

Teaching Unit 27: Accent bias at work

Background

In teaching units 24 and 25, students were able to learn about accents, accent biases, and discrimination in general. In units 26 and 27, students can explore the project rationale and main findings of the Accent Bias in Britain project. In this teaching unit, we explore data from professionals who work in law firms. Students will be asked to interpret graphs and figures to see whether accent bias influences the professional judgment of a candidate.

Visit www.accentbiasbritain.org for more information!

Accent Bias & Discrimination

Because accents are linked to things like ethnicity and social class, we often use accent to make judgments about where a speaker is from or what they do for work. These stereotypes are natural, but they have the potential to become problematic, such as if accent is used to infer whether a speaker is good at their job or if they're trustworthy.

These judgments are likely to be influenced by **accent bias** – that is, the potential for people to exhibit an inclination either positive or negative towards a particular accent, based on such factors as exposure to different accents and personal experience with accents.

You can find out more about accent bias and discrimination at:
www.accentbiasbritain.org/background/

Data and results

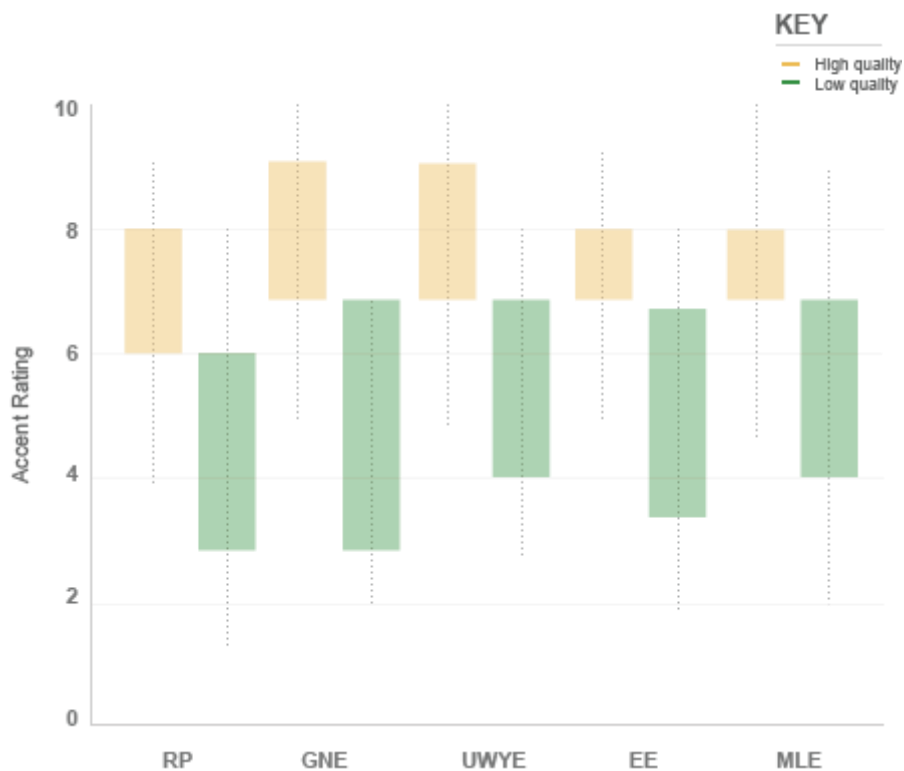
Attitudes Among Professionals

Teaching unit 26 details the two experiments that we used to explore accent bias amongst the general public. In those studies, we found that there was a hierarchy of accent evaluations, with more standard accents – such as Received Pronunciation – more highly rated than non-standard ethnic accents – such as Indian accented English.

In the third experiment, we were keen to investigate whether the attitudes that the general public displayed were also held by those in positions of authority. If this were to be the case, it's possible that this bias could result in some candidates being less favorably judged on the basis of their accent. This could mean that some individuals are less likely to get a job than other candidates because of their accent.

To investigate this, we recruited 61 lawyers and graduate recruiters in UK law firms to undertake the mock interview exercise. They were asked to judge whether the answer was 'good' or 'not-as-good'. To compare their ratings, we asked a panel to judge the quality of the written answers before we presented this to our participants.

The data below show the results for this analysis. The y-axis shows the average accent rating and the x-axis indicates the five different accents that we tested. The quality of the answer is indicated by the different colours: high quality (yellow), low quality (green).



Points for discussion:

- Is there a difference between high quality and low-quality answers? If so, what is the difference? Why might this be?
- Is there a difference between the five accents? Are there more differences between low- or high-quality answers?
- Can you explain these patterns? What might cause these differences? Are these results what you expected?
- Do these results look similar to the general public? (compare with TU26)
- If not, why do you think this is? Why do you think this group of professional lawyers and recruiters show similar or different results?

Thinking about the data

We provide an indication of answers to the above questions here, to help you facilitate the discussion. The graph above does not in fact show statistically significant differences across accents, only across quality. This means that professionals in law firms who did our survey had been trained well to tune out their personal biases and focus on the quality of the answer, as they should.

You may wish to discuss these results alongside those described for the general public in TU26. Based on these different explorations, students should be able to reflect on how the **way** in which an accent is encountered – as a label, as a real voice, as a job candidate, and **by** a professional recruiter – affects the way in which people respond to it. They should also be able to explore possible explanations for these different findings.

You can find out more about the project and our findings at www.accentbias.org

Further Reading

Coupland, N. and H. Bishop. 2007. Ideologised values for British accents. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 11: 74-93. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9841.2007.00311.x>

Giles, H. 1970. Evaluative reactions to accents. *Educational Review* 22: 211-237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013191700220301>