giles et al. 1981; Alemoru 2015)
  - Discrimination against non-standard accents in the workplace even when communicative effectiveness not in question (Roberts et al. 1992)
  - Self-suppression of regional accents for employment purposes (Baratta 2015)
“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
- Specific role of accent in perpetuating unequal outcomes in contemporary Britain under-explored
- No large-scale surveys to date of accent attitudes in the UK using audio stimuli (cf. Giles 1970; Hiraga 2005)
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Accent Bias

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

Are these attitudes affected by listener age, class, region, ethnicity, gender, experience and/or psychological profile?
Attitudes to Accent Concepts

- Nationally representative sample of UK public (N=827)
- Respondents rated 38 accent labels for **prestige** and **pleasantness**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accent</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2019</th>
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<tr>
<td>Queen’s</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Standard</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Own</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>Scottish</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Estuary</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>French-accented</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Australian</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Attitudes to Accent Concepts

- Nationally representative sample of UK public (N=827)
- Respondents rated 38 accent labels for prestige and pleasantness
“Conceptual accent evaluation arguably taps into deeply conservative ideologies of language, obscuring socio-psychological shifts over time and contextual effects.”
(Bishop, Garrett, & Coupland 2005)

Are such accent preferences evident with audio stimuli in relation to an actual person in a situated context?
Methods

- Verbal guise study with representative sample of UK population (N=1014)
- Listeners evaluated interview performance of “candidates” for trainee solicitor position at a corporate law firm
- Candidates were young men, native speakers of 5 English accents (2 speakers/accent): 
  - Received Pronunciation (RP)
  - Estuary English (EE)
  - Multicultural London English (MLE)
  - General Northern English (GNE)
  - Urban West Yorkshire English (UWYE)
- Stimuli were audio responses to interview questions, some requiring legal expertise and others focussing on more general professional skills (developed with lawyer consultants)
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?

$\alpha = 0.96$
Methods

- Listeners rated all 10 speakers (each responding to a different interview question)
- After rating listeners provided information about their social and linguistic backgrounds, including:
  - region, gender, age, class and networks
  - beliefs about social mobility in the UK (e.g., McConahay 1986)
  - motivation to control prejudiced reactions (e.g., Dunton & Fazio 1997)
Results

[England only (N=846)]

**Figure:** Graph showing the evaluation (1-10) against respondent age for different categories (RP, EE, GNE, UWYE, MLE). The graph indicates a downward trend with increasing age, with the category labeled as "ns" showing a non-significant trend. The significance level "***" is indicated on the right side of the graph.
Results

[England only (N=846)]
Results

[England only (N=846)]
Non-Significant Effects

Accent (as main effect)  Accent : Speaker

[England only (N=846)]
Non-Significant Effects

Social Class (as main effect)

[England only (N=846)]
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) and **region**
- Effect is mitigated by **expert content** and by **motivation to control prejudiced response**
Other Phases of Project

- Verbal guise survey with legal professionals, where quality of response is also manipulated
- Testing influence of “accentedness” (cf. speaker effect)
- Examining perceptual ratings in real-time
- Designing and testing different anti-bias interventions
Thank You!

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