

Why having a regional accent doesn't hold you back in top job interviews

November 11 2019, by Julie Gatenby



People in positions of power have the capacity to resist accent bias. Credit: University of York

Having a regional accent did not count against candidates applying for jobs, a study by the University of York has found.

The study found that [accent](#) bias is still strong in the UK but that people in positions of power are able to put bias to one side when it matters.

The research project, Accent Bias in Britain, examined current attitudes to English regional, class, and ethnic accents, and investigated whether

unconscious accent bias plays a role in how candidates are evaluated in job interviews.

The study—a collaboration between the University of York and Queen Mary University of London—found that whilst accent bias continues to be pervasive in the UK, people in positions of power could suppress bias.

It found that:

- When people were asked for their opinions of accent labels such as "Cockney" or "Birmingham English", they tended to penalise non-standard working-class and ethnic accents and uphold middle-class "standard" speech as the most prestigious. The study found some reduction in accent bias—the distances between the highest and lowest rated accents are smaller in this research compared to earlier studies—but there is a very established and enduring 'hierarchy of accents' in the UK.
- When people listened to actual voices of candidates in interviews for a job in a law firm, the differences they drew between accents were much smaller. Nevertheless, working-class and ethnic London accents were still rated significantly lower, especially by listeners who were older, lived in Southern England, and came from a higher social class.
- Lawyers and recruiters in the legal profession were more nuanced than the general public when making such judgments. When asked to evaluate the quality of candidates' interview responses, lawyers and professional recruiters were able to suppress their biases and attend very well to the quality of the response.

Discrimination

Dr. Dominic Watt from the University of York's Department of

Language and Linguistic Science said: "The results of the study give grounds for optimism, in that although accent-based prejudice seems to be all around us in this country, it appears to be possible for people in positions of power to put these biases to one side when it really counts.

" One of the goals of the Accent Bias in Britain project is to develop interventions to help recruiters to understand how harmful accent-based discrimination can be, and how assumptions about language that many people think are 'common sense' are rooted in arbitrary and subjective preferences rather than linguistic reality."

Erez Levon, Professor of Sociolinguistics from Queen Mary and Principal Investigator on the project said: "Accent bias exists. We all have automatic associations with particular voices. Bias becomes discrimination when we allow these associations to govern our judgement of unrelated traits such as intelligence or competence. Our work offers hope that people have the capacity to prevent their automatic biases from affecting their judgement."

Professor Devyani Sharma, Head of the Department of Linguistics at Queen Mary, and Co-Investigator on the project said: "This work sheds new light on the way in which bias can creep into judgements, but also the way in which it can be negated. One goal of unconscious bias training can therefore be, not the complete elimination of long-held and often unconscious preferences, but the management of their impact on judgement."

Professional life

The researchers caution that whilst lawyers were found to be able to disregard bias in a controlled setting, it does not negate the potential for accent bias in many other aspects of professional life.

A 2015 Social Mobility Commission report pointed to the role of many other aspects of 'cultural fit' in hiring decisions. However the results do demonstrate that the effects of accent [bias](#) can be overcome in certain situations.

Provided by University of York

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