

# This Week's Citation Classic

Giles H. Evaluative reactions to accents. *Educ. Rev.* 22:211-27, 1970.

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British teenagers judged the aesthetic, communicative, and status values of 13 accented-speakers. A prestige continuum emerged with standard-English rated most positively, followed by certain foreign accents, regional/national, and certain immigrant and urban accents, respectively. Raters' socio-demographic attributes were important evaluational determinants. [The *SCI*® and the *SSCI*® indicate that this paper has been cited more than 45 times and is the second most-cited paper published in this journal.]

## Professor Higgins and Eliza Doolittle Revisited

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My interest in accents developed while hospital portering during student vacations. Certain physicians' and nurses' diagnoses and treatments appeared, to me anyway, to be influenced by their patients' social characteristics, not least of which was their accents. Having been a (Skinnerian-molded) psychology major with subsidiary linguistics, I wanted to pursue a PhD in these more social terrains but found difficulty attracting sponsorship; language within social psychology was more of a curiosity than a substantively respected area. Ultimately, I was offered a Bristol postgraduate ship under Peter Powesland—his having "had mad ideas like this" in his own youth. Longstanding academic speculation, folk psychology, and literature (e.g., *Lady Chatterly's Lover*) about the social world of British accents abounded, yet only a couple of empirical studies were published.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, my initial PhD study was designed to investigate this notion and the emergent findings were in accord with this hierarchical framework. Arguably, the resultant publication's influence may stem from it being really the first study (and still a rare one) locating a very wide array of accents, clearly and unforgettingly, along judgmental continua.

The method adopted was Wallace Lambert's "matched-guise technique."<sup>2</sup> This required listener-judges to evaluate supposedly different audio taped speakers reading the same neutral passage of prose. Speakers were actually the

same bi- or multidialectal person who could produce various authentic accents (as independently assessed) maintaining the same paralinguistic features and delivery style throughout. Rigorous control was the order of the day—a dynamic we now question theoretically—to the extent that *only accent* was considered manipulated. Finding people who could produce 13 different varieties convincingly, and who had the time to record them painstakingly, was near impossible. Eventually, and given theatrical pretensions, I concocted the guises myself. No one in the study verbalized the ruse in postexperimental discussions, and a follow-up with native-accented speakers revealed a +.93 rank-order correlation with the original hierarchy.

Prepublication, I presented this paper at a conference not anticipating the ensuing media deluge, including newspaper reports, radio, and TV interviews—let alone my sudden (and dubious) notoriety in local and family circles. While this attention was oftentimes beneficial and sometimes even surprising (e.g., being invited to write an authorially unattributed essay about the research for *The Lancet*), too much of it was less than desirous, especially that relating to the lowest-ranked accent, Birmingham. Many reporters stated that I had discovered "the worst accent in Britain" while another (in passing mentioning my "Welsh warble") claiming it as "rated revolting in the extreme"! Predictably, a Birmingham newspaper retorted that local dignitaries assessed the research as "snobbish rubbish," and for a while I had nightmares of "Brummies" seeking me out for retribution! Another feature of all this was the apparent surprise at the findings; Britons felt that this was a vestige of decades past. Yet years later when presenting subsequent research at a conference, an editorial chastised me for reflecting the obvious while simultaneously devoting center pages to TV stars refuting it.

We have since devised far more sophisticated studies still finding that accent is just as important today.<sup>3,4</sup> A diversity of insightful theoretical models and perspectives have also emerged in the late 1980s. Gratifyingly, this program of work contributed to British Psychological Society honors, the Spearman Medal (1978), and the President's Award (1989).

1. Giles H & Powesland P R. *Speech style and social evaluation*. London: Academic Press, 1975. (Cited 165 times.)
2. Giles H & Coupland N. Language attitudes: discursive, contextual and gerontological considerations. (Reynolds A G, ed.) *Bilingualism, multiculturalism, and second language learning*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1991.
3. Giles H, Hewstone M, Ryan E B & Johnson P. Research in language attitudes. (Ammon U, Dittmar N & Mattheier K J, eds.) *Sociolinguistics: an interdisciplinary handbook of the science of language. Volume 1*. Berlin, Germany: deGruyter, 1987. p. 585-97.
4. Bradac J J. Language attitudes and impression formation. (Giles H & Robinson W P, eds.) *Handbook of language and social psychology*. Chichester, England: Wiley, 1990. p. 387-412.

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