

Does your accent make you sound smarter? 23rd May 2017

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Some of us will speak with a posher voice if we think it will make the right impression, but is it worth it? Accents are more than just about how we speak, writes Chi Luu.

They say you should always dress for success, but should that extend to the way you speak? We're not adverse to dressing appropriately to make a good impression at work or for a social engagement, even if it means wearing clothes we wouldn't normally choose to put on. Is changing your accent to get ahead any different?

There are some famous names who have done it: Margaret Thatcher swapped her Lincolnshire accent for a posher one, adopting the standard 'received pronunciation' (or RP), which at the time was thought to be more in keeping with a position of political power.

More recently, Tony Blair and George Osborne took their own accents in the opposite direction, introducing more working class "mockney" inflections in their upper class speech, in an attempt to enhance their perceived approachability. With such obvious changes to their accents, they were roundly mocked for lacking authenticity.

A standard dialect is simply one local variety of a language which has become most publicly accepted in social institutions such as the media, the law and government. In many Anglophone countries, the dialect spoken by most of the population is considered to be standard, such as Standard American or Standard Australian English. In the UK, however, the so-called standard – known as RP or the Queen's English – is spoken natively by less than 3%. Yet, it's unreasonable to suppose most Britons are speaking their own language incorrectly.

Linguist and author Rosina Lippi-Green refers to this as "the standard language ideology", where many people believe the dialect with the highest social prestige is also the only correct and valid form of the language. In fact, all dialects and accents are linguistically valid.

Some professionals whose regional accents are deemed non-standard by their employers, like these trainee teachers from the north of England, can find themselves under pressure to tone down their native accents to improve their job and progression prospects.

There are some workplaces, such as call centres, that even offer accent training programmes for their staff. Some promote regional accents that are widely seen as more trustworthy, calming or pleasant, such as Scottish English or Southern American. Today, it is not as simple as moving your speech patterns up the social ladder to boost your career prospects.

How far is too far?

But when we examine the reasons why anyone would consider changing their accent, we uncover a raft of biases that shouldn't necessarily be reinforced.

First, it's not exactly easy to put on a new accent for work and take it off when home like you would a new suit, even if you're a highly trained actor.

No doubt, we find some accents more entertaining or more amusing than others. But accents aren't just purely about how we speak – they are one of the most distinctive cues for where we come from. They immediately mark out who we are and they form a core part of our identity. Entire stereotypes have built up around different accents – New Yorkers are rude, British RP speakers are educated, Yorkshire speakers are trustworthy, Southern Americans are pleasant, and Birmingham speakers, depending on who you ask, either sound melodic or like criminals. Accents can be funny things... until they're not.

Whether you're from Birmingham or Brooklyn, working class or the upper crust, a second language speaker or native-born, accents say a lot more about someone than you might expect.

Studies have shown it can take just 30 milliseconds of speech – enough to say "hello" – for listeners to identify a person's ethnic or cultural background as being different from their own and make snap judgements about the kind of person they might be, whether positive or negative.

Thanks to this kind of bias, accents can be a shortcut that allows us to "linguistically profile" others based on the stereotypes of their regional backgrounds, class, gender or ethnicity. Without even realising, we can use this to discriminate. This can make it hard for marginalised and minority speakers to find a job, gain an education, or even in find a home.

In one study, John Baugh, a sociolinguist at Stanford University, made repeated phone calls in answer to newspaper advertisements for apartments, using different accents, and recorded how many of those apartments were available or unavailable, depending on whether he used African American English, Chicano English or Standard American English accents.

When Baugh used a non-standard accent, suddenly fewer apartments were available to him. This is not because there's anything linguistically wrong with those accents, but that listeners judged them as markers of racial and ethnic traits that they found undesirable.

Since the 1960s, research has reinforced how listeners can attribute all kinds of unrelated personal traits to a speaker – from height, physical attractiveness, social status, intelligence, education, good character, sociability, even criminality – just based on how they sound. Like in Baugh's test, experiments present subjects with different "guises" or accents performed by the same person. Listeners invariably respond differently when faced with different accents, even if the person speaking hasn't changed. In the real world, these biases can have far-reaching repercussions for those who speak with a socially stigmatised accent.

It's thanks to these language attitudes that for some, an accent becomes a source of cultural pride, but for others, a secret source of shame. But these attitudes about the way we sound are so pervasive that even non-standard speakers may judge their own dialects and accents just as harshly as others do, perpetuating the erroneous belief that their native speech is "incorrect" and needs to change.

If you can't beat 'em

This ingrained linguistic prejudice has led to studies showing that people consistently rate those with standard accents or 'prestige' accents as being more competent, intelligent, effective communicators and better suited to high status professional jobs. Those with non-standard accents are often rated as better employed in lower status, less desirable jobs.

These findings can have a major impact on our working lives and careers, especially if you speak with a non-standard accent. A recent ITV/Comres survey on UK language attitudes found that over a quarter of Britons feel they have encountered accent discrimination. The more people change their accents to fit in with prevailing attitudes and stereotypes, the more those views are reinforced.

This has had some real life impacts. For example, there are fewer academics who have kept their regional accents, because students somehow just don't find them as effective if they have one – and often rate them accordingly – regardless of their actual expertise.

Even in job interviews it's easy for an interviewer to fall into the trap of believing that a person's mere accent is enough to indicate their ability. A surprising 80% of employers admit they do discriminate based on accent, according to recent research. In extreme (though not uncommon cases), people have lost their jobs thanks to these prevailing attitudes, even when their accent had no bearing on the actual work.

With such a linguistic minefield to navigate, is it any wonder people consider making their accents over for an easier life?

Easier said than done

Before you call that speech and dialect coach, consider that even if you do successfully change your accent, it may not matter. Experiments have shown that listeners can still have problems cognitively processing information from a speaker when their accents don't seem to match up with their perceived background.

In one test, subjects were shown two different pictures, one of a Caucasian person and one of an Asian person. The same audio of a native speaker talking in standard American English was played as participants looked at each image.

Subjects had significantly more trouble understanding the speech when looking at the Asian "speaker". Some even went so far as to identify a non-existent foreign accent, showing how social biases bleed into our cognitive interpretations of language. So, it's clear there are other social factors that play into how job candidates and employees are judged, even if you end up sounding posher than the Queen.

But practically speaking, if you look the part and find it necessary and productive to lose a stigmatised accent it's possible to do successfully on an individual level. Many people have, but at what cost? Rather than advising people to change a core part of their identity, it's important that all of us become more aware of our hidden linguistic prejudices. On a wider community level, for many, changing an accent isn't a viable solution to dealing with discrimination in the workplace. In the long run, tweaking how we sound to improve our career prospects? It just doesn't work.

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