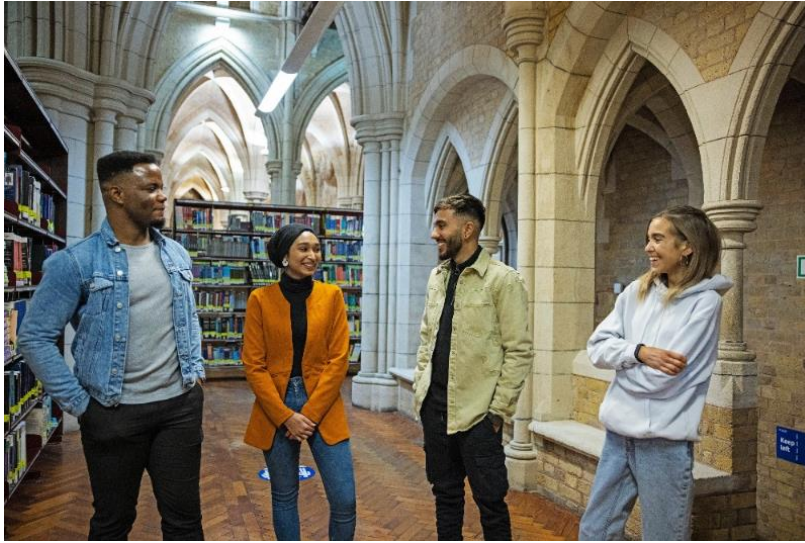


# Talking proper – could accent bias harm your job prospects?



"There's no such thing as an ugly accent," says linguist David Crystal, "like there's no such thing as an ugly flower." But is that true? Do we respond equally to voices speaking with any accent? Research led by Professors Devyani Sharma and Erez Levon suggests that accent bias is alive and well in Britain – in fact attitudes have changed little in the last fifty years.

## How biased are we?

Many people recognise that they shouldn't discriminate due to the protected characteristics of ethnicity or gender – yet they may openly disparage a particular accent, which can be a marker of these characteristics.

A 2006 survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development found that 76% of employers admitted discriminating against candidates based on their accent, while only 3% of employers recognised accent as a protected category.

Sharma and Levon, working with a UKRI-funded interdisciplinary team of sociolinguists, social psychologists, and lawyers, set out to discover whether attitudes to accents have changed in the UK over the past five decades. They also wanted to see whether accent bias affects job prospects, and find ways to address the problem.

## Attitudes to accents among the general public

For an updated picture of public attitudes, the Queen Mary team re-ran surveys from 50 years ago. They surveyed more than 800 people, asking them to rate 38 different British accents from 1-7 for prestige and pleasantness.

The research showed that attitudes towards British accents remain largely unchanged from 50 years ago. The Received Pronunciation (RP) accent remains the most highly regarded. 'French-accented', 'Edinburgh', 'New Zealand' and 'Australia' all appeared within the top 10. As in the two previous studies, 'Birmingham' was rated the lowest and 'Afro-Caribbean', 'Indian', 'Liverpool' and 'Cockney' were all in the bottom 10. These accents align with urban working-class groups and ethnic minorities.

#### Do listeners hear candidates differently if they're confident and knowledgeable?

The researchers compared the ratings of responses to "expert" texts (where the speaker showed knowledge of the law) to non-expert texts, where the speaker spoke on general topics. The results show that expert content improves the response to all accents, regardless of their status.

In another study, the team showed that listeners reacted more negatively to a job candidate who showed lack of confidence than to their accent.

These findings are important for aspiring students who may worry about accent bias. They show that being confident and having technical knowledge really do change how a person is heard.