



Accent Bias

Do you know what an accent is? It's a sign of bravery (Amy Chua)

The name itself reveals the broad nature of this type of discrimination – accents can range from dialects to international, yet the differences between accents are prevalent when entering a new area. Accents are not a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010, reinforcing the loophole of the legislation, however if a person's accent is of a particular national, racial or ethnic origin a discrimination claim can be brought.

Therefore, while not explicitly covered in the law it is implicitly acknowledged, arguably foreshadowing the normalisation of discrimination in the public sector. There are two broad categories of accent bias – external accent bias, where the discriminated individual's ethnicity is outside the UK, or their race is linked to an accent outside of the UK, and internal accent bias, which mainly focuses on dialects within the UK. The focus here, will be on external accent bias.

External Accent bias

The overarching position of External Accent bias can be seen within a survey Ruth Kircher and Sue Fox conducted in 2019, where they surveyed 800 Londoners about Multicultural London English. On a scale from 1 to 5 - where 1 is very low and 5 is very high - the respondents awarded MLE an overall score of 2.2. This rhetoric emphasises the dire need for accent bias to be recognised legally due to the immense stereotypes ethnic minorities face because of it.

Accent bias is as significant as racism, and this is illustrated in Andrea Levy's "Small Island", where the Jamaican protagonist Hortense aspires to speak the anachronistic language of King George VI, and despite adopting this unnatural accent is still perceived as speaking in "tongues" when in England. Even though much of Levy's literature being arguably fictional, there are myriads of evidence that this bias travelled from society into the workspace; even when the individual lacked a MLE accent.

In 2021, Alex Scott was infamously ridiculed for her London working-class accent although there was very little difference between her accent and that of her colleagues - the key difference here was race. This highlights the role of media in projecting and promoting accent bias, interlinked with racism.

Moreover, in 2011, David Starkey commented that "the whites have become black...in a gangster culture" where they "operate in a language...which is wholly false...this Jamaican patois that has intruded into England"; the negative connotations surrounding patois, along with Starkey's ability to use his social influence to ignorantly project his prejudice, reinforces the need for accent bias to be acknowledged rather than overlooked.

This is necessary particularly as the School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences discovered that standard varieties such as ‘received pronunciation’ are generally evaluated as more prestigious than other regional, working class and minority ethnic accents. This results in the inhibition of social mobility in situations such as job interviews. Consequently, speakers who contradict this “norm” are likely to conceal their accents, which is known as code-switching.

What should we do?

It is essential to state that anyone can face accent bias. The fact that accent bias is not a protective characteristic despite it often being an indicator of ethnicity, reinforces the belief that it is an insignificant category of discrimination.

Nevertheless, it is still important to note the negative impact that it can have mentally, emotionally and physically, on people’s lives. As a result, employers should seek to educate themselves about this issue and spread awareness to encourage tolerance and an understanding that all aspects of ethnicity should be respected.

About the writer - LJ is a university student with an interest in history, and communications.