

A Multidimensional Approach to Investigating Accent Attitudes in Britain  
*Amanda Cardoso, Erez Levon, Devyani Sharma, Dominic Watt, Christian Ilbury, Yang Ye*

Language attitude research has long recognised that individuals can maintain conflicting explicit and implicit attitudes to the same attitude object (e.g., an accent or a variety), which researchers can access via direct or indirect methods, respectively. A recent critical summary of research on the topic, Rosseel and Grondelaers (2019), proposes moving beyond binary divisions and toward a more multi-faceted consideration of listeners' attitudinal reactions to language. In this paper, we take up this suggestion and present results from a multidimensional exploration of how listeners evaluate patterns of accent variation in 21st-century Britain. Drawing together approaches from linguistics, social psychology and labour market economics, we investigate how accent attitudes relate to subjective judgments of candidates in job interviews and, consequently, to social mobility in the UK more generally.

We report results from 5 studies, each targeting a different dimension of accent evaluation:

- 1) In Study 1, 826 members of the UK general public evaluate 38 English accent labels (e.g., Cockney, Liverpool) in terms of prestige and pleasantness (Giles 1970; Bishop et al. 2005). This study allows us to examine explicit attitudes, and so get a picture of the ideological landscape of accent variation in Britain. Results are remarkably consistent with prior research, demonstrating the existence of an enduring hierarchy of accents in the UK.
- 2) Study 2 asked 1106 UK listeners to evaluate native speakers of 5 English accents, who were "candidates" for entry-level positions in a major law firm. This study allows us to obtain more implicit attitudes related to an accent's perceived professionalism. Results show that differences in evaluation across accents are mitigated when using a more indirect approach, and are significantly conditioned by listener factors such as age, region and motivation to control a prejudiced response.
- 3) Study 3 asked 61 lawyers and professional recruiters to evaluate the same stimuli as in Study 2. By replicating the study with lawyers/recruiters, we further explore listener background and context as factors that moderate attitudinal outcomes. Results show an even stronger mitigation of accent attitude effects, with lawyers showing no bias across accents at all.
- 4) Study 4 examines real-time evaluations of accents among 160 UK listeners, allowing us to explore the relationship between evaluative endpoints and online attitudinal processing. Results show that standard versus non-standard accents engender distinct real-time response trajectories, demonstrating the existence of a deeper and more implicit form of accent bias.
- 5) Finally, Study 5 asked 80 UK listeners to rate 10 speakers of 5 UK accents for how "strong" their accent is and how "professional" they sound. Results show judgments of accent strength are a better predictor of professionalism ratings than accent, indicating that the target of evaluations may be prevalence of (non-standard) features rather than "accent".

Together, the 5 studies present us with a holistic perspective on attitudes to contemporary UK accents. In the talk, we discuss the ramifications of our findings for current theories of language attitudes, and for the role of accent as an impediment to social mobility.

## References

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