

# Working-class and ethnic minority accents in south-east England judged as less intelligent, study finds

October 7 2021, by Amanda Cole

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There's been much—and rightful—scrutiny of prejudice towards accents in the north of England. For instance, research has highlighted teachers

with northern accents being told to "posh up" and northern university students being ridiculed for their accent.

But there is also prejudice towards accents in south-east England. In this region there are various regional accents which, among others, include cockney (which you may now be most likely to hear in Essex), and "multicultural London English", which is spoken mainly by young people in London and is influenced by the city's many different ethnic communities. Not all south-eastern accents are treated equally, which both reflect and reproduce societal inequalities.

In my recent research published in the *Journal of Linguistic Geography*, a group of almost 200 people aged 18 to 33 from south-east England were played ten-second audio clips of other [young people](#) reading the same sentence. Clips were played of over 100 people from different areas of London and across every county in the south-east.

The participants were not provided with any information about the people whose voices they heard. They were asked to make judgments on sliding scales about how friendly, intelligent and trustworthy they thought each person sounded.

My study shows that certain groups were evaluated more negatively than others. Based only on their [accent](#), lower-working-class people were judged to be on average 14% less intelligent, 4% less friendly and 5% less trustworthy than upper-middle-class people. People from ethnic minority backgrounds were evaluated as 5% less intelligent than [white people](#), regardless of class.

Compared with other areas of the south-east, negative judgments were made about people from London and Essex, places where the accents have been routinely devalued. For instance, people from Essex were judged on average 11% less intelligent than those from south-west

London. Also, women were evaluated as being 2% less intelligent but 5% more friendly and trustworthy than men.

Above all, this is deeply unfair. When some people speak, regardless of the clarity or weight of their words, they are seen as less intelligent, friendly or trustworthy than other people. Accent bias is a mirror of societal biases. It is propping up class prejudice, racial inequality, gender stereotypes and cliched ideas of people from certain areas.

## 'Standard' English

In Britain, many people still subscribe to the mindset that a few limited ways of speaking English (such as the "Queen's English", which is at the extreme) are legitimate and correct while others aren't. Even if many [regional dialects](#) are considered quaint or fun, they are also often judged to be a rejection or rebellion against "correct" English or a reflection of poor education.

For instance, in the report *So why can't they read?*, commissioned by the then London mayor, Boris Johnson, the author discusses a link between speaking "street" (most likely referring to multicultural London English) and the alleged shortcomings in literacy among London school children.

What we might consider being correct or proper English—in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar—is inherently no better than any other way of speaking English. No dialect of English is deficient, they too have complex grammatical systems, and have the same range and power of expression and fluidity.

Indeed, the English that any of us speak today is a snapshot in time. English's grammar, words and pronunciation have flexed and evolved for thousands of years. If not, we would be able to read *Beowulf* unassisted, a poem written in Old English around a thousand years ago.

## Challenging accent bias

What we think of as correct English is like a yardstick in quicksand. Concepts of standard English are bolstered through the media, the education system, politics, and our own adherence and faithfulness to these ways of thinking.

So ingrained and pervasive are concepts of standard English that we accept it to be true even if it disadvantages us. In my study, working-class people also judged other working-class people to be less intelligent than they judged middle-class people to be. And people from an ethnic minority background perceived white people to be the most intelligent group based on their accent.

So what can we do about accent bias? Awareness comes first. There are already some brilliant projects that hope to raise awareness of accent bias, such as [Accent Bias Britain](#) and the Accentism Project.

As individuals, let's reevaluate phrases like "they have an accent" (if you speak, you have an accent) or "they don't speak properly". In fact, most people speak in a way that reflects who they are—where they are from, their class, their ethnicity, their sense of identity and their life experiences. These aren't things we should expect anyone to leave at the door.

When we hear someone's accent, we very quickly group them into categories and make judgments about them. This is something we all do. It is often unconscious and is not intended to be hurtful. But you can challenge that visceral response, the feelings and ideas about that person that begin to surge inside you. Only when we are aware of accent bias—and its role in propagating inequalities—can we begin to challenge it.

**More information:** Cole, A., Disambiguating language attitudes held towards sociodemographic groups and geographic areas in South East England, *Journal of Linguistic Geography* (2021). [DOI: 10.1017/jlg.2021.2](https://doi.org/10.1017/jlg.2021.2)

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Citation: Working-class and ethnic minority accents in south-east England judged as less intelligent, study finds (2021, October 7) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-10-working-class-ethnic-minority-accent-south-east.html>

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