

## Language investigation: Accent Bias

This language investigation is inspired by the Accent Bias Britain project. Visit <http://www.accentbiasbritain.org> for more information!

Because accents are associated with individuals' social characteristics—like age, gender, and social class—we often use accent to make judgments about someone's character. Whilst everybody does this to some extent, it can become a problem when people use accent to infer characteristics about someone that aren't related to their accent, like how good they are at their job or whether they're an honest person.

In this language investigation, you will explore whether accent bias plays a role in how different people are perceived. You will use an experiment to identify whether people judge speakers with a particular regional accent differently to others, such as whether they perceive them to be less trustworthy or reliable than those with other accents.

Accent bias and linguistic prejudice is a hot topic at the moment, and your study has real potential to demonstrate to people how our perceptions of people are influenced by stereotypes in the wider world.

### Finding a focus

A good place to start is to observe evaluations of accents in digital and social media. For instance, you might search Twitter for tweets relating to 'Yorkshire' or 'Northern' accents. This would allow you to see some of the types of evaluations of speakers that individuals make when they hear certain regional accents. Of course, you should avoid tweets which discuss the area or the people and focus on just those that refer directly to the accent. See what accents are discussed the most and try to start thinking about any themes that are repeated.

If you don't have access to social media or you don't find many comments on there, try asking people directly. What happens, for example, if you ask someone if they like the Bolton accent? Do they have certain ideas about the people who speak this accent?

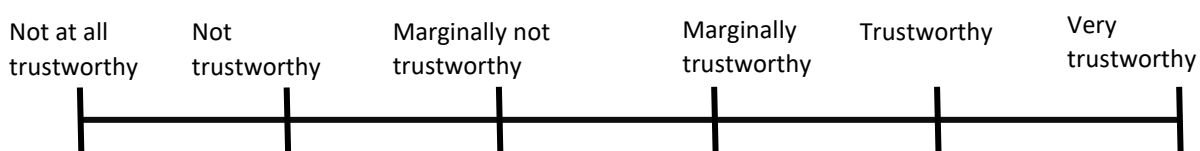
For the rest of the investigation, we will focus on designing an experiment to examine whether accent bias plays a role in people's perceptions of speakers who speak with a particular accent.

## Gathering data

The experiment that we'll run through here seeks to find out whether people's perception of the quality of an answer is influenced by accent bias. One way you can test this is to play recordings of individuals who speak with different accents reading the same set of statements. You could then present these recordings to different sets of people and ask them to evaluate the statements.

First, you'll need to create the materials that you'll use in the experiment. These are known as the *stimuli*. A good place to start would be to record a set of speakers with regional accents and have them complete the same tasks. For instance, you could record three speakers: one from the West-Country City of Bath, one from Birmingham, West Midlands and one from the Northern City of York. Next, you could get these speakers to read out a series of facts, whilst you recorded them. Try to pick some obscure facts so your respondents can't guess which ones are true!

Once you've recorded your stimuli, you'll need to create a way of testing how people perceive these speakers. One way of doing this is by using a questionnaire. This could include questions that try to elicit judgments of those speakers. For example, you could test whether they thought the speaker was trustworthy, knowledgeable, kind, rich, educated, or some other personal characteristic. You could also ask whether they believed the statement to be true. Your questionnaire could contain a series of scales and participants could be asked to rate the speaker out of 10, depending on the characteristic and how much they felt they suited that value. For instance, the below is a scale of 'trustworthiness' where people were asked to rank the speaker on a scale of 'not at all trustworthy' to 'very trustworthy'.



You should then play the recordings to participants and have them fill in the questionnaire, asking them to specify where they would rate the speaker on a scale, like the one above.

Note: it's not a good idea to play the same statement in different accents to a single listener, as your goal will be too obvious. So you should record several statements in each accent, so that no listener hears the same statement in different accents.

## Analysis

Great – you've got your data! Now, time for the analysis. If you've recorded people's perceptions of the 'trustworthiness' or 'educatedness' of the speaker on a scale, you have data that you can **quantify** – in other words, you can count how many times people thought your speaker from York was a trustworthy individual.

To make it easier, you might want to convert your scale from the labels ‘not at all trustworthy’, ‘not trustworthy’ to numbers. In this case, you could convert the labels from 1-6, with 1 being the least trustworthy and 6 being the most trustworthy. This would allow to easily identify any emerging patterns in your data. Once you’ve done this, you might want to arrange your data in a table like the one below. This will help you visualise your findings.

	<b>Accent</b>		
<b>Characteristic</b>	Bath	Birmingham	York
Friendly	52	54	42
Educated	50	35	46
Reliable	30	47	52
TOTAL:			

Once you’ve organised your data, start thinking about comparisons. Say you find that the speaker from York is quite highly rated, how does this compare to, say, your speaker from Bath? Is one more trustworthy than the other? What do the numbers tell you? At this point, you should attempt to identify any patterns – this will help you interpret the data in the next step. If you used a similar scale to the example here, it’s easy to quantify this. You simply have to work out which score is higher!

### Interpreting the data

The next step is interpreting the data – in other words, what does this all mean? Let’s say that your experiment shows that people rate your speaker from Bath consistently lower on the scale of ‘trustworthiness’ than your speaker from York. What might this mean? Do you find any evidence for accent bias here? If, for example, this is indeed the finding you observe, then it looks like you can confirm an effect of accent bias. Once you’ve established that this effect exists, try to think why this might be? Are some accents thought of as more prestigious than others? Are there media stereotypes that circulate that might explain your findings?

Similarly, if you *don’t* find evidence for accent bias, think about why this might be. Is it that people simply don’t display any bias? Maybe the stereotypes that you thought might exist aren’t invoked by people in practice. Or could it be to do with how you designed your survey? In other words, did people guess what you were researching so changed their responses to ones that were more acceptable?