Reise Programmes

Wait… Now We're Judging How People Speak?

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-Wolfram, 2017

Sociolinguistic Prejudice and 'Accentism' in Britain: The effects of accent bias in mainstream employability

Brace yourself, this one's a bit more technical….

Social Problem

Social Prejudice within Britain has remained an issue for hundreds of years at varying degrees throughout history. Well known prejudice in our past included those against immigration, racial inequality and women. One prejudice however remains salient and it's one that all of us possess innately at a subconscious level. Our language is one of the most powerful insignia of social behaviour and when interacting with another person, their accent is a particularly dominating factor in what is perceived to be proof of background, ability, socioeconomic status and education. It also contributes to our interpretation of that persons presumed social group (Labov, 2006). This results in a significant impact on applicant job prospects and opportunities whilst entering a competitive labour market (Sharma, 2019).

 "Language is one of the most powerful emblems of social behaviour. In the normal transfer of information through language, we use language to send vital

social messages about who we are, where we come from, and who we associate with. It is often shocking to realize how extensively we may judge a person's background, character, and intentions based simply upon the person's language, dialect, or, in some instances, even the choice of a single word" (Wolfram, 2017)

In our culture, we are not averse to dressing for the situation we need to make a good impression. For example, a social engagement or interview, even if it means wearing garments we wouldn't normally select. Is changing an accent to increase occupational opportunities any different? This prejudice is an automatic assumption made almost instantly whilst meeting someone for the first time (Wargo, 2006) and we all base that judgement by drawing on our own experiences, relationships and awareness of cultural and religious contexts via confirmation bias and it's observed that human nature often seeks to confirm our bias rather than critically assess or challenge them (Wason, 1960). These prejudgments coupled with our own stereotypes of regional and non-regional accents, could lead us to potentially inaccurate presumptions about an individual. Many social groups, therefore, are potentially subject to experiencing this sociolinguistic prejudice, whilst seeking employment, interviews or capability assessments. In job interviews alone, a clear association between recruitment success and the influence of an applicant's accent had a specific bearing on whether the employer deemed the applicant to be suitable or not. So much so that eight in ten employers admit to making discriminating decisions based on regional accents, according to a report by law firm Peninsula (Peninsula, 2017) Furthermore, the report identified that a high percentage of employers would not be inclined to consider certain regional accents for promotion or further career progression within those organisations. This study further demonstrates the importance of recognising and addressing an innate issue amongst employers in which awareness is considerably lacking or dismissed.

It may perhaps be that the social psychological concept of 'Normative fit' prescribes our own bias for what type of person should occupy a specific post. Perhaps this bias means someone doesn't 'fit' a management/public facing or ambassador type role for an organisation because they aren't deemed to be particularly articulate or well spoken, thus they aren't considered a viable option.

Or could it perhaps be the case that aside from our unconscious bias and prejudice, that an element of social comparison is at play? It might be considered that those interviewing candidates with what they deem to be undesirable accents for specific roles don't want management or representational roles stationed as an equally tiered colleague. Perhaps in the role of the interviewer, there is subconscious bias that employs a preference for certain accented candidates to be in subordinate roles. This would be qualified by the need for us to evaluate ourselves against those we deem to be worse than ourselves in order to maintain our own self esteem. (Festinger, 1954).

Given the extent and significant impact of this prejudice, social psychologists and sociolinguistic researchers have invested significant studies into both the understanding of this problem and various interventions to progress our own bias into a multicultural acceptance and appreciation.

A Theoretical Explanation ...

In order to look at why these preconceived stereotypes of accents exist, a necessary factor for consideration is our nation's historical context. Regions of marked industrial revolutionary development were in cities such as Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool, Newcastle, London, Edinburgh and Glasgow (Simpkin, 1997) This revolution changed the landscape and infrastructure of Britain forever. It meant many of those that resided in rural areas, were forced to move into cities for factory work and working-class life was not particularly healthy, safe or well regarded in society, "The living conditions in the cities and towns were miserable and characterized by: overcrowding, poor sanitation, spread of diseases, and pollution. As well, workers were paid low wages that barely allowed them to afford the cost of living associated with their rent and food" (Writers, 2016). Many of the key areas of the industrial revolution were cities that to present day, carry a recognisable and very distinct local accent that is still somehow attached to the working-class stereotype and undesirable stigma. Dr Sol Gamsu, an assistant professor of sociology at Durham University stated: "Accents are tied into uneven regional geographies of economic and cultural power," he says. "The associations between intelligence and forms of middle-class and elite speech and accent are

deeply woven into British class structures." (Levelle, 2019) This places particular importance in drawing on social theories, studying what works and making adaptations to our legislation during recruitment and employability interventions to ensure that the accent we use is not indicative of anything other than the geographical area that we originate from.

It would appear that many still regard the accent and language of an individual as a social status and not simply a form of communication, being distracted by the accent itself and missing out on articulate and important subject matter as a result (Mitchell, 2017). Historically, the most widely accepted and favoured 'Queens English' or 'Received Pronunciation' (RP) has been indicative of higher social class, well-educated and wealthy individuals (Robinson, 2019) Historically in British culture prior to the Industrial Revolution there was a divisionary system of hierarchy which saw generational diffusion of occupation, inheritance, social status and potentially therefore, political influence. Post industrialisation era, new social variables changed the dynamics of social status and opened opportunities for those who had not afforded them by birth, such as the more open acquisition of education without financial constraints (Carl, 2009).

Social Identity theory relates significantly to understanding this problem from the perspective of the Self Categorisation (Turner 1986) This theory dictates that perceptions will remain problematic and an ongoing salient factor in our interpretation of each other due to automatic assumptions rather than motivated processes, which are he states is not an intrinsic or subconscious norm. This narrative of social categorisation means conforming to our own in-group identities, further stereotyping those who do not speak in our dialect, accent or choice of word (Turner, Social categorization and the self-concept: A social cognitive theory of group behavior. In T. Postmes & N. R. Branscombe (Eds.), Key readings in social psychology. Rediscovering social identity (p. 243–272)., 2010).

Normative Fit also plays a significant part in why we are unable to see people outside of their stereotypical appearance and linguistic characteristics. Furthermore, someone may dress in a very smart business suit, but might immediately confuse perception in a normative capacity when they speak with a cockney, or other perceived working-class accent. Conversely, it might be outside of perceived cultural stereotypes to see a scaffolder speaking in very articulate received pronunciation.

In a recent study, Professor Devyani Sharma, Professor of Sociolinguistics asked a group of volunteers to listen to 38 different British accents and see which attracted a negative bias. Participants were asked to judge the intelligence of the accented candidate. Of the 38 British accents, they discovered that those using received pronunciation; the Queens English, French-accented English, Edinburgh English were still in association with higher social class. The lowest ratings echoed those in a previous study and had remained as those within ethnic minorities and those associated with the industrial areas (Cockney, Essex, Liverpool, Birmingham). Sharma believes that the bias half a century down the line is still against those with working class accents and ethnic minority accents. (Sharma, 2019) According to Prof Sharma: "We all have automatic associations with accents based on people we've met during our lives. It's only when we rely on these simple stereotypes to judge unrelated traits, like intelligence or competence, that our cultural baggage becomes discrimination." This demonstrates a deep-rooted and ongoing problem within our culture that is

immersed and interwoven in a lack of understanding and a distinct bias against an individual purely based upon the sound of the words that they express. Popular culture has evolved several new linguistic merges such as Multicultural London English. A term that describes an accent comprising of elements from learner varieties of English; those such as the Indian subcontinent, Africa, Caribbean creoles and their indigenised London versions (Kerswill, 2013,). This is a natural evolutionary result of migration and cultures merging, which demonstrates that accents will continue to evolve and change, along with any attached stigma.

A Theoretically Grounded Intervention …

Despite self-categorisation being more subconscious or automatic than preconceived or processed, we do have the ability to ignore stereotypes and process information more consciously through our own cognitive control. As such, many seek to study and create strategies on the topic, aligning proposals for the enhancement of control, to ultimately reduce discrimination. The possibility of an accent being indicative of an individual's education, ability or intelligence is particularly detrimental to our social interaction and the nation's economy, given that our culture continues to diversify, adapt and merge with other European nationals and immigrants. Therefore looking into current studies and what does or does not work, is essential to curb the issues that arise from accent discrimination, particularly in an employability capacity.

Accent Bias Britain's Training Interventions revealed that raising awareness significantly reduced accent bias via the recruitment industry (Levon, 2000). Their targeted interventions were initially implemented through 5 key strategies:

The five control strategies we tested were as follows:

Strategy 1: Raising Awareness. Recruiters are alerted to the existence of accent bias.

Strategy 2: Identifying irrelevant information. Recruiters are asked to commit to ignoring irrelevant information when making their decisions, e.g. If I hear that

the candidate has an accent, I will pay no attention to
it.

Strategy 3: Committing to fairness and objectivity. Recruiters are asked to commit to an agreed set of objective criteria before making judgements.

Strategy 4: Increasing accountability. Recruiters are told that they will have to justify their decisions.

Strategy 5: Appealing to multiculturalism. Recruiters' attention is drawn to diversity and its positive benefits.

At the end of these studies, the strategy with the highest degree of positive change was that of increasing awareness (Levon, 2000)

Based upon this study, it would be wise to look at expanding on the intervention of increasing awareness of accent bias amongst employers in Britain. This will demonstrate the positive effects of cognitive control over our own assumptions and bias, which are not always accurate. Given the scale of the problem and the significant impact resulting on the affected individual and our economy, a plausible approach to consider would be to use a generalised anti-discriminative protocol during recruitment rhetoric. This awareness training in recruitment staff would potentially avert any subjective tendencies or bias when surmising the suitability of a prospective employee.

> *"This awareness training in recruitment staff would potentially avert any subjective tendencies or bias when surmising the suitability of a prospective employee"*

To implement an intervention that increases awareness amongst recruitment staff and recruitment procedures in any given organisation, there will be an undertaking of an awareness training programme for such staff. This programme will include 100 recruitment/human resource volunteer participants from at least 5 different vocational sectors. Support for recruitment of volunteers will be sought from local authority recruitment departments and varied employment sector members from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. Using material and support from Accent Bias Britain which includes transparent and honest evaluations will allow participants to become aware of their own in-group preferences and any accent discrimination involved in perceived employment credibility. The initial assessment of this will be delivered in the

same fashion as Levon's Attitudes to Accents and Implications for Fair Access (Levon, 2000) whereby participants will listen to a series of regional British accents and then rate their perception of the recorded individual's suitability for employment. They will score from least suitable – 0 to most suitable -10. This will be purely based upon how they sound and not the verbal content of the except.

After this initial assessment of audio clips, participants will be given a questionnaire to complete regarding their opinions on a scale of 1-10. This will question how important they feel it is to identify accent discrimination in their recruitment practice, how useful they felt this exercise was and finally, if they feel they are now more aware of any subconscious bias they may have. Material from Accent Bias Britain will be used to outline their accrued statistics on accent discrimination in Britain and the negative outcomes that result from this behaviour.

The participants would then be asked to listen to the same audio clips with a rubric to work from that clearly outlines what each applicant has been asked and the suitability of their answer, therefore entirely negating the importance of their accent. The results from this alone, will identify potential bias and increase awareness of the tendency to discriminate. This will also reinforce the statement that there is a social tendency to listen to the sound of delivery rather than surmise the content of what is said (Mitchell, 2017). Furthermore, this process can also measure our ability to use cognitive control, if any, in such a situation. If a participant has to make a conscious decision about the importance of overriding bias and listening carefully to the content of what is said by someone, the ensuing consultation would result in more positive and fairly assessed future appraisals (Levon, 2000)

Assessment of Success

The batch of questionnaires taken from the group mid intervention, would be an important measure of participant interest in the subject. However, the second set of questions to match the audio clips would establish the desired awareness of content over accent, knowledge over linguistic style and understanding of the job role over the region you represent. It would be desirable to attain results as detailed below. These results would clearly identify that the need for awareness of accent discrimination is not only essential for recruitment professionals, but that it gives considerably more substantial opportunity to the best suited or highest skilled applicants,

regardless of accent. The knock-on effect demonstrates a marked difference to the recruiting organisation and therefore, the economy as a whole.
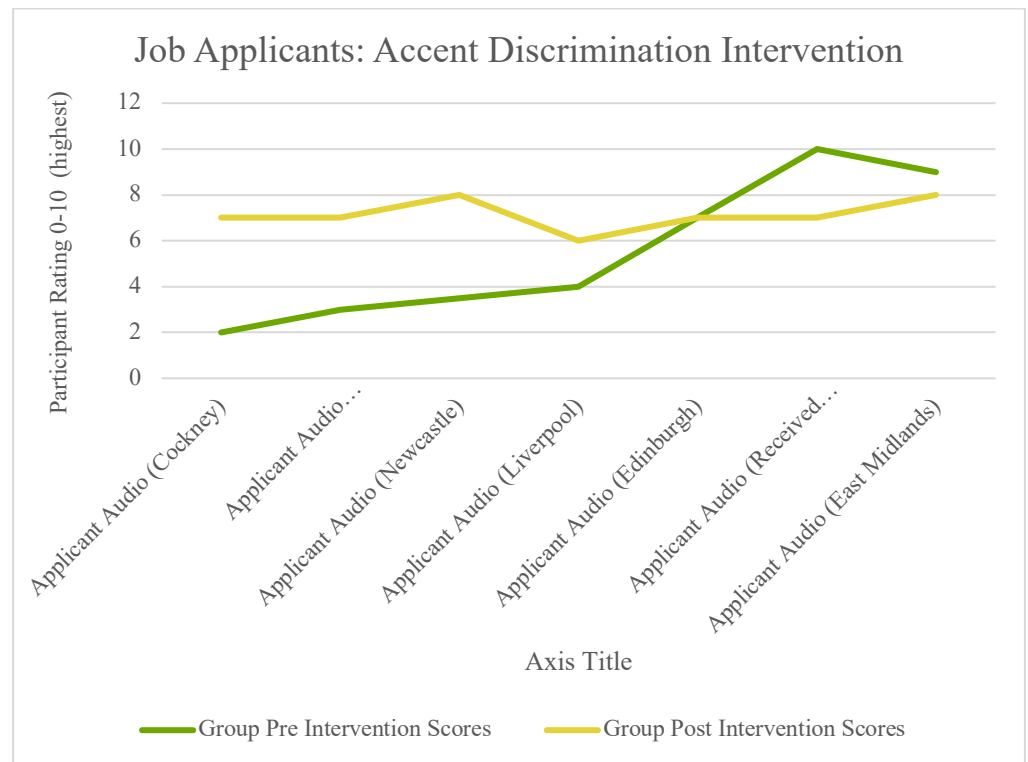
Strengths and Limitations

The outcome of this intervention with results that echo the statistics desired, would prove to be essential evidence for employment legislation. This legislation would have to ensure that recruitment professionals conform to awareness training that prohibits the exclusion of qualified individuals to posts without good reason. This data could ensure that policy makers at a national level would have to ensure that several forms of diversity training is involved amongst recruitment professionals, inclusive of accent discrimination awareness training. The potential for job applicants to access jobs they are qualified for, regardless of an accent that doesn't correlate with perceived normative fit, would be potentially life changing.

Although in-group preferences are ever present, the volunteers that participate collectively in this intervention, can express themselves in a transparent manner because the feedback from the initial assessment will identify that several participants naturally possess a bias toward certain accents, regardless of the content of dialogue. Therefore, there is an in-group culture amongst participants whereby acknowledgement of bias is accepted and willingly addressed. When awareness of subconscious bias is expressed in a learning capacity, it can help volunteers to address this bias collectively, with each other. The simplicity of this intervention would make it possible to easily duplicate and open opportunities to incorporate other forms of intervention support, for example awareness work continuing into education about out-group members, particularly those that have been marked the lowest throughout the intervention activity.

However, it would require considerable cultivation and adaptation in order to fulfil its full potential and effectivity. This simplicity could potentially open scope for error or further affirmations of out-group stereotypes. The diversified prospective participants of all socioeconomic and ages could create too many variables for consideration in the implementation of an awareness intervention. This would add to the need for specific, bespoke or tailored interventions. For example, older adults are characterized as more forgetful and less able to learn new information (Hummert ML, 1994) – could this potentially mean a less effective standardised approach?

It would be fair to assume that job applicants that interview well, demonstrate the necessary knowledge of the interview questions are therefore successful. Some questions would still arise from such a decision. For example, how much of the necessary criteria is being met based upon the subjectivity of the interviewer? And how much of that includes accent discrimination, with or without cognitive intention? Ultimately, the objective would be to ensure that awareness is heightened amongst those in such an important decision-making capacity. Furthermore, since the outcome of increasing awareness as studied in Accent Britain's research, demonstrated the greatest success in change (Levon, 2000) it would be desirable to push that evidence alongside interventions such as this, to ensure a considerable risk is truly being assessed.

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MSc Psychology June 2022

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