

Posh Spice sounds posher, but changing your working-class accent isn't a ticket out of discrimination

September 15 2022, by Amanda Cole



Credit: Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

Accentism—discriminating against someone because of their

accent—has a long history in the U.K., where the way someone speaks is often an easy way to tell their social class. People with working-class accents are frequently criticized and encouraged to speak "properly." This is true even for people who have achieved fame or success in the media or politics.

But changing the way one speaks isn't necessarily a fix. When people with working-class accents begin to speak in a more "posh" way, it is often seen as inauthentic and insincere. The latest example is Victoria Beckham, whose [accent](#) in a recent video has been [subject to criticism](#).

Beckham was born in Essex and raised in Hertfordshire, and her husband David Beckham was raised in east London. Despite the couple's enormous wealth and success, they come from working-class backgrounds and continue to be seen as such. They have previously been [labeled](#) "chavs" a [contemptuous, stereotyped moniker](#) of the working class.

Their accents have typically included working-class, vernacular linguistic traits from London or southern England more broadly. In 2014, David Beckham was [voted](#) one of the British public's least pleasant voices. In 2010, Victoria Beckham was slated for both her appearance and her accent when she was a guest judge on American Idol.

U.S. paper the Village Voice, [wrote](#): "I always thought a British accent made people sound smart but I guess I was wrong." Her fellow British judge, privately educated Simon Cowell, was not criticized for his very standard, southern English accent.

A recent makeup tutorial video posted by Victoria Beckham revived longstanding speculation that the Beckhams are [changing their accents](#) and even having [elocution lessons](#).

Changing accents

We all have different accents. We can speak in [different ways](#) depending on factors like who we are talking to, our emotional state, the formality of the situation and the topic of conversation. But our accents can also change throughout our life, depending on the ways of speaking we are exposed to, depending on where we live and who we talk to (footballer Joey Barton was a remarkable [example](#)).

Even Queen Elizabeth II experienced [accent change](#) throughout her life, which matched the subtle changes happening in standard southern English. [Research](#) has also found that Glaswegians who are fans of the soap opera EastEnders are more likely to speak with elements of a cockney accent.



Credit: Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

A person with a working-class accent may also consciously adapt their accent if they feel it holds them back or they are perceived as unintelligent (which probably is the case). Changing your accent is no easy feat, and the burden is greater for those whose accent is further from the standard.

There are also examples of people with standard accents suddenly and uncharacteristically speaking with less standard and more working-class accents, such as politician Ed Miliband when talking to comedian Russell Brand. Although Miliband was seen as hospitably finding an "[accent on common ground](#)" in a generous act of extending familiarity.

But when a person is thought to have begun speaking more "posh," like Victoria Beckham (and also [Meghan Markle](#)), they can be unfairly ridiculed as fake or pretentious. Victoria Beckham perfectly exemplifies how working-class people are criticized for speaking, no matter how posh their accent is. It is being working-class that is the problem.

Working-class accentism

My own Essex accent is often brought up when sharing my expertise in linguistics. On a BBC radio interview, the presenter read aloud a listeners' text: "Try getting someone who can speak correctly if you're going to talk about grammar." My experience is [not unusual](#) for academics with working-class accents.

People in the public eye with working-class accents are constantly

singled out. Rylan Clark was [slammed](#) for t-glottalling (dropping t) on The One Show. A BBC announcer was [criticized](#) for th-fronting ("thriller" as "friller").

[Debate](#) constantly ensues about whether Angela Rayner, the deputy leader of the Labor party, sounds sufficiently "professional" in Parliament. And Alastair Campbell [wrote](#) about Priti Patel: "I don't want a home secretary who can't pronounce a G at the end of a word."

Lord Digby Jones singled out [sports commentator Alex Scott](#) for saying "swimming" as "swimmin'" in her Olympics coverage. She hit back that she was proud of her working-class accent, to which Jones accused her of "[playing the class card](#)." He insisted it was "not about accents" but instead: "It is about the fact that she is wrong. You do not pronounce the English language ending in a 'g' without the 'g.'"

Comments like these demonstrate a spectacular misunderstanding of basic linguistic principles. Beyond this, saying swimmin'—or indeed, dropping t or th-fronting—has everything to do with both accent and class. Across Britain, working-class people are the most likely to speak with accents that mark out where they are from and are the furthest removed from Queen's English.

If working-class accents are not seen as appropriate in the media, politics and academia, then working-class people are not seen as appropriate in these domains. The commonplace notion that accent pedantry is actually just upholding good diction, decent standards, clear articulation or the inherent "correctness" of English is a rickety scaffolding for [accent prejudice](#) that keeps working-class people in their place.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Posh Spice sounds posher, but changing your working-class accent isn't a ticket out of discrimination (2022, September 15) retrieved 26 June 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2022-09-posh-spice-posher-working-class-accent.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.