INTER-SPEAKER VARIATION AND THE EVALUATION OF BRITISH ENGLISH ACCENTS IN EMPLOYMENT CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT

Public attitudes towards social and regional British English accents have been widely researched. However, this work rarely investigates how inter-speaker variation within accent groups affects these attitudes even though judgments may differ as a function of the specific phonetic profiles of individuals. This paper examines the public perceptions of five British English accents (two speakers per accent) in interviews through a large-scale nationwide survey (n = 1015). We further explore differences in perceptions of individuals in one accent group – Multicultural London English (MLE) – and how these differences relate to the density of accent features in the speakers' repertoires.

Evaluations of accents in interviews reflect previous findings from accent attitude studies (e.g. Received Pronunciation speakers are rated positively). However, individual differences are found for the MLE speakers. The candidate with more marked MLE features (e.g. /k/-backing) is rated more negatively, suggesting that inter-speaker variation is a crucial factor in accent evaluations.

Keywords: language attitudes, inter-speaker variation, accent density, sociophonetic markedness

1. INTRODUCTION

Research on attitudes to social and regional British English accents has revealed consistent differences in how accents are evaluated (see, for example, [1, 3, 5, 6]). Previous work finds that standard accents and accents associated with higher socio-economic status, such as Received Pronunciation (RP), are perceived as being more prestigious and educated. However, these accents are often rated less positively for traits like friendliness. Conversely, non-standard accents are rated positively with regards to likeability and friendliness but are not perceived as being as highly educated. These attitudes may impact upon evaluations of members of different accent groups in employment contexts, as certain traits may be considered more desirable in this context (e.g. being educated). Differences in evaluations may then lead to unequal outcomes for members of different accent groups. For example, attitudes towards accents may influence evaluations of job candidates with comparable professional experience and qualifications, but who speak with different accents.

In much of the work on public attitudes to accents, a small number of speakers are recorded to represent a particular "accent". However, speakers have access to a range of accent features and inter-speaker variation within accents with regards to the density of accent features in speakers' repertoires has been widely reported [12, 13, 14]. Furthermore, attitudes towards accent features have been shown to influence judgements [2, 8, 9]. For example, TH-fronting, which is where /θ/ is realised more like [f], is perceived as being less professional by listeners in Northern England [10]. Therefore, attitudes toward an individual within an accent group may differ depending on their phonetic profile. This suggests that inter-speaker variation is a crucial factor in accent evaluations. Despite this, previous research has rarely investigated the effect that inter-speaker variation within accents has on public attitudes to accents (but see, for example, [11, 15]).

To examine the proposed effects of inter-speaker variation on accent attitudes, the current paper includes two analyses on a public survey dataset that contains overt evaluations of interview candidates speaking with different British English accents. The first analysis addresses the issue of general accent attitudes, while the second analysis addresses the issue of inter-speaker variation by examining the extent to which speaker specific phonetic profiles influence attitudes towards individual candidates.

2. METHODS

2.1. Stimuli

Stimuli consisted of recordings of mock answers to ten interview questions for a trainee solicitor position at a law firm read by ten male actors. To ensure (ecological) validity, written answers were judged by a panel of practising lawyers.

We recorded native speakers of five British English Accents (two per accent): Received

Pronunciation (RP), Estuary English (EE), Multicultural London English (MLE), General Northern English (GNE), and Leeds English (LE). The accents were chosen to reflect fundamental social contrasts in England, such as region and socio-economic status. Table 1 details the social contrasts and how the accents map onto these contrasts. Furthermore, nine contrastive accent variables – based on previous research – were balanced across the written answers. There are six vowel variables (STRUT/FOOT, FOOT, BATH/TRAP, FACE, GOAT, happY) and three consonant variables (/θ/, /ð/, /l/). Wells' [16] lexical sets have been used to represent the vowel variables, as the phonological categories for these variables vary across the accents.

Table 1: Social contrasts reflected by the five British English accents used for the stimuli.

	Accent				
	RP	EE	MLE	GNE	LE
Region: North (N), South (S)	S	S	S	N	N
Prestige: standard (S), non-standard (N-S)	S	N-S	N-S	S	N-S
Localness: local (L), supralocal (SL), national (N)	N	SL	L	SL	L
Age: established (E), newly emergent (N)	E	N	N	N	E
Ethnicity: white (W), non-white (N-W)	W	W	N-W	W	W
Class: Working (WC), Middle (MC)	MC	WC	WC	MC	WC

Stimuli were controlled for duration across all accents within and across answers. Hesitations and disfluencies were removed. Realisations of the nine accent variables, intonation, and pause locations and pause durations are consistent across speakers within an accent, wherever possible. A pilot investigation (n=99) indicated that stimuli are equally believable as recordings of job candidates in interviews.

2.2. Participants

A representative sample of the UK population was recruited through a market research firm. There are 1014 participants (514 men, 497 women, 3 unknown) ranging in age from 18-84 (median=48) from all regions of the UK. The sample size per region is based on population densities in the UK. The regions are: South East, London, South West, East of England, East Midlands, West Midlands, Yorkshire and Humberside, North East, North West, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

2.3. Data Collection

Accent evaluations were obtained via an online Qualtrics survey. During the survey, participants were asked to evaluate the interview performance of 10 candidates. After hearing a candidate's response to an interview question, participants rated the candidate's expertise, likeability, professionalism, and hireability on a series of 10-point Likert scales. Participants heard every speaker once (each accent twice) answering a different mock question. The association of speakers/accents to questions was pseudo-randomised using a Latin square design. Order of presentation of accents/questions in the survey was fully randomised.

2.4. Data Analysis

Stimuli were auditorily analysed (with visual inspection of the acoustic signal) for presence of accent features.

Hierarchical linear mixed-effects models were fitted to participant evaluations with question type and accent as main effects, question and speaker as grouping factors, and random slopes for participant by accent and participant by question type.

2.5. Socio-indexical Information

We conducted an additional pilot investigation (n=50) to establish any individual and accent-level differences in the stimuli with regard to perceived socio-indexical information. Participants listened to short clips of each speaker and were asked to judge the speakers based on competence and social attractiveness traits, such as masculinity.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Evaluations of Accents

Our findings suggest that accent significantly influenced the participants' evaluations of candidates [F=7.30, p<0.001]. Candidates with standard accents (RP and GNE) were more positively evaluated than candidates with Southern non-standard accents (EE and MLE), as shown in Figure 1. However, candidates with Northern non-standard accents (LE) received more positive evaluations than Southern non-standard accents and similar evaluations to standard accents.

Participant perceptions of the accent groups were largely consistent across perceived traits. For example, candidates with accents that were perceived

to be more hireable were also perceived to be more professional. RP speakers were perceived most positively across the different traits, except for likeability, where Northern speakers (GNE and LE) were rated highest. Conversely, EE speakers were rated most negatively, except for hireability, where MLE was rated lowest. Table 2 provides the means, and standard deviations of evaluations for perceived traits across the accents.

Figure 1: Overall mean participant evaluations by accent. Southern accents are in darker greys and Northern accents are in lighter greys.
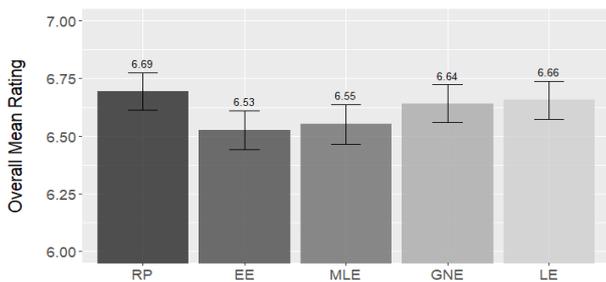

Table 2: Mean evaluations for each trait by accent. Standard deviations in brackets. Bolding indicates highest evaluation; underlining indicates lowest.

	RP	EE	MLE	GNE	LE
Overall	**6.69**	6.53	6.55	6.64	6.66
	(1.87)	(1.92)	(1.96)	(1.90)	(1.90)
Professional	**6.80**	6.63	6.67	6.73	6.77
	(1.94)	(1.99)	(2.01)	(1.98)	(1.95)
Expertise	**6.56**	6.36	6.42	6.47	6.51
	(2.12)	(2.19)	(2.17)	(2.14)	(2.15)
Hireability	**6.82**	6.62	6.62	6.73	6.72
	(1.95)	(2.01)	(2.05)	(1.97)	(1.99)
Likeability	6.51	6.43	6.44	6.56	**6.57**
	(2.08)	(2.07)	(2.13)	(2.04)	(2.06)

Despite these overall differences across accents, we also find significant inter-speaker differences in evaluation occur within accent groups [$F=14.28$, $p<0.001$], as shown in Figure 2. In section 3.2, we focus on the difference between evaluations for the two MLE speaking candidates.

Figure 2: Overall mean participant evaluations by accent and speaker.
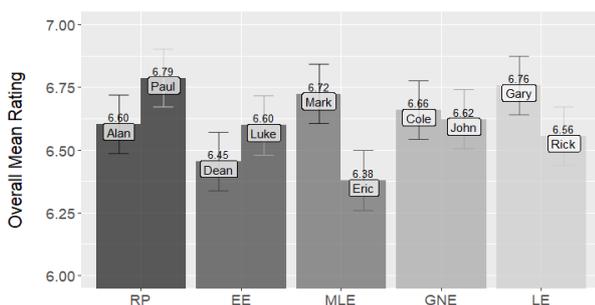

3.2. Inter-speaker Differences in Evaluations

As shown in Figure 2, the two MLE speaking candidates were evaluated differently by participants. Mark received much higher evaluations than Eric and was often one of the highest rated candidates across all accents. Conversely, participants consistently rated Eric as one of the lowest rated candidates. These differences are unlikely to arise from the content or presentation of the stimuli, due to the highly controlled stimuli and experimental design. Rather, we suggest that these differences are related to the speakers' phonetic profiles and socio-indexical traits associated with the speakers, which are interlinked.

We only discuss results from the pilot study, which were found to be significantly different for the MLE speakers compared with the other accent speakers. Participants perceived MLE speakers to be similar with regards to masculinity and confidence. However, participants perceived Eric as less educated than Mark, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Perceptions of socio-indexical traits for MLE speakers.
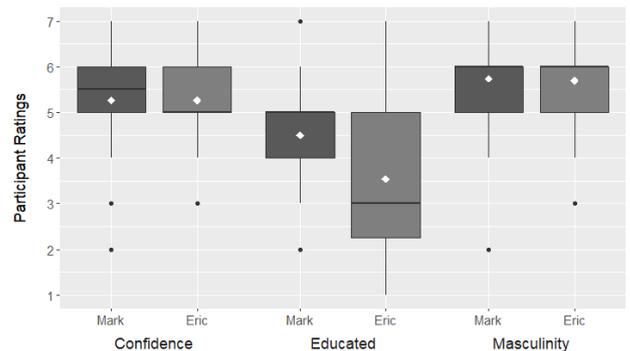
In addition, pilot participants identified Eric's ethnicity as "black" more often than Mark (see Figure 4). Over one-fifth of the participants perceived Mark's ethnicity as being white, mixed or other.

Figure 4: Perceived ethnicity for MLE speakers.
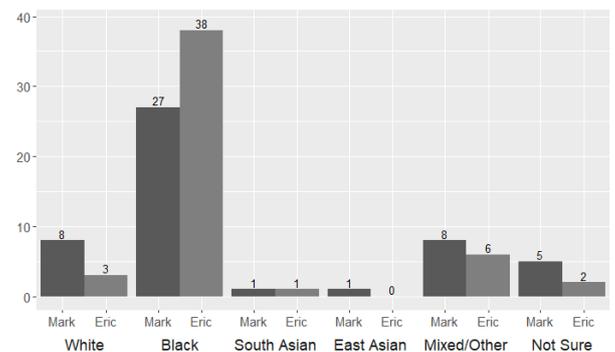
Turning to the MLE speakers' phonetic profiles, we find differences in the speakers' use of accent

features. Mark's profile consists predominantly of features which also form part of some of the other accent repertoires, such as GOOSE-fronting and /l/-vocalisation. Eric, on contrast, uses a higher proportion of features that are specific to MLE, such as /k/-backing and DH-stopping [4]. Table 4 shows the number of instances of accent features within the speakers' profiles. Note that the stimuli contain the same content across all speakers, so each speaker within an accent has the same number of environments where accent features may occur.

Table 4: Counts of accent features used by the MLE speaking candidates. Percentages are calculated on how many times the speaker produces the feature divided by how many times the feature can occur. MLE-specific features are in italics. For each feature an example word from the stimuli is provided below the accent feature.

	Mark	Eric
GOOSE-fronting e.g. 'through'	21 (46%)	29 (63%)
/l/-vocalisation e.g. 'ball'	64 (93%)	66 (96%)
TH-fronting e.g. 'theme'	4 (44%)	5 (56%)
DH-fronting e.g. 'rather'	4 (4%)	5 (5%)
FOOT-fronting e.g. 'would'	10 (59%)	0
/k/-backing e.g. 'contract'	0	24 (59%)
DH-stopping e.g. 'there'	2 (2%)	58 (56%)
FOOT-backing e.g. 'good'	1 (6%)	10 (59%)
GOAT-backing e.g. 'vote'	1 (4%)	21 (88%)

Both MLE speakers have similar levels of GOOSE-fronting, /l/-vocalisation, TH- and DH-fronting. All of which are shared with other accents. However, they differ with regard to the use of FOOT-fronting, /k/-backing, DH-stopping, FOOT-backing, and GOAT-backing. These features are predominantly MLE-specific accent features, with the exception of FOOT-fronting, which is used by Mark.

4. DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

Our results suggest that evaluations of job candidates are influenced by the candidate's accent. In other words, there appears to be a certain degree of accent bias in employment contexts. The direction of this bias parallels the results of previous work. Standard speakers are evaluated the most positively and are perceived to possess traits that are considered important in hiring contexts, such as being educated and confident. Conversely, non-standard speakers are judged more negatively and are shown to be associated with traits that are either not important or undesirable in professional situations, such as being friendly, less intelligent and less well-educated.

However, not all non-standard accents receive negative evaluations. Candidates with Northern non-standard accents (LE) are rated as positively as candidates with Northern standard accents and more positively than Southern non-standard accents. This result suggests that accent bias does not apply equally across accent groups. The attitudes towards LE are not similar to the attitudes towards the Southern non-standard accents (EE and MLE). Thus, suggesting that there is a nationwide hierarchy of accent prestige. Standard accents are most prestigious, Southern non-standard accents are least prestigious, and Northern non-standard accents are in between.

Patterns of accent bias in the current study are further complicated by inter-speaker differences within accent groups. These differences suggest that bias is influenced by the specific accent features (and their associated socio-indexical traits) employed by a speaker. Participants judge MLE speakers who use accent features that more readily identify them as being an MLE speaker as having socio-indexical traits that are closely align with previous work on non-standard accent evaluations. For instance, the MLE candidate who uses more MLE-specific features is perceived as being less educated. Furthermore, this speaker is more often perceived to be a member of social categories associated with the MLE accent (e.g. being ethnically black). By contrast, masculinity and confidence appeared to be equally signalled by the two different MLE repertoires.

These accent features and their associated traits then influence evaluations of candidates' suitability for employment. For example, the MLE candidate who was perceived as being more well-educated is more likely to be evaluated positively in employment contexts, as level of education is often an important factor in employment contexts. On the other hand, being more easily identifiable as a speaker of MLE by using accent features that are accent-specific (e.g. /k/-backing for MLE), leads to more negative evaluations, potentially as a result of the socio-indexical traits associated with these accent features.

Attitudes to different accents are complicated by the inter-speaker variation that exists within an accent group and the accent features that a speaker employs. Therefore, research investigating attitudes to accents and accent bias should consider the speaker specific phonetic profiles and how this influences the perceptions of the accents.

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