

## Teaching Unit 24: Accent bias overview

### Background

This unit explores the topic of ‘accent bias’, including the definition of the term and the issues that arise when people display accent bias. The unit provides teachers and students with real-world examples for discussion and guides users through the main discussion points to focus on.

This teaching unit is inspired by the large-scale research project Accent Bias Britain. Visit [www.accentbiasbritain.org](http://www.accentbiasbritain.org) for more information!

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### Discussion points

#### Regional Accents in the UK

The UK has an extensive amount of accent variation. Beyond the north-south divide, it is possible to observe substantial changes in accent across areas that are relatively close geographically. People’s perceptions of accents are likely to be influenced by stereotypes of the group of speakers who use them. What are your perceptions of certain regional accents?

Our Accent Bias Britain project website hosts a series of sound files that capture some of Britain’s most recognisable regional accents. You can access these by following this link: [www.accentbiasbritain.org/accents-in-britain](http://www.accentbiasbritain.org/accents-in-britain).

Play some of these sound files and ask students to create mind maps of the types of characteristics they associate with the speaker.

Do they perceive the speaker to be kind or generous? Working-class or upper-class? How does this represent a type of accent bias?

#### What is accent bias?

Whether we like it or not, we often use peoples’ accents to make judgments about them. This includes information directly related to their accent, like where they’re from, or their social class. Different social groups develop distinctive accents or ways of speaking over time, and these can become associated with specific regions, social classes, ethnic groups, genders, or age-groups as **stereotypes**. All human beings rely on stereotypes to be able to function in daily social interaction.

However, this natural process can become a problem when we use accent-based stereotypes to make judgments about other qualities of individuals that aren't directly related to their accent, like how good they are at their job or whether they're an honest person. Managers and people in power may use accent to make non-accent related judgments about the people they're hiring. This may mean that they will choose certain candidates over others based on their perception that some accents are more 'professional' than others. This can lead to a vicious cycle of whereby people from certain social groups get locked out of more prestigious professions.

In the UK, there is a long history of people evaluating some accents as more favourable than others. For instance, Coupland & Bishop (2007) find that Southern accents such as *London English* and *the Queen's English* (or *Received Pronunciation*) are rated more positively than varieties such as *Birmingham English* and *Black Country English*.

A 2006 survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2006) found that 76% employers admitted to discriminating against applicants on the basis of their accents, while only 3% of employers nationally include accent or dialect differences as a protected characteristic.

**Stereotype:** a commonly held but overgeneralised and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing. It could include expectations of a particular group's personality, preferences, or ability.

**Accent Bias:** when people exhibit a preference for aligning a particular accent with a particular stereotype or attribute.

**Accent Discrimination:** when people rely on their accent biases to judge unrelated characteristics of a person, such as knowledge, professional competence, or other ability.

**Points for discussion:**

- Have you heard of accent bias before?
- Have you ever experienced accent discrimination yourself?
- Why do you think people discriminate based on accent?
- Can you think of any examples in media of accent discrimination or accent bias?
- Do you think some accents are more 'professional' than others? If so, why? What might this mean for speakers who use that accent?
- What could managers do to ensure that applicants don't experience accent discrimination?

Below are some excerpts from interviews with lawyers from a recent study by the Social Mobility Commission (Ashley et al. 2015). They suggest how accent may play a role in

people's evaluations of certain applicants, and how those attitudes may be changing. Do you agree that things are changing in this way?

*"If you go back six or seven years ... very occasionally you would get people saying "we couldn't possibly have this person in the office because of their accent". And it tended to be that it was a cockney accent or an Essex accent and on a couple of occasions I heard "well, they sound a bit like they're a used car salesman." ... That has changed. I'd be very surprised if you heard that anywhere now in the City."*

*"We are fussed asked about things like grammar, but we're not that fussed about local accent, or even institution to a large degree."*

### Judging professional competence

As already discussed, perceptions of accents become problematic when people use them to assume non-accent related characteristics about people. This could be whether they are trustworthy, knowledgeable, honest, even kind. These assumptions become especially problematic if they relate to how well the person might do their job, i.e., their professional competence.

Accent discrimination in professional contexts appears to be a common story in news media. For instance, teachers are regularly told to 'modify' their accents whilst MPs, such as the MP for Ashton-under-Lyne, Angela Rayner, have been subject to abuse on social media for their regional accents.

Our Accent Bias Britain website provides a list of related news stories on accent bias and discrimination ([www.accentbiasbritain.org/links-and-further-reading](http://www.accentbiasbritain.org/links-and-further-reading)). Read through some of these media stories and think about the ways that accent bias may impact these individuals' professional careers.

#### Points for discussion

- What types of comments are directed at those with regional accents?
- How do people justify their accent bias? i.e., why are some claiming that people in professional contexts should not speak with regional accents?
- Do you think teachers/MPs should have regional accents?

### Further activities and discussion points

- Watch clips from the BBC television show, the Apprentice, and think about the ways by which candidates with regional accents are discussed. Do any instances of accent bias emerge? Do these candidates have different interactional styles?
- Use the 'accent bias in the UK' Language Investigation (<http://www.teachrealenglish.org/language-investigations/>) to develop your own accent evaluation survey
- Examine popular media parodies and characters who speak with regional accents (e.g., Big Shaq, Vicky Pollard, Catherine Tate's Lauren) and think about how they use

those characters to perform stereotypical images of the speakers who use those varieties

### Further reading

Ashley, L., J. Duberley, H. Sommerlad and D. Scholarios. 2015. A qualitative evaluation of non-educational barriers to the elite professions. London: Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission.

Chartered Institute for Personnel Development (CIPD). 2006. Managing diversity: How much progress have employers made?

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>

Heath, A. and S. Y. Cheung. 2006. Ethnic penalties in the labour market: Employers and discrimination. *Department for Work and Pensions*. <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130125104217/http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2005-2006/rrep341.pdf>