Nested language ideologies: Does context affect accent bias?

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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 impede access to elite professions
  
  Giles et al. 1975; Kalin et al. 1980; Giles et al. 1981; Alemoru 2015; Roberts et al. 1992

- 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

- Little understanding of how attitudes vary by context
Accent Bias in Britain

Attitudes to *accent labels* among general UK public

Attitudes to *audio stimuli* among general UK public

Attitudes to audio stimuli among *legal professionals*

Examining perceptual evaluations in *real-time*

Designing and testing different anti-bias *interventions*
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Study I  Attitudes to Accent Labels

- Nationally representative sample of UK public (N=827)
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Enduring **hierarchy** of prestige over half a century: 2019, 2004, 1969

- National + Inner Circle top-ranked; Industrial + ethnic varieties bottom-ranked
- Relative **rankings stable**, slightly lower range of contrast
Study I Attitudes to Accent Labels

Age

- A third of accents show a significant age difference, all at the age 45 boundary.
- Young people “less embedded in the conservative ideology of positively evaluating ‘standard’ accents” (Coupland & Bishop 2007):
  - Mostly younger have higher ratings: Foreign + ethnic heritage, Working class + industrial
  - Older have higher ratings: UK national + traditional rural
  - Parallels in 2004 data, so not real-time change: age-grading

← Normativity in mid-life
Further observations (MANOVA and post-hoc testing parallel to Bishop et al. 2005):

- **Loyalty**
  - In-group loyalty: Scottish, Edinburgh, West Country, Cardiff, ethnicity, working class
  - Out-group bias: Scottish listener ratings of many other regions
  - Self-directed bias: Swansea, Belfast, Black Country (all working class)

- **Stance towards diversity** Significant effect on ratings, except for Queen’s English

- **Gender** Most change, almost complete disappearance of gender effects

- **Ethnicity** Not analysed due to replication design, but Black listeners highest, White lowest
“Conceptual accent evaluation arguably taps into deeply conservative ideologies of language, obscuring socio-psychological shifts over time and contextual effects.”

(Bishop et al. 2005)

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

- Verbal guise study with representative sample of population in England (N=848)
- 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) on response quality, expertise, likelihood for success and likeability = overall evaluation score
- Listeners also provided demographic and social network information, and beliefs about social mobility and diversity more generally
Interim summary

- Hierarchy of accent prestige mitigated when in the context of audio stimuli in mock interview contexts (milder effects than for accent labels, less variability in ratings)
- Accent evaluations are moderated by respondent age — indicative of age-grading than societal change over time (same as for accent labels)
- Effects mitigated by expert content and by motivation to control prejudiced response (Dunton & Fazio 1997)
Hearing real voices in a situation with real consequences still shows bias, but to a reduced extent as compared to accent labels.

Are these milder biases found equally among professional recruiters focusing on quality in a real workplace?
Methodology

- Verbal guise study with lawyers and legal recruiters (N = 61) via fieldwork in commercial law firms (London, Leeds, York)
- Again, interview performance of “candidates” for trainee solicitor position at a corporate law firm
- Same candidates with 5 same accents
- Unlike prior study, all 10 questions required *technical expertise*
- To avoid simple social desirability bias, *quality* of responses varied
  - Developed “better” (6.5/10) and “worse” (4.5/10) responses to questions
  - Pre-tested in written form with 25 experienced lawyers unconnected to project
  - Respondents could not simply ‘up-vote’ non-standard accents; had to judge quality
Study III  Attitudes in the Workplace

- **No evidence** of bias among lawyers in workplace
- **Quality of response** is sole factor
- We do not conclude that lawyers have no accent bias *(cf. professionals in nationwide data)* but rather than biases can be controlled
- **Situated context** and **goal-directed behaviour**, possibly also training, increases focus on objective indicator of quality, rather than on accent
“when there is little contextual information, participants rely more heavily on the target linguistic feature to form impressions of the speaker” (Hilton & Jeong 2018)

**ACCENT LABELS**
- sharp distinctions — average ratings ranged between 3-5 (on a scale of 1-7)
- age-grading and normativity in middle age
- long-standing ideological landscape in UK

**VOICES**
- fewer and milder distinctions — average ratings within 6 (on a scale of 1-7)
- bias against Southern working class accents
- but mitigated by voice, job context, expertise, MCPR

**WORKPLACE**
- no distinctions — focus on objective quality differences
- mitigating effect of professional setting, expert/trained listeners
- not lack of bias but ability for bias to be controlled
Summary  Degree of bias nested by context


- Attitudes toward a Behaviour
- Subjective Norms
- Perceived Behavioural Control

**Behavioural Intention**

**Behaviour**

**ACCENT LABELS**
- general attitudes decontextualised from behaviour
- not as sensitive to norms or control

**VOICES**
- link to behaviour: action [hiring], context [interview], target [person speaking]
- effect of attitudes to behaviour, norms, & control

**WORKPLACE**
- more direct link to behaviour
- sharper norms for conduct/content
- enhanced perceived control
Thank You!

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Study II  Attitudes to Voices

![Graphs showing model estimated ratings for South, Midlands, and North regions for younger and older age groups, with expert and non-expert ratings indicated.](image-url)
Study II Attitudes to Voices

The diagram illustrates the model estimated ratings for different regions (South, Midlands, North) and age groups (younger, older) across various dialects (RP, GNE, UWYE, EE, MLE) and MCPR categories (high, low). The data points are represented with lines and symbols, where significant differences are indicated by asterisks. The significance level is indicated by asterisks: one asterisk for a p-value of 0.05, two asterisks for a p-value of 0.01, and three asterisks for a p-value of 0.001.