

## 5.2 THE PROBLEM OF ACCENT DISCRIMINATION IN GREAT BRITAIN AND FRANCE

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***Abstract.** The article deals with the issue of accent discrimination – the focus on prejudice against regional accents. It has been noted that lack of regional lexicon is one of the main reasons as to why ‘accentism’ is still going strong. It has been articulated that the reasons for glottophobia are hegemony of the monolingualism in France and class divisions in Britain that can lead to a skewed view of the world. Examples of accent bias are given. It has been found that there is currently no legislation to protect someone from accent discrimination. It has been studied that ‘Received Pronunciation’ or the ‘Queen’s English’ in Britain and standardized French in France seem to sound ‘very intelligent’ and it is a wide held view. It is being identified that academic institutions still support the idea of a single language model and accent prejudice. It has been concluded that in multicultural and multilingual Britain and France the solution is reasonable accommodation. It is required that the speaker is to make themselves understood whatever accent they choose.*

### 1. Introduction

It is common knowledge that language is a natural and effective tool for integrating people into society. At the same time, unfortunately, it can turn into a weapon for the domination of some people over others. Since languages are present everywhere in the social dimension and since everything social is in one way or another linguistic, languages are effectively used both as tools of influence on the social, on the lives of members of society, and as filtering tools that can give preference to certain groups of the population, discriminating against others, rejecting certain people and groups of people to influence something.

‘It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman despise him,’ George Bernard Shaw wrote in the preface to *Pygmalion* in 1913. There is a hierarchy of accents in Britain which has changed little over the years. The accents of Britain’s highest classes are seen as neutral, ‘accentless’ and correct, while others are seen as divergent or inferior and are often stigmatized. As such, those who have “non-standard” accents are seen as legitimate and admissible targets for comment and judgement. They are also saddled with an apparent responsibility to change how they sound [1].

For example, in France, access to political, economic and cultural influence is determined by the use of the French language, other languages are excluded, while only a certain variant of the French language is recognized [2].

Therefore, the accent and lexical features of a person’s speech can become the reasons for discrimination. 30 million French people speak with a regional accent, and this linguistic feature, which could be considered trivial, is often the subject of ridicule

and prevents some people from accessing work, education and even housing. To define this type of discrimination, Philippe Blanchet, a French researcher and teacher of sociolinguistics, proposed the term 'glottophobia', formed like the words 'xenophobia', 'homophobia', 'Islamophobia', etc. [3].

Glottophobia can be defined as discrimination against a person because of the way they speak a language or a variety of language, so the term glottophobia is mainly used to refer to discrimination based on accent; in scientific literature in English, this phenomenon is called 'accentism' [4]. Dr Alexander Baratta from the University of Manchester spoke of 'accentism', where people are discriminated against because of how they speak, and likened it to racism. In a study, he asked people why they changed their accents and how it made them feel. A third of those questioned said they were 'ashamed' about flattening out their accents. But what was the alternative? We all want to get ahead; for the most part, the best way to do that is to 'fit in'. Still, there is a price, the professor says. Facing the world with a voice that is not your own can undermine your sense of being [5].

Glottophobia is contempt, hatred, aggression, rejection of people in connection with their use of language forms that are considered inferior, inferior or incorrect [6]. Glottophobia manifests itself in behavior that can range from simple mockery, unpleasant and humiliating remarks to actual discrimination in employment or other vital situations. One of its consequences is a feeling of insecurity in those who have become its victim: a destabilizing sense of not meeting the expectations of owning the codes, of not being able to say how it should be. In glottophobia, it is not languages that are discriminated against, but people: by mocking the manner of speech, they humiliate persons who speak differently and the social identity with which they are associated.

## **2. Research Outcomes**

Research by Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) looked at how a person's accent could affect their opportunities and life outcomes, and found that there is an "enduring hierarchy of accents" in the UK. The research found that people over the age of 40 were more likely to judge a job candidate as less employable if they spoke with a regional working class accent. It was a different picture when it came to lawyers and legal professionals however, as they were seen to have a more nuanced approach, and were able to judge candidates based on what they said, rather than how they said it [7].

As part of a Tonight programme investigating whether social stigma and snobbery still exist towards regional accents, an exclusive poll reveals that more than a quarter of Britons feel they have been discriminated against because of the way they speak. The most upsetting moment for me making this film was when some Middlesbrough children confessed to me that they were ashamed of their accents.

Shockingly, they told me they believed their accents would affect their life chances – for the worse. 'We sound right scruffy like,' said young one boy in his football kit. 'Not like you: posh. We won't be able to get proper jobs,' he told me [8].

Glottophobia is not as widespread as discrimination based on skin color, gender, sexual preference, religion, social origin, place of residence, but it is well documented, especially in those areas where language plays an important role [4]. The results of an Ifop study published in 2020 indicate that 16% of French people (more than 10 million people) have been discriminated against because of their accent when

hiring. Glottophobia when hiring applies to all socio-professional categories and manifests itself, in particular, in professions where public speaking is a necessity (announcer, TV presenter, actor, journalist, hostess, call center operators, sales representatives). UCL reports; ‘Research shows that 28% of the UK population feel that they have been discriminated against due to their regional accent, while 80% of employers admit to this discrimination’ [9].

So, for example, no one has ever presented a newscast with an accent different from the standard, neutral accent that is considered the norm (this is the pronunciation of representatives of the top management of the capital region and large cities of the northern half of France) [10]. The Middlesbrough boys said they thought RP sounded ‘very intelligent’ and our research once again suggests that is a widely held view.

Our TV screens are full of RP speakers: in the media, politics and the establishment which reinforce the sense that it is still the ‘proper way to speak’ [8]. In journalism departments and in TV and radio newsrooms, remarks about the accent – social or regional – are a well-known phenomenon. This prompts journalists to change the way they speak in order to more fully meet the norms expected in the profession. Several seminars at journalism festivals have been devoted to this topic in recent years, and Victoria Tuayon’s documentary explored the formatting of radio announcers’ voices, which, in particular, implies an undisguised struggle with regional accents [11].

Last summer, I listened to Journalist Jenni Murray speak at a literary festival, where she explained that at the beginning of her career, she had to lose her Northern Barnsley accent in order to be taken seriously and get given a job. We’ve all heard the stories that back in the day this was *de rigueur*, so you couldn’t get a job in the UK media if you had a regional accent. Times have however progressed slightly and we do see more diversity on the TV but there is still a lack of regional representation and strong accents. Just think about it, could you imagine somebody with a strong Northern accent being allowed to present the nationwide news? Breakfast TV? Or a political debate show? Or any highbrow show?! [9].

In addition to journalism, the most common evidence of glottophobia concerns educational professions, the field of communication, sales, as well as artistic professions. On the stage and film, actors claim that their regional accent condemns them to playing “expressive” minor roles and that any attempt to play ‘serious’ roles while maintaining an accent leads to ridicule or disqualification.

Just when you thought that the media couldn’t fuel glottophobia any more than they already are doing, step forward a recent article by The Times entitled, ‘BBC’s lavish *Les Misérables* gives poverty a Northern accent.’ To cast a little insight, the poor BBC producers were left baffled as to how they could portray the heroic lower-class protagonist Jean Valjean’s peasant roots in a recent adaptation of *Les Misérables*. So, The Times explains that its Director Tom Shankland said: ‘*In Britain there are class divisions that we perceive on the basis of accents, so the simplest rule that we found was really to nod towards those rules that we have in our own divided society.*’ So in short, he believes that the working-class have a Northern accent [9].

In politics, the accent can also be a drag on national-level ambitions, given that the republic’s elite speak standardized French (normative Paris variant) in public institutions [4]. We all know that Lincolnshire lass Margaret Thatcher rubbed out her accent. The Telegraph once presented actual evidence that Cherie Blair had undergone

vocal coaching [12]. Similarly, in the same boat is Angela Rayner MP who was brought up on a council estate in Stockport, as she still receives abuse about her accent. On one occasion when she was receiving grief about it, Channel 4's Cathy Newman tweeted: *'Don't be fooled by her accent. Whenever I've chatted to her she's always been sharp as a pin and funny too'* [9].

So, the following trend is very clearly observed: the more prestigious the job or related to oral communication, the more respect for language norms is expected from the applicants [13]. We discovered elocution lessons are on the rise, with many seeking lessons doing so to 'soften their regional twang' which they hoped would increase their job prospects [8].

Simultaneously with the existence of an accent that ensures the sympathy of employers and social respectability (standard, neutral, 'Parisian' accent), there is also a 'gradation' in the devaluation of other accents. People with a southern accent, even if it is generally considered 'cute', are perceived as 'not very serious' people. Certain images are associated with this accent (summer, vacation, sun, pleasant moments of rest). Playing pétanque with a guy from the south is fun, but trusting him with your company's IT security is a frivolous decision...

Writing for the Radio Times, BBC Presenter Stephanie McGovern explains that she still receives abuse about her Northern accent. Originally from Middlesbrough, the Business Specialist writes; 'I've had tweets questioning whether I really did go to university because surely I would have lost my accent if I did; a letter suggesting, very politely, that I get correction therapy; and an email saying I should get back to my council estate and leave the serious work to the clever folk.' All the more disturbingly, she also says that a Senior Manager at the BBC said 'I didn't realize people like you were clever' [9].

Northern accents, in addition to frivolity, have other flaws in the eyes of people: they are ugly, rude, grotesque and associated with the image of an uneducated factory worker. The accents of the inhabitants of Franche-Comté, the miners of Picardy and the Breton peasants do not have any positive connotations and are at the lowest rungs of the hierarchy of regional accents [10, 13].

I have altered how I speak to suit situations in the past, but I would never go full Eliza Doolittle and get rid of my Liverpool accent. If a Liverpoolian child had aspirations to be a doctor, would the fact that he or she pronounced doctor as if spelt with four cs and not one be a hindrance? Before even buying the Fisher Price stethoscope, should parents take a surgical scalpel to slice out extraneous consonants and sharpen sloppy vowels [12]? Regional accents have no place at all on national television and in the national public space [14]. We know that the media is a soft power and influences change within society, and for that reason I believe that this discrimination is largely fuelled and normalized by the lack of regional accents in the media [9].

Glottophobia in France is a consequence of the hegemony of the ideology of monolingualism. Linguistic unification is the central pillar of French state-national construction. The denial of any linguistic plurality is one of the key ideological foundations of the French state, which postulates that a common language must be mastered in order to create a unified society [6].

The dominance of standardized French was formed as a result of the French Revolution and centralization. Like the country, the linguistic model was centralized with the idea that France should have only one language. This language is French, with

only one way of writing and, gradually, only one manner of pronunciation peculiar to representatives of the central government. As Alain Ray aptly observed, the republic claimed to give the right to vote to the people, linguistically it gave it to the bourgeoisie. Today's accent discrimination is the endpoint of linguistic centralization: not only must everyone speak French, but everyone must speak French equally.

Apart from geographical discrimination, social discrimination must also be kept in mind. So the contempt is twofold: because a person was born in the wrong region, and because he was born in a 'bad' social environment. Such trends create a real threat to democratic equality: discriminating against people because of their pronunciation fundamentally contradicts republican equality; it also refers to favoring the social class that is in power [10].

Calls to combat glottophobia are becoming more frequent. It is about creating a linguistic world in which languages would be adapted to people, and not people to languages, and such a world would be more humane, fairer, more hospitable [6]. In 2021, MP Christophe Euzet introduced a bill to the National Assembly to combat accent discrimination. The lawmaker claims that many French people do not feel represented because regional accents are considered undesirable in the public sphere and in the media. He wants the Criminal and Labor Codes to state that it is illegal to discriminate against someone because of an accent, just as it is illegal to discriminate against someone because of sexual orientation or the color of their skin [14].

While it is illegal under UK law to discriminate against a person based on protected characteristics such as gender, race, religion or disability, accent is not recognized in this list. Addressing these prejudices may be an uphill battle. We start to become aware of accent distinctions from a very early age, with children as young as five months demonstrating a preference for a familiar accent over an unfamiliar one. Children from three years old have shown the ability to group speakers according to regional accent distinctions.

This process of categorization lays the building blocks for the social judgements. Such judgements have nothing to do with linguistic characteristics – no English dialect is inherently better, more beautiful or more correct – but represent a form of classism. As such, accentism often reflects camouflaged prejudices. When we judge someone's characteristics based on their accent, we are not judging them on their own merit but making assumptions about their social class, education and ethnicity because of how they speak. Needless to say, these assumptions are often false [1].

### **3. Conclusions**

Unfortunately, the school, which could be one of the main actors in the fight against the stigmatization of accents and the discrimination of people because of their accent, continues to defend a single language model and disqualify other ways of speaking French [15, 13].

Recent headlines suggest that accent prejudice (or 'accentism') is no relic of the past but continues to blight the university experience of many students. Even at northern universities, students from the north of England face commentary and ridicule for their accents [1].

So we need to be proud of our regional identities, local culture and quirks, and fight for representation to help stop Glottophobia.

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