

Most people still think barristers need to sound posh, research shows—but accent discrimination serves no one

May 13 2024, by Natalie Braber



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

In the UK legal system, a barrister's job is to present formalized legal arguments in court and at tribunals. Training to become one, therefore, involves considerable focus on oral skills. It is considered important that barristers have the ability to speak "eloquently."

This risks people thinking there is a "correct" way of speaking in order to be successful in this career. Accents, of course, play an important role here.

Accent-based bias discriminates against speakers with non-standard accents—people whose speech differs from Received Pronunciation (RP). There is a [consistent pattern](#) of accent inequality in professional hiring within the UK, including for doctors and teachers.

With the law industry, [research has shown](#) that people are still worried their accent may hold them back. Job progression within the law matters because judges are often recruited from the bar (the professional organization for barristers). This means the lack of representation within the profession risks leading to a lack of diversity among those who control UK trials.

For a recent study, [my colleagues and I examined](#) how the public perceives those barristers in England and Wales who have different (including non-standard) accents. We found that having a regional accent can still make career progression harder for them.

Public perception

We began by creating a recording of a defense closing speech in a criminal trial, delivered by male speakers with eight different English accents: RP and seven different regional accents from around England.

Between 2022 and 2023, we asked 99 members of the public, recruited

through the online research platform Prolific, to listen to this recording and rate the speakers according to different criteria, including "professionalism," "intelligence" and "trustworthiness." Our respondents also scored the extent to which they thought a speaker was "likely to be a lawyer"—and whether they would want to be represented by them in court.

We found the speakers with RP and south-east England accents scored highly on "professionalism," "intelligence" and "confidence." By contrast, the West Midlands accent scored lowest across the board.

Whereas more than 80% of participants said they would be "comfortable" or "very comfortable" to be represented in court by the RP or south-east England speaker, less than 20% said they would want to be represented by the West Midlands or south-west England speakers.

Similarly, in response to the question "How likely is it that this person is a lawyer?", the highest ratings were given to the RP and south-east England speakers. The lowest ratings were given to the West Midlands or South-West England accents.

As part of our study, we also interviewed five senior barristers, two early-career barristers, and two students in training for the bar from England and Wales. They spanned a range of backgrounds and practice areas, and had a variety of different standard and non-standard accents from around the UK. We were interested in whether they felt they had suffered accent discrimination in their working lives from clients, other lawyers, solicitors or judges.

Barristers interviewed from all levels said they had been mocked for their accents. In training, they'd hear comments like: "Oh, so now people from XXX are going to university, are they?"

All the senior barristers said that, historically, there had been significant accent discrimination at the bar. As one put it: "Accents are an easy rod to beat someone with." Our interviewees identified Liverpool and Birmingham accents as the most undesirable accents for barristers.

One remembered a senior judge saying that if they wanted to work in a particular high-status field, they would have to lose their northern accent. "I have made a conscious effort to be more careful with the way I speak," the barrister said. One of the trainee barristers concurred: "I get worried at times. I feel my dialect is coming across and I'm missing out."

There was consensus that progress has been made over recent years, but also that there are still too few practicing barristers with regional accents. Those at the beginning of their careers said they were occasionally still told to change the way they spoke if they wanted to fit in. They worried that not being "from the London set" could still hold them back.

A younger barrister rejected the idea that this kind of comment was "just banter." They said they sometimes doubted the job was really for them: "It's difficult when you don't see anyone like you."

A senior barrister confirmed that barristers with regional accents lacked role models. Another said that non-native speakers of English experienced less discrimination than particular regional accents. As one early career barrister put it: "I've never met a barrister that sounded like I do."

This had affected people's career choices. Participants voiced concerns about not being "Oxford-educated" or "posh enough" to fit in. One trainee for the bar said they had deliberately avoided applying to work in London: "I felt more at home working in the north as I didn't stick out."

Why this matters

Research has [long shown](#) that people tend to [perceive](#) those who speak with a standard accent as more intelligent and eloquent. "Rural" accents are often seen as trustworthy and friendly, but not intelligent. "Urban" accents are seen negatively for most traits.

The UK has one of the [lowest levels](#) of social mobility in the developed world. Research suggests that failure to address this issue will cost the UK economy up to [£140 billion per year by 2050](#).

Within the legal industry, the problem is still present. A [2023 survey](#) conducted by the Bar Standards Board (the professional regulator of barristers in England and Wales) shows a disproportionately high number of barristers attended fee-paying schools. Of the barristers who identified their schooling, 33.5% stated they went to a fee-paying secondary school, compared with 6% of the general population.

Language is firmly connected to social mobility in England. Research highlights the connection people make between [socioeconomic class and accent](#). Yet, neither is a legally protected characteristic in England.

In a bid to better represent society at large, the bar has [worked hard](#) in recent years to improve on diversity and inclusivity. But [accent](#) is frequently overlooked. Worse still, the public still believes that barristers are supposed to sound a certain way. Things will only change if people buck the system and retain their accents, despite prevailing attitudes.

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

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Most people still think barristers need to sound posh, research shows—but accent discrimination serves no one (2024, May 13) retrieved 16 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-05-people-barristers-posh-accent-discrimination.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.