The Effect of Accent on Judgments of Professional Competence

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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 **background** (e.g. age, region, etc.) and **psychological profile**?

**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-suited 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**

**Methods**

Verbal guise study

- Representative sample of England (N= 846)

Listeners:

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 reactions (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

Statistical analysis: Linear Mixed Effects Models

**Results**

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 & Question Type

- Southern older listeners downgrade both for EE & MLE
- Midlands older listeners downgrade non-expert for MLE

Accent by Listener’s Age, Region & MCPR

- Downgrade EE & MLE by low MCPR Southern & Midland older listeners only

Non-significant effects: accent, listener social class

**References**


Accent Bias Britain

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

**Take-Home**

**BUT**: in wider project we find that results differ when

- listeners respond to accent labels
- professional recruiters judge candidates

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