Debunking myths: Is there accent bias in the workplace?

One of the key things that contributes to your identity, is your accent and dialect. Despite people using these terms interchangeably, they hold different meanings and are both different subordinate parts of language. An accent is classified as a ‘specific manner of pronunciation’, relating solely on how one chooses to articulate their words, whilst dialect s a variant of a language and, not only refers to a specific form on pronunciation, but also vocabulary, grammar, and language as whole.

**The Issue at Hand: The Persistence of Accent Bias**

Now, as we know, accent bias exists. In the UK, a long history of class-based social hierarchy has led to a hierarchy of accents, with RP considered to be more prestigious and desirable than others, and regional accents being less favourable and perceived as “unintelligent” (ITV, 28% feel accent discrimination, 2013).

A recent report on “accent bias”, compiled by Professor Devyani Sharma and Dr. Dominic Watt

, found that 30% of professionals report being mocked, criticised, or singled out in educational settings because of their accents, compared with 20% of those from better off backgrounds. With RP viewed as being the most prestige before the 20th century, it seems these ideas remain largely unchanged, as Sharma writes “non-standard working- class accents are downgraded, and historically prestigious ones are upgraded”. This is a problem that can actively disadvantage certain groups for social mobility i.e. job interviews and careers (Professor Erez Levon, 2020, pp. 7-10), an example being in the West Midlands where a school banned pupils from speaking regional slang as they felt it would “improve their employability”. (Dathan, 2013, pp. 1-3), or a teacher from Cumbria who had a target to “sound less Cumbrian”, as it sounded more ‘educated’

**The Social and Career Impact of Accent Discrimination**

Although accent bias is indeed strong in the UK, the same study has also shown some factors which could be taken into consideration when It comes to the reasoning behind some instances of accent bias. One of the key elements, is age category. When asking participants to listen to mock interviews, particularly focusing on 5 accents, the older listeners generally rated the two working-class London accents lower, whereas young people did in fact not rate accents significantly differently at all. One may interpret this as a change over time, but the same age pattern was found by (Nikolas Coupland, 2007, pp. 74-93)and shows that people’s attitudes about accents correlate with established norms as they get older. In this case, the context of the bias is incredibly vital and depends greatly on the age of the listener.

Thinking a little broader, perhaps it isn’t a simple manner of prejudice at work. As the ITV study shows, people find it significantly harder to trust those with a Scouse accent and choose to favour RP for both loyalty and intelligence. However, what if it doesn’t come down to bias? I would state that perhaps the reasoning could be more of a lack of understanding. With arising intonation and being spoken at the front of the mouth, the scouse accent could lead to people struggling processing the information. A recent trial can support this finding, as it showed that listeners were more apprehensive and closed off to those with a regional accent, due to being unable to understand.

Although this does show stereotypes play a smaller part in bias, it's still important that employers take the measures to educate people for the prevention of accent discrimination.

**Conclusion: The Complex Nature of Accent Bias**

Evidence from Queen Mary University and University of York does show that employability can be hindered, depending on your accent and clearly, that aspect is vital for some people- the example of the ban in West Midlands and Cumbria is a clear example and reflects the attitudes of society.

But we have concluded that prejudice is not always the issue at hand and instead, other factors take a great part in this debate. Whilst I can understand how people could perhaps feel a little overwhelmed by someone’s accent, I’d argue age is perhaps a clearer explanation as it’s shown that most of the accent discrimination originates from the more senior age category. As this is a more dated stereotype, the younger generation have learnt to become more accepting and have been educated so they can challenge previous ideologies.

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