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

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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)

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:
1. 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

2. provided social and linguistic backgrounds:
- region, gender, age, class and networks
- beliefs about social mobility in the UK
- motivation to control prejudiced reaction (MCPR)

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

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) downgraded EE & MLE

Results — Professionals

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

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

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