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’ sociodemographic 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 porterling 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 postgraduatehip under Peter Powseland—his having “had mad ideas like this” in his own youth. Longstanding academic speculation, folk psychology, and literature (e.g., Lady Chatterley’s Lover) about the social world of British accents abounded, yet only a couple of empirical studies were published.¹

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 unforgivingly, along judgmental continua.

The method adopted was Wallace Lambert’s “matched-guise technique.”² 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 Lancer), 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.³ 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).


Received November 29, 1990