

## Teaching Unit 26: Accent bias and the public

### Background

In teaching units 24 and 25, students were able to learn about accents, accent biases, and discrimination in general. Over the next two teaching units (26 and 27), students can explore the project rationale and main findings of the Accent Bias in Britain project. In this teaching unit, you will explore data we collected from members of the public.

Visit [www.accentbiasbritain.org](http://www.accentbiasbritain.org) for more information!

### Accent Bias & Discrimination

Because accents are linked to things like ethnicity and social class, we often use accent to make judgments about where a speaker is from or what they do for work. These stereotypes are natural, but they have the potential to become problematic, such as if accent is used to infer whether a speaker is good at their job or if they're trustworthy.

These judgments are likely to be influenced by **accent bias** – that is, the potential for people to exhibit an inclination either positive or negative towards a particular accent, based on such factors as exposure to different accents and personal experience with accents.

You can find out more about accent bias and discrimination at:  
[www.accentbiasbritain.org/background/](http://www.accentbiasbritain.org/background/)

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### Data and results

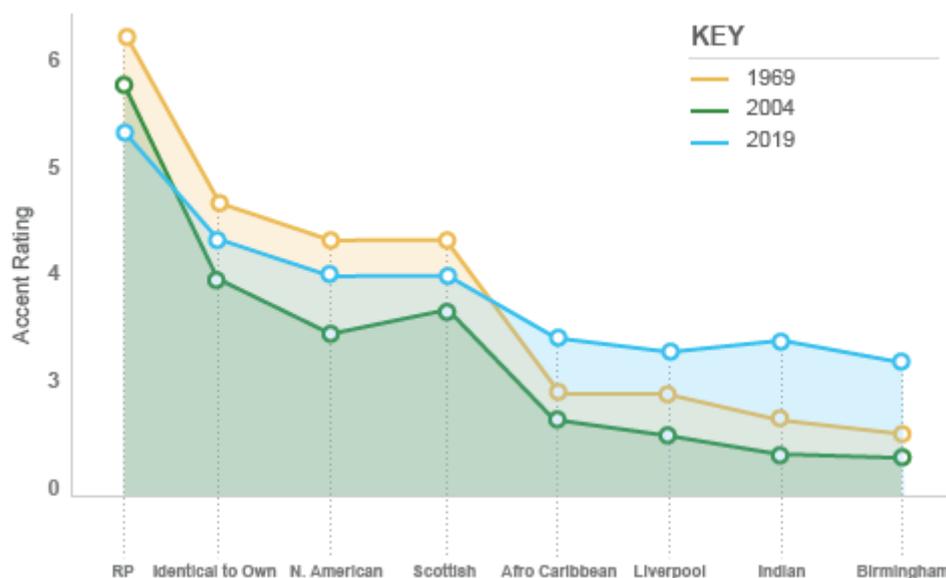
#### Attitudes to Accent Labels

In this section, we'll explore the data for first part of our study which assessed people's attitudes towards 'accent labels'. An accent label is a term like 'Received Pronunciation' or 'Birmingham English' that refers to a variety of British English.

To investigate how people responded to these labels, we recruited over 800 participants and asked them to rate 38 British accent labels in terms of their 'prestige' and 'pleasantness'.

You can read a summary of a similar study by Coupland & Bishop (2007) on our [Linguistics Research Digest!](#)

Below is a graph which summarised the main findings of our accent label survey. On the y-axis (the line going upwards) we find average accent ratings for the labels. On the x-axis (the line going across) we find 8 examples of the accent labels used in our study. The three different colour lines show the average ratings for the accents in three different studies: one conducted in 1969 (50 years ago), one in 2004 (15 years ago), and one very recently (in 2019). The references for these studies can be found at the end of the Teaching Unit.



**Points for discussion:**

- Which accents are rated the highest? Which are less favourably rated?
- Which accents are rated differently across the three studies? Can you think why there might have been changes?
- Are there 'groups' of accents that are rated in similar ways, e.g., urban/rural, traditional/modern?
- Do these ratings match your own?

**Attitudes to Real Voices**

As noted earlier, since accents often become associated with stereotypes of people, it is possible that these may be used to discriminate against certain people or groups. One possible area of discrimination is in the employment process, where candidates with certain accents may be viewed less favourably than others.

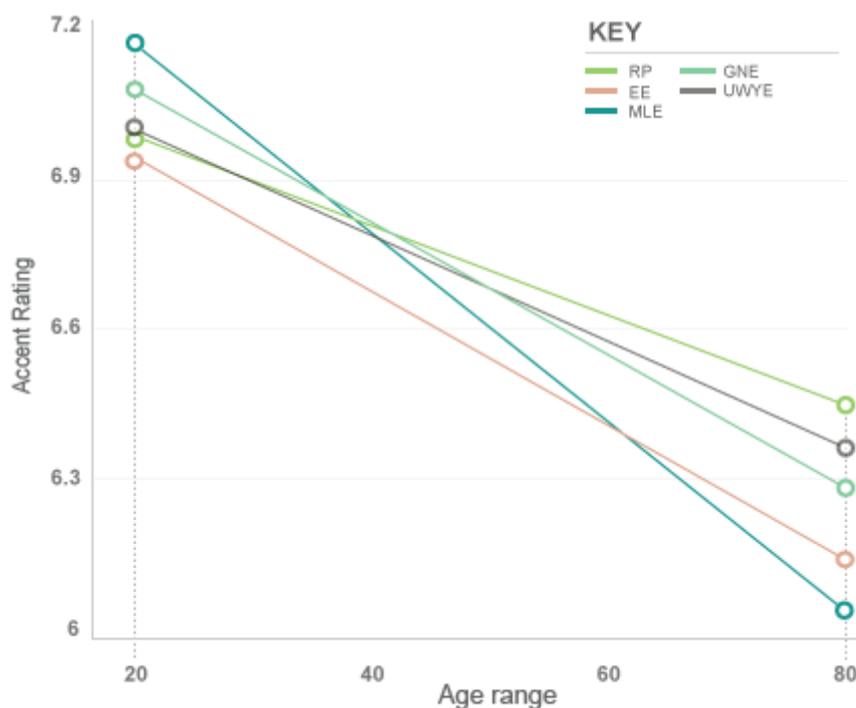
In the second part of our study, we investigated whether these attitudes had the potential to influence the individuals' employment opportunities. We recorded individuals in a mock interview and played these clips to a sample of the British public to see if attitudes towards UK accents affected the ratings of the suitability of a candidate.

To do this, we recruited over 1,100 participants who were asked to listen to 10 mock interviews conducted with candidates who spoke one of five accents (Received

Pronunciation, Multicultural London English, General Northern English, and Urban West Yorkshire English). Questions were either 'expert' – those requiring a level of expertise and knowledge or 'non-expert' – those which involve background and personal information. We asked participants to rate the candidates on how well they answered the question by indicating their responses on a ten-point scale.

Listen to some of our sound clips that we played to participants at [www.accentbiasbritain.org/accents-in-britain/](http://www.accentbiasbritain.org/accents-in-britain/)

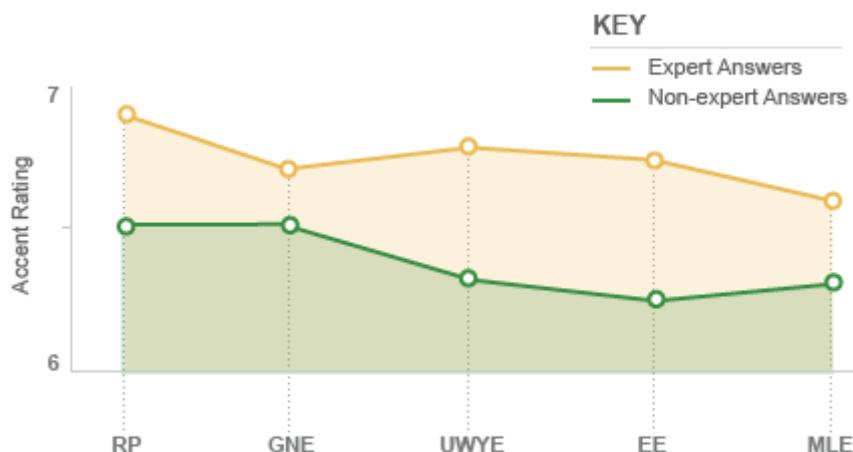
Below is a graph that shows the average rating for the five accents (as indicated by the coloured lines) across different age groups. The y-axis shows the average accent rating out of 10 and the x-axis shows the age-range of the participants.



**Points for discussion:**

- Which accents are generally rated the highest? Are there differences across age groups?
- What overall patterns do you see? Can you think of any explanations for the patterns you observe?
- What other factors might influence someone's rating that aren't related to age?

Now turn to the graphs below. These graphs show you the data for the five accents and their average ratings for both the 'expert' and 'non-expert' questions. Average accent rating is found along the y-axis and the five accents can be seen across the x-axis. The different colours indicate the 'expert' (yellow) and 'non-expert' (green) answers.



**Points for discussion:**

- Do you see a difference in the ratings for 'expert' and 'non-expert' answers? Why might this be?
- Are there any accents that are rated similarly across 'expert' and 'non-expert' answers?

**Further Reading**

Coupland, N. and H. Bishop. 2007. Ideologised values for British accents. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 11: 74-93. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9841.2007.00311.x>

Giles, H. 1970. Evaluative reactions to accents. *Educational Review* 22: 211-237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013191700220301>