

Accent bias and judgments of professional competence: A comparison of laypeople and trained recruiters

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

Background

Long-standing patterns of **inequality** in professional hiring in the UK (Ashley et al. 2015)

Accent = key signal of social background and may impact ability to access elite professions

- e.g. lowest status jobs most-suitable for non-standard accent speakers (Giles et al. 1981; Alemoru 2015)
- e.g. discrimination of non-standard accents in workplace (Roberts et al. 1992)

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



George B. Shaw, Pygmalion, 1916

Research Questions

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

Are these attitudes affected by listener **background** (e.g. age, region, etc.) and **psychological profile**?

Do **laypeople** and **trained recruiters** show the same biases?

Methods

Two verbal guise studies

- Representative national sample of **England** (N= 846)
- 61 **legal professionals** in North and South England

Listeners in national sample:

- evaluated** all 10 “candidates” for trainee solicitor position at corporate law firms on:
 - Overall quality of candidate's answer
 - Does the candidate's answer show expert knowledge?
 - Will the candidate succeed as a lawyer?
 - Would you like to work with the candidate?
 - Rate the candidate overall
- provided social and linguistic **backgrounds**:
 - region, gender, age, class and networks
 - beliefs about social mobility in the UK
 - motivation to control prejudiced reactions (**MCPR**)

Candidates: 10 young men (mid-20s), **native speakers** of 5 English accents (2 speaker/accents):

- Received Pronunciation (RP)
- Estuary English (EE)
- Multicultural London English (MLE)
- General Northern English (GNE)
- Urban West Yorkshire English (UWYE)

Stimuli: audio responses to **10 interview questions** (developed with lawyer consultants)

- 5 questions require legal expertise
- 5 more general professional skills

Legal professionals only: asked to distinguish good/poor quality responses accurately

Statistical analysis: Linear Mixed Effects Models

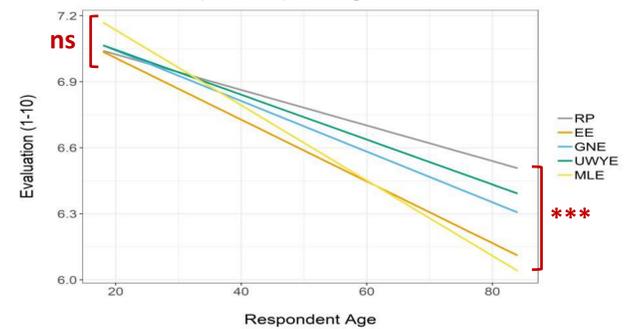
Middle-Class Working-Class



Results — General Public

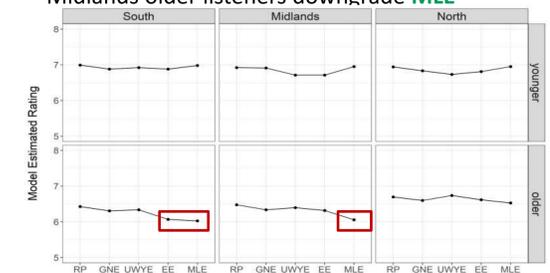
Accent by Listener Age

- Older listeners (ca. > 45) downgrade **EE & MLE**



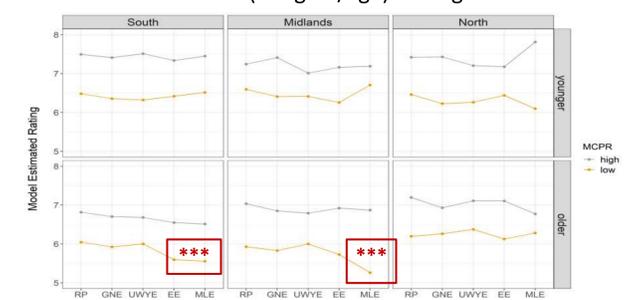
Accent by Listener’s Age & Region

- Southern older listeners downgrade **EE & MLE**
- Midlands older listeners downgrade **MLE**



Accent by Listener’s Age, Region & MCPR

- Low MCPR listeners (+ region/age) downgrade **EE & MLE**

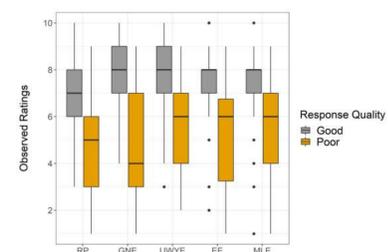


Non-significant effects: accent, listener social class

Results — Professionals

Performance of legal professionals

- Highly accurate** identification of better/worse responses
- EE & MLE** not low except outliers, **RP** slightly low (likeability)



Take-Home

Southern working-class accents are dispreferred in legal employment interviews, but the effect is:

- moderated by listener **age** and **region**, **expert content** and **motivation to control prejudiced response**

BUT:

- professional recruiters can disregard accent and **accurately** judged quality of response
- Capacity to **inhibit bias** when necessary

References

Alemoru, K. 2015. “You don’t sound like them”: A sociolinguistic investigation into how race interacts with the perception and attitude towards Multicultural London English. Unpublished MA dissertation, University of Sheffield

Ashley, L., J. Duberley, H. Sommerlad & D. Scholarios. 2015. A qualitative evaluation of non-educational barriers to the elite professions. Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission

Giles, H., P. Wilson & A. Conway. 1981. Accent and lexical diversity as determinants of impression formation and perceived employment suitability. *Language Sciences* 3: 91-103.

Roberts, C., Davies, E. & T. Jupp. 1992. *Language and Discrimination: A study of communication in multi-ethnic workplaces*. London: Longman.