Accent Bias in Britain

Attitudes to Accents in Britain and Implications for Fair Access
Project Report

Professor Erez Levon, Queen Mary University of London
Professor Devyani Sharma, Queen Mary University of London
Dr. Dominic Watt, University of York
Christina Perry, Queen Mary University of London

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Overview

This report details the findings of a large-scale research project led by academics at Queen Mary University of London and the University of York, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The project sought to identify the prevalence of accent bias in the United Kingdom today, and examined the effects of this bias in professional hiring contexts, with a specific focus on the sector of Law. The project investigated current attitudes to accents through surveys and experiments, and examined the role of unconscious accent bias in the evaluation of job candidates.

In this document, we present key findings of the project, and suggest training methods and interventions that may help employers, managers, and HR personnel tackle the effects of accent bias and discrimination in the workplace.

You can find out more about the project at: https://accentbiasbritain.org/

Research team
Professor Erez Levon, Queen Mary University of London (principal investigator)
Professor Devyani Sharma, Queen Mary University of London
Dr. Dominic Watt, University of York
Christina Perry, QMUL School of Law

Postdoctoral researchers
Dr. Yang Ye
Dr. Amanda Cardoso
Dr. Christian Ilbury

Advisory Board
Social Mobility Commission (SMC)
Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD)
Aspiring Solicitors
Professor Lizzie Barmes, QMUL Centre for Law, Equality and Diversity
Louise Bloor, barrister
Professor Jenny Cheshire FBA, Queen Mary University of London
Chris Wilkinson, Employability Tutor, York Law School

Key findings
What we found – in brief

Accent bias exists. British people tend to downgrade non-standard working-class accents and selected ethnic minority accents, and upgrade accents historically perceived as more prestigious. This accent hierarchy has been in place since the earliest surveys 50 years ago.

In professional contexts, accent bias is weaker but still likely to influence how a job candidate is perceived. People evaluated job candidates who spoke in a Received Pronunciation (RP) accent as more informed and more suitable for professional employment, even when speakers of other accents gave identical answers.

Professionals have the ability to mitigate the effects of accent bias. We found that legal professionals in major law firms have the ability to switch off personal biases and attend very well to the content of job interview responses, regardless of accent.

Raising awareness of accent bias is an effective intervention. We found that acknowledging the potential for accent bias before judging candidates reduced discrepancies in rating of candidates with different accents.

Overall, we find that whilst accent bias remains pervasive in the UK, under certain conditions, people in positions of power have the capacity to resist this effect.

Outcomes
Our plans and interventions

- We have shared a series of free-of-charge training packages and resources with HR professionals, recruiters, universities, and students.
- We have tested the relative efficacy of different anti-bias awareness training approaches.
- We have developed an online resource that documents the project rationale, findings, and outcomes.

Introduction

This report details the findings of a large-scale ESRC-funded research project, 'Accent Bias in Britain', undertaken by researchers at Queen Mary University of London and the University of York. The interdisciplinary project brings together theories and methods from sociolinguistics, social psychology, and labour market economics. The project had three main aims:

1. To examine current attitudes to British accents
2. To investigate whether accent bias exists in professional hiring contexts
3. To test tools, training techniques, and other preventative measures to combat bias

To explore these issues, we developed a project comprised of three main activities:

First, we carried out two national surveys of attitudes to accents, to examine the general prevalence of accent bias amongst the UK public.

Next, we examined the impact of accent bias on hiring practices in more detail. Focusing on an elite sector that has historically struggled with diversity (law), we investigated whether accent bias interferes with judgments of professional competence.

Finally, we tested tools and training methods in order to offer recommendations to help combat the effects of bias. These target three key audiences: policymakers, recruiters, and jobseekers.

The report details the main results of these three aims.

Background

Accents in the UK

The UK has some of the highest levels of accent diversity in the English-speaking world.

Spanning the range from "traditional" accents like Brummie, Cockney, Geordie, or Scouse to newer accents like Estuary English, British Asian English, and General Northern English, accents in the UK reflect differences in what region people come from, their family's social class background, their age, and their social networks.

Many of these differences are related to the distinct Germanic dialects brought to the British Isles 1500 years ago. Their settlement patterns led to distinct dialects of Old English (Northumbrian, Mercian, Kentish, West Saxon), which in turn gave rise to different accents of British English (roughly Northern, Midlands, South Eastern, West Country).

The accents of Britain have continued to develop, affected by large-scale patterns of migration and social change, as well as the promotion of "standard" accents associated with the seat of power, London, since the 17th century.

The present project surveyed attitudes to 38 different accents, and conducted more detailed research on five specific accents, described later in this report. The two examples below illustrate some of the social associations and phonetic details of accents.

MLE

Multicultural London English (MLE) is a label for a new dialect of English that originated amongst young, working class peers of different ethnicities in East London and is now spreading to other urban contexts. Accent features include the pronunciation of the "th" sound in the words *the* and *that* with a "d", and in words such as *things* as an "f". The vowel in words such as *like* sounds more like "lack". MLE also has a distinctive grammar and lexicon.

RP

Received Pronunciation (RP) – sometimes called 'BBC English' – is an accent of English that is associated with people from the upper- and upper-middle-classes. In RP, the 'r' sound in words like *worked* or *order* is not pronounced, so the words sound more like "wuhked" and "awdah". Similarly, in a word like *craft*, the vowel is pronounced as "ah" and not like the vowel in "at". The vowels in words like "go" and "face" have a particular combination of vowels that is different from many regional dialects.

Accent bias and accent discrimination

All humans have cognitive biases – simplified ways of thinking that help us to process the world quickly. Accent is no exception: we all have automatic associations with accents, particularly as accents often trigger social stereotypes relating to specific regions, cultures, ages, genders, and social classes. An automatic association with an accent is referred to as a type of **accent bias**.

These types of 'shortcuts' are very common in general human perception. It is impossible for a person to have no social associations with accents. However, when we rely on these simple stereotypes to judge unrelated traits, like intelligence, competence or trustworthiness, our judgments may lead to active **accent discrimination**.

This process becomes particularly problematic in professional contexts, when accent is used to judge the suitability or competency of a candidate. Unlike ethnicity, social class, or race, accent is not a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. As such, employers can legally discriminate against candidates based on their accent.

A person's accent reflects their social background, not their intelligence or expertise, but because accents are often linked to ethnicity, social class, and other

targets of discriminatory beliefs, accent often becomes a proxy for other forms of discrimination that are prohibited.

Language discrimination at work

Language-related discrimination can happen at many junctures along a career path. A person can be discriminated against before they even have a chance to speak. Studies in the United States and in the United Kingdom have found that CVs with ethnic minority names receive significantly fewer replies from potential employers than identical CVs with typically white names.

Discrimination can also happen through accent bias. This is the focus of the present project. A 2006 survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development found that 76% of employers admitted discriminating candidates based on their accent, whilst only 3% of employers recognised accent as a protected category.

Finally, even if recruiters make an effort to disregard accents during an interview, other aspects of an interviewer's linguistic and non-linguistic communication (how they respond to an utterance, their eye gaze, smiling, casual remarks, interruption, cultural references) can subtly, often unconsciously, convey bias and undermine the confidence and performance of a candidate. These types of effects can persist past the hiring stage as well.

Social mobility and accents

There has been little systematic description of general attitudes to UK accents. In the 1970s, Howard Giles (1970) found that individuals attributed different levels of prestige and social attractiveness to UK accents. For instance, he found Received Pronunciation (RP) to be highly rated for both prestige and social attractiveness. For other accents, such as Birmingham English, he found significant downrating for both prestige and social attractiveness. 35 years later, Coupland and Bishop (2007) found very similar rankings of accents. Our project examines whether the same attitudes hold now, 50 years on.

> **Almost all studies of bias in recruiting have failed to examine the specific role of accent. There is a clear need for a better understanding of the role of accent-based bias as a barrier to social mobility.**

How such attitudes play out in the workplace is similarly underexplored. In contrast to the United States, there has been little research in the UK on accent in professional contexts and the role it plays in unequal social and economic outcomes. Most research into bias in hiring in the UK has focused on wider social factors such as ethnicity and schooling. The little research that does exist was conducted some time ago. For instance, Kalin et al. (1980) found that Standard British English was preferred in employment interviews over Standard West Indian English, and Giles, Wilson, and Conway (1981) reported that the lowest status jobs were seen as most suitable for speakers with non-standard accents. However, given the differing research contexts of these studies, it is unclear if these findings are still relevant in the contemporary context.

A report by the Social Mobility Commission in 2015 suggested the potential for some forms of accent bias in the legal sector, but also that the climate may be changing with greater awareness.

Our project examines attitudes to major accents in England, changing attitudes across age groups, attitudes to new urban dialects, and how accent interferes with assessments of professional ability.

Methodology

Attitudes to accent labels

In the first part of our study, we examined people's perceptions of accent labels. We recruited 827 individuals through a market research firm. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 79 and included a representative number of people in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. The sample was balanced for gender and included all major ethnic groups.

Participants were presented with a list of the 38 accent labels and were asked to rate each one (on a scale of 1-7) for its prestige and pleasantness. Once participants finished rating the answers, they provided information about their personal background (including gender, ethnicity, age, region of origin, highest level of education, occupation, English accent, languages spoken), and completed a short questionnaire about their exposure to different UK accents, the diversity of their own social networks, their beliefs about bias in Britain, and a set of psychological measures such as their level of concern about being perceived as prejudiced.

Attitudes to real voices

The first part of our study tells us what people think of accent labels, but it is possible that people might respond differently to an audio recording of a real speaker. To test this, we asked 1062 members of the British public to listen to ten mock interview answers and assess the speaker's suitability for a job in a law firm.

As with the previous study, respondents were recruited through a market research company, allowing us to reach a typical sample of the UK population. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 79 and included a representative number of people in England (890), Wales (51), Scotland (90), and Northern Ireland (31). The sample was balanced for gender and included all major ethnic groups.

The participants heard 10 short mock answers to typical questions in law firm job interviews. The clips were 20 seconds in length. These mock answers were developed in coordination with senior professionals in the legal sector. All the answers were pre-tested with a group of 25 lawyers unrelated to the project. Some of these questions required legal expertise (expert questions) whilst others focused on more general professional skills (non-expert questions).

The answer texts were in a formal register using standard grammar, regardless of accent, to approximate an interview speech style. The texts were recorded by 10 young men (18-25 years old) – two native speakers of each of five accents.

The five accents we studied were:
- Received Pronunciation (RP)
- Estuary English (EE)
- Multicultural London English (MLE)
- General Northern English (GNE)
- Urban West Yorkshire English (UWYE)

Male speakers were used to avoid any effect of gender on the assessment of the candidate.

To listen to some of the clips used in the experiment, visit:
www.accentbiasbritain.org/accents-in-britain

After listening to a recording, participants rated the candidate's overall performance, knowledge, suitability, and hireability on a 10-point Likert scale, responding to the following questions:

"How would you rate the overall quality of the candidate's answer?"
"Does the candidate's answer show expert knowledge?"
"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?"

Audio stimuli were pseudo-randomised, so that each participant heard two versions of each accent, and no answer or speaker more than once. After participants finished rating the recordings, they were asked to provide demographic information, including their gender, ethnicity, age, region of origin, highest level of education, occupation, English accent, and languages spoken. They then completed the same short questionnaire about their background and beliefs as in the accent labels study.

Attitudes to accents at work

The above study tells us about whether the British public let accent bias cloud their judgment when hearing a candidate in a professional context. However, it does not tell us whether these effects are strong enough to interfere with the ability to recognise expert content, particularly among recruiters who are directly responsible for hiring candidates.

Might lawyers consciously or unconsciously let biases influence their judgements? For example, would they rate a 'poor' answer as better when they hear it in a Received Pronunciation (RP) voice than when they hear it in an Estuary English voice? Would they rate a 'good' answer as worse when they hear a working-class Multicultural London English speaker giving it than when they hear someone with a middle-class General Northern English accent give the same answer?

To answer these questions, we asked 61 lawyers and graduate recruiters in leading UK-based international law firms to complete a mock hiring exercise. In order to avoid them simply guessing the goal of our study, we made the task more difficult, with some answers subtly better than others. This made it impossible for lawyers to simply boost their ratings of certain accents to mask their bias. We examined whether 'good' and 'poor' quality mock interview answers were clearly identified as such regardless of accent, or whether the accent these answers were spoken in affected the rating of their objective quality. The audio stimuli were the same as those evaluated by the general public in the previous task, but with the additional quality manipulation to generate 'good' and 'poor' responses.

Interventions to combat bias

In the final analysis, we looked at what intervention strategies were best suited to combating accent bias, if any. We tested the effectiveness of five different strategies discussed in social psychology and management studies:

1. *Raising Awareness*
   Recruiters are alerted to the existence of accent bias.

2. *Identifying irrelevant information*
   Recruiters are asked to commit to ignoring irrelevant information when making their decisions, e.g. If I hear that the candidate has an accent, I will pay no attention to it.

3. *Committing to fairness and objectivity*
   Recruiters are asked to commit to an agreed set of objective criteria before making judgments.

4. *Increasing accountability*
   Recruiters are told that they will have to justify their decisions.

5. *Appealing to multiculturalism*
   Recruiters' attention is drawn to diversity and its positive benefits.

We asked 480 members of the general UK public to rate three candidates for an entry-level job at a major British law firm. Each mock candidate was a native speaker of either Received Pronunciation (RP), Multicultural London English (MLE), or Estuary English (EE), and listeners heard each candidate respond to one interview question. Before hearing the candidate's response, listeners were given information of the five types of interventions listed above, and a sixth (control) group had no intervention.

Participants then listened to each of the three candidates and rated them on the same five evaluation scales used in the accent label survey:

"How would you rate the overall quality of the candidate's answer?"
"Does the candidate's answer show expert knowledge?"
"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?"

After rating all three candidates, participants provided the same information about their backgrounds and beliefs as was gathered in the other studies.

Our findings

Summary

We found that attitudes towards British accents remain largely unchanged from 50 years ago. Accents such as Received Pronunciation (RP) continue to be rated very positively, whilst urban working-class and ethnic minority accents are awarded much less prestige.

However, when we looked at whether accent stereotypes affect people's sense of whether a person is professionally competent, by having participants respond to the audio mock interview exercise, we found that, whilst working-class and ethnic accents were still downrated, these differences were much smaller.

When we asked professional lawyers and recruiters to judge how good candidates' answers were, they did not let accents interfere with their judgements at all. They were able to rate the quality of an answer independently of the candidate's accent.

Lastly, we find that the most effective intervention strategy is simply to raise awareness of accent bias.

Overall, our project shows that accent bias is widespread, but people in positions of power have the capacity to resist its effects.

Our findings in detail

Attitudes to accent labels

When we examined attitudes to accent labels, we found that, despite a slight reduction in the overall range of ratings, attitudes towards particular accents appear to have remained remarkably stable over half a century. This is shown in figure 1 below.

> You can find out more about the studies we compared our results with at:
> https://accentbiasbritain.org/background/

Like Giles (1970), we find that more standard and middle-class accents are rated the highest for prestige, along with 'Queen's English', 'Edinburgh', 'New Zealand', 'Australia', and 'Own Accent' all appearing within the top 10. As in the two previous studies, 'Birmingham' is rated the lowest and 'Afro-Caribbean', 'Indian', 'Liverpool' and 'Cockney' all appear in the bottom 10. These accents correspond to working class social groups, often based in industrial towns, and ethnic minority groups.

Compared with analyses conducted 50 and 15 years ago, our study found that public attitudes to accents and their related stereotypes have remained largely unchanged over time.
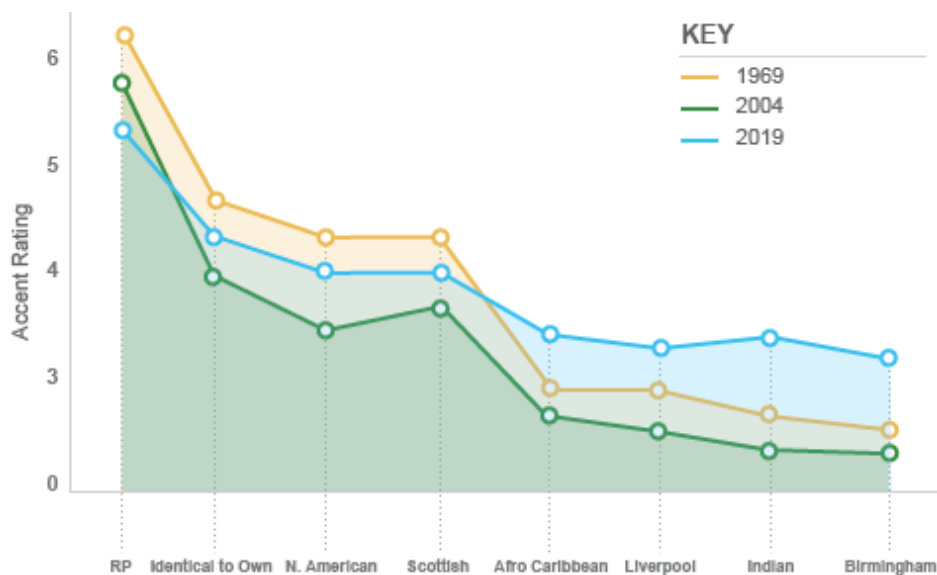

Figure 1. Accent label evaluations over time

> ## Our findings suggest that:
> A stable pattern of accent bias has been in place for at least half a century, with urban working-class and ethnic accents disfavoured and more standard accents favoured.

Attitudes to real voices

When participants were asked to listen to mock interviews, with a focus on five specific accents, they showed some similar accent biases, but the differences were much smaller. We also found that a number of interesting social factors affect how people evaluate of a given accent.
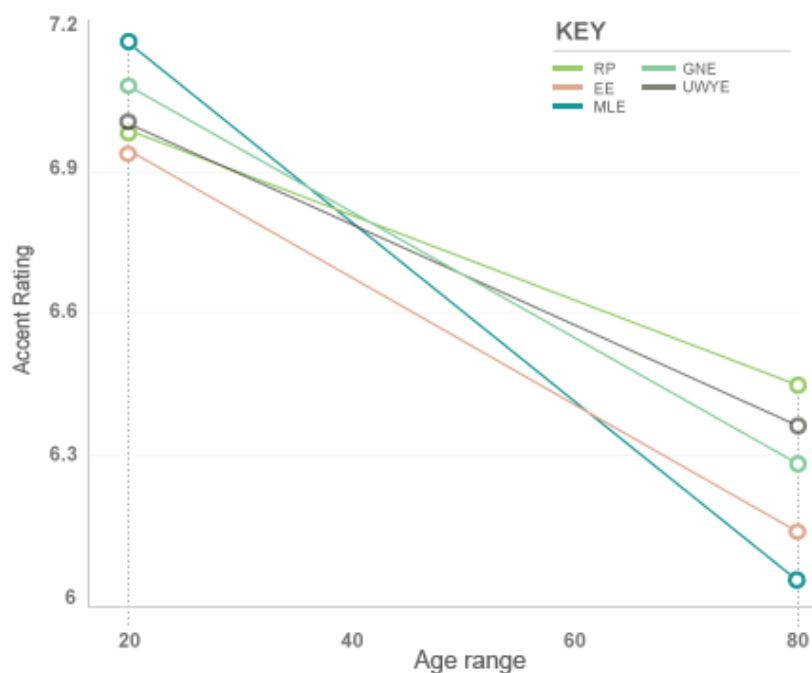

Figure 2. Accent evaluations of audio stimuli in relation to the listeners' age

The first strong factor is the listener's age. Older speakers generally rate all five accents less positively than their peers (see figure 2). They also specifically rate the two working-class London accents lower than younger people. In fact, when tested statistically, young people did not rate accents significantly differently. It may be tempting to interpret this as a change over time, but the same age pattern was found by Coupland and Bishop (2007). So it is more likely that the pattern in figure 2 means that people's attitudes about accents conform increasingly to established norms as they enter the workforce and get older.

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Older listeners (over 40 years of age) rate Estuary English and Multicultural London English significantly lower than the other accents tested. Younger listeners make no such distinction.

We also examined whether the type of question influenced how people evaluate candidates. Does expertise help listeners overcome bias? We compared the rating of responses to 'expert' questions (those that demonstrate technical knowledge of the law) to 'non-expert' questions (those about general skills and behaviour). The results are shown in figure 3. Expert content improves the judgement of all accents.
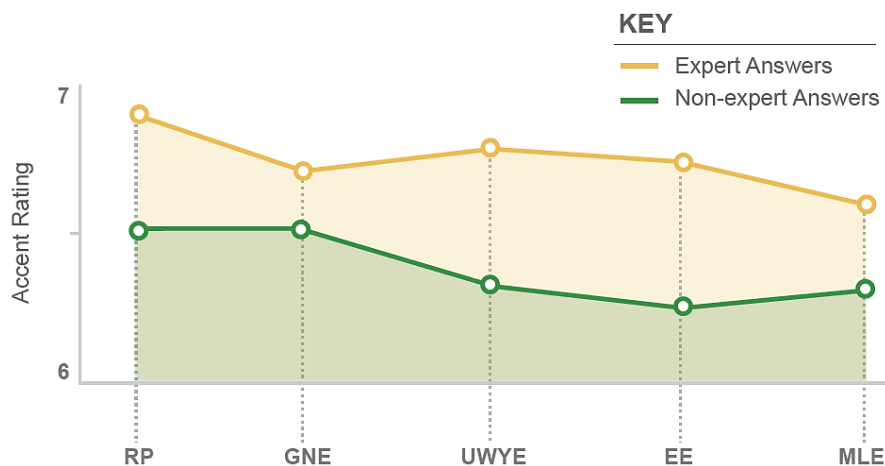
KEY
— Expert Answers
— Non-expert Answers

Figure 3. Accent ratings of audio-stimuli in relation to expert vs. non-expert answers

We find that, across the five different accents, answers given to 'expert' questions were rated more highly by listeners.

The expertise effect is not strong enough to override all bias. Older listeners in the South, and to a lesser degree the Midlands, still rated non-standard Southern accents (EE and MLE) significantly lower than any of the other accents, regardless of the question type (expert vs. non-expert questions). This is shown in figure 4. This bias was particularly prevalent among respondents from a higher social-class.
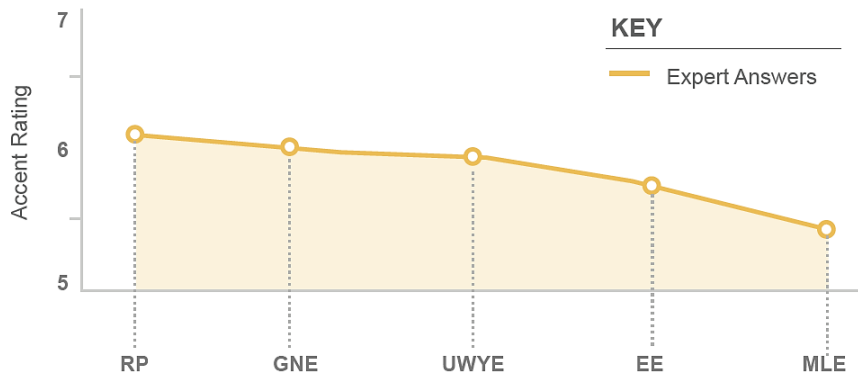
Figure 4. Accent ratings of Southern Listeners to audio-stimuli of expert answers

We also investigated whether a concern with being perceived as prejudiced would affect a listener's rating of the answer. Motivation to Control a Prejudiced Response (MCPR) is a psychological measure that indicates an individual's desire to be perceived as not acting in a prejudiced fashion. Figure 5 shows that this was a strong influence on listeners' overall reactions to candidates.
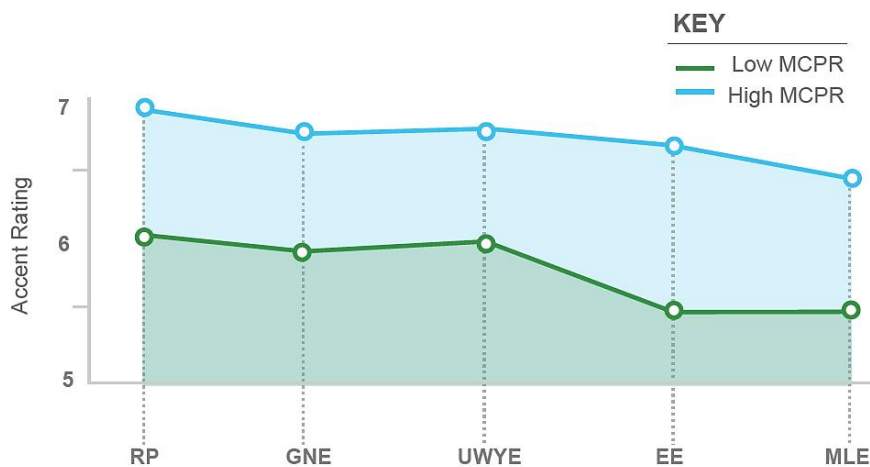

Figure 5. Accent ratings of audio-stimuli in relation to the individuals' level of MCPR

We find that listeners who have a stronger desire not to appear prejudiced rate all speakers more favourably.

This effect often eliminates accent bias: for older Southern and Midlands listeners, it is only those listeners with low levels of MCPR who show a dispreference for EE and/or MLE.

> ## Our findings suggest that:
> In professional contexts and with real voices, accent bias is weaker than when people judge accent labels. Nevertheless, it still interferes with the perception of a candidate. There was a tendency to associate Received Pronunciation (RP) with professional expertise at the expense of Southern working-class accents.

Attitudes to voices at work

We found a very different result when we examined how lawyers and professional recruiters responded to the mock interviews.
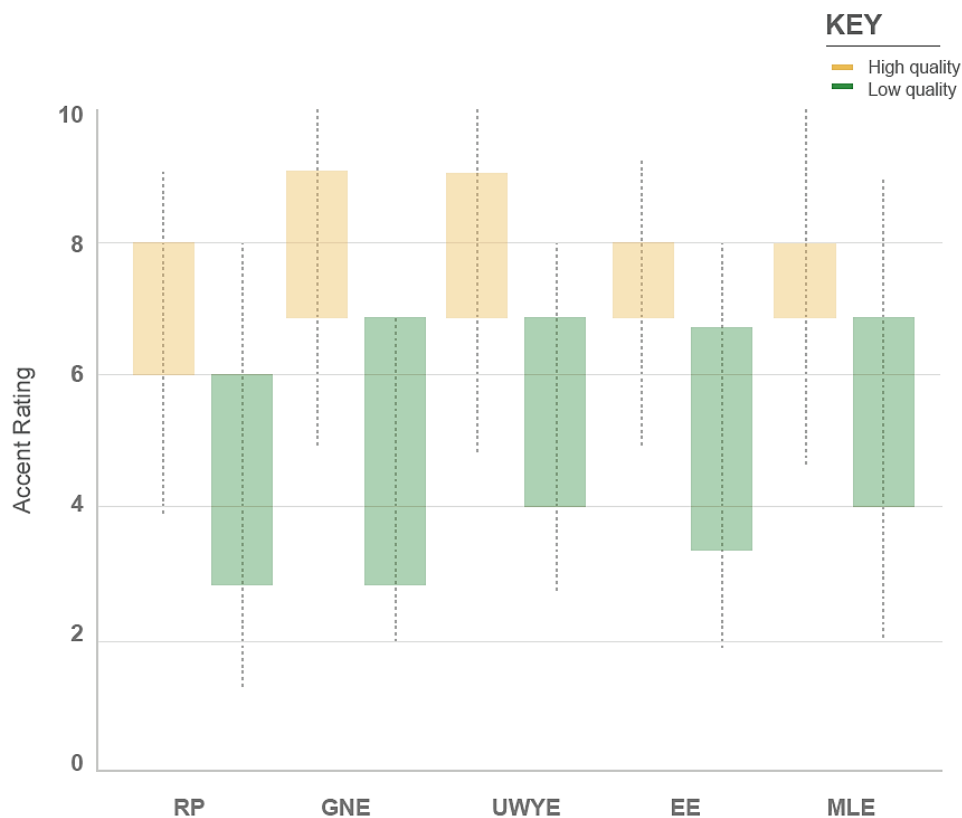

Figure 6. Accent evaluations for high- and low-quality answers as rated by lawyers and graduate recruiters

As figure 6 shows, lawyers and law firm recruiters showed a consistent ability to rate responses according to whether the response was of marginally higher or lower quality, regardless of accent. In fact, their ratings very closely matched the evaluations provided by a pre-test group of legal professionals when they saw only the written version of the mock responses.

> **Unlike the general population, when assessing expert knowledge lawyers did not show significant preferences for Received Pronunciation or General Northern English, nor did they show a consistent dispreference for working class or non-white accents.**

However, it is worth noting that the two accents that were most downgraded in the Nationwide Survey – the South Eastern working class accents, Estuary English (EE) and Multicultural London English (MLE) – received by far the lowest individual ratings of any accent when giving high quality responses. This might suggest pockets of strong bias against these accents.

Unlike the general population, who rated RP relatively positively, lawyers reported marginally lower likability ratings for RP. This slightly lower rating of RP may indicate high status but low solidarity associations or a higher expectation of quality answers for RP speakers – a variety stereotypically associated with higher levels of education.

> **The age and regional background of the lawyer did not influence how they judged job candidates, unlike what we found among the general public. How long they had worked in the legal sector also had no discernible effect.**

None of the factors which exerted a strong influence among the general public were found to operate here: This includes age, region, class, and Motivation to Control a Prejudiced Response (MCPR), as well as the number of years worked in the legal sector.

However, MCPR did affect their ratings of personal social attractiveness. Listeners who were concerned that they should not seem prejudiced gave higher overall

ratings for personal likeability. But this did not influence them when they were judging professional competence.

The absence of bias effects among these lawyers when judging content offers a positive way forward. We do not interpret it as an absence of bias altogether, but rather a likely effect of professionalism and heightened diversity awareness and training in top tier law firms.

> ## Our findings suggest that:
> Professionals have the ability to limit how much accent bias interferes with their judgement. Legal professionals were able to disregard biases and attend very well to the quality of what was said.

Interventions to combat bias

When we examined the effectiveness of intervention strategies, we found that *Raising Awareness* had the strongest and most consistent impact on reducing the difference in rating between a non-standard accent (MLE or EE) and RP. This means that when people were alerted to the existence of accent bias, differences between their ratings of job candidates with different accents were smaller.

Our results show that simply raising awareness about accent bias may be the most effective intervention for recruiters.

We have developed two interactive training tutorials on unconscious accent bias, which introduce users to how accent works, what accent bias is, how discrimination can arise, and how to minimise its effects. Users are given the opportunity to test themselves using our audio stimuli. These tools are available online and are free-of-charge. One is designed for professional recruiters and HR teams in law firms or other professions. The other is designed for students of law or students on other elite profession career tracks.

Our findings suggest that:
All interventions are beneficial in addressing accent bias, but raising awareness is likely to be the most effective strategy.

To access the training tools we've developed, visit:
https://accentbiasbritain.org/training-intervention/

Summary and implications

Our results have shown that accent bias exists. It is part of a very established and enduring 'hierarchy of accents' in the UK. However, this bias is sensitive to context – people's responses are more nuanced when listening to actual speech or listening to someone in a job interview, where their career prospects are at stake. Our work with real professional recruiters in the legal sector has shown that, with increased awareness, people can almost fully suppress this bias under certain conditions, such as in a professional recruiting context.

> **The present study has shown that accent bias is pervasive but, under certain conditions, people in positions of power have the capacity to resist this effect.**

Needless to say, the current study has simulated just one small part of trainee hiring, focusing exclusively on accent and the recognition of competence in responses. It does not provide information on the potential for accent or language bias in other aspects of professional life, e.g. informal interaction during the interview, post-hiring experiences of candidates from non-traditional backgrounds, or progression through more senior career stages.

We therefore cannot conclude that accent bias does not play a role in the overall hiring process. Nevertheless, our study does show a clear capacity for recruiters to disregard natural accent biases when recruiting, despite their continued prevalence in the United Kingdom. Future research should continue to investigate the extent to which recruiters in different professions exercise this capacity and minimise the effects of accent bias.

Further information

You can find out more about the current project at https://accentbiasbritain.org/