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Regional accents are OK for teaching but not *too* regional: A discussion of accent preference in British teaching

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Accent can still be a contentious topic in Britain, with accent-based preference, if not prejudice, in turn reflecting class-based prejudice. Thus, accent in Britain often functions as a linguistic proxy for class and as such, negativity ascribed to accents judged to be working class still exists. This paper reflects the views of two British teachers from a larger sample within the primary and secondary sectors of teaching, seeking to better understand the role that accent plays in the British teaching profession. In doing so, it addresses the central question: what are the implications for teachers with broad accents in a profession that champions equality, yet set against the societal reality of accent-based prejudice? From these two teachers' accounts, the results show that accents perceived as broad and/or too 'regional' are those which are targeted for modification by senior staff. However, the two teachers have different attitudes, with one agreeing to the modification, and the other in complete disagreement. From these two accounts, we can glean an insight, however small, into the role that accent plays in one's professional identity as a teacher, in a country where accent continues to be of particular relevance.

Keywords: accent, teaching, accentism, class, professionalism



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1 Introduction

Accent-based prejudice is hardly a unique phenomenon. In some cases, it can be reflected in banter, perhaps not intended to offend. However, it can lead to negative judgements made of individuals, with accompanying stereotypes linked to their supposed intelligence, trustworthiness and friendliness (Baratta, 2021; Hughes et al., 2012; Mugglestone, 2003).

This has relevance for the teaching profession, in which a teacher's voice, and by implication accent, is of importance. If we consider the British context of teaching in particular, at both the primary and secondary levels, then an issue is the class-consciousness which is still present in British society (Rickett, 2023). Putting the two points together, what are the implications for British teachers who have accents judged to be working-class, accents often referred to as broad varieties (Baratta, 2021)? What might the implications be for these teachers, whose accents are stigmatised in society? That is, if these negative judgements are just as relevant in the classroom as they are on the city streets, then are teachers expected to modify their accents in some way? If so, the modification might be self-selected by the teachers, and responded to with an overall objective attitude – in principle, no different than choosing formal attire for teaching as opposed to wearing, for example, pyjamas. However, we need to consider the implications for teachers who do not agree with modifying their 'home accents', as it were, despite directives from senior staff and/or mentors.¹ When we consider the need for 'professionalism' in teaching, what might this mean on a linguistic level? Such a question is largely unaddressed in the context of British teaching, with the focus within this paper addressing this gap, and for the following reasons.

First, given the sheer diversity of accents in Britain, a study within British teaching would be useful. This is because such linguistic diversity might be represented within a profession in which one's accent – notably for phonics teaching – is relevant. Granted, while there are only two teachers whose accounts are presented within this paper, their feedback derives from larger studies which involved, or focused on, teachers' accents in British teaching (Baratta, 2016, 2018). These are, to my best knowledge, the only studies which have focused solely and exclusively on the British teaching profession, though Sharma et al. (2020) have further discussed the role of accent in professional contexts overall in Britain, discovering that accent-based prejudice is a live issue. Second, as mentioned, what might the implications be for stigmatised accents within the teaching profession? Do negative societal connotations apply to teachers' accents? And yet should this be the case, for a profession in which equality is surely encouraged and for teachers who are otherwise fully qualified to teach? Finally, in instances of accent modification, what are the specific phonological targets teachers are expected to aspire to, as part of what might be considered a professional – if not standard – accent?

2 Previous research on accentism

A dislike of certain accents can lead to negative judgements made of the speakers, based on accents which are perceived to lack societal prestige and/or attractiveness (see Coupland & Bishop, 2007). Accentism can lead to action, such as people having their job threatened, or not being hired, based on their accent (Lippi-Green, 1997; Udavant, 2020), and there are implications for credibility within the courtroom based on the accents of witnesses (Cantone et al., 2019).

In the British context, accentism has an arguably long history, based in large part on class-based assumptions. The accent referred to as Received Pronunciation (RP) is one that has

¹ In British teacher training, a mentor is responsible for guiding the trainee teacher throughout their course, offering feedback and advice, for example.

existed as a prestige accent (Snell & Andrews, 2016; Trudgill, 2002) and exists in Britain, and certainly England, as a class-based accent. Its associations with the upper-middle, and upper-class, reflects its prestige, given positive associations and connotations connected with the upper-class. RP is not a linguistic monolith, however, and comes in several varieties, with Wells (1982, p. 280) discussing U-RP, adoptive RP and mainstream RP, with U-RP having connotations of ‘an elderly Oxbridge don’ or ‘a jolly-hockey-sticks schoolmistress at an expensive private girls’ school’. More recently, Cruttenden (2014) references RP as having been influenced by more regional accents such as Cockney, which, to some extent, might reflect Estuary English (Przedlacka, 2001). While current associations of RP, certainly the more conservative varieties (e.g., U-RP), might reflect snobbery (Hughes et al., 2012), and even be regarded as outdated (Lindsey, 2019), RP nonetheless maintains, in all its varieties, connotations of upper-class status and with this, specific images that can reflect education and sophistication (Addison & Mountford, 2015), for example. Given that RP exists as a class-based accent, this in turn implies a lack of *regional*-based phonology. Herein is arguably a key to the prestige of RP – it can be spoken from Newcastle to London, and everywhere in between. By removing regional features, it frees speakers from being tied to a given city region, which subsequently means that the stereotypes associated with inner cities in Britain are also removed (Baratta, 2021).

This leads to the need to clarify what is meant by terms such as broad in relation to accents. Such a term reflects societal labels in Britain, often used to describe people in terms of indeed having broad/strong accents (as well as mild accents) (Baratta, 2018). The opposite end of the accent spectrum involves individuals being viewed as *not* having an accent, which simply means that regional sounds – those that could immediately tie the speaker to a given region, whether on a city- or local-level – are absent (Baranowski & Turton, 2015; Cardoso et al., 2019; Ramsaran, 2015; Strycharczuk et al., 2020). The implications for such neutral accents in Britain are that they – and the speakers – are perceived as middle-class (Cardoso et al., 2019; Strycharczuk et al., 2020). From here, associations connected with positive connotations, such as social mobility (Donnelly et al., 2019; Friedman, 2016), can be derived. In this manner, we are essentially dealing with a linguistic means to signal social mobility in the workplace by means of avoiding accents which might, in society’s view, suggest the opposite. There is indeed evidence that noticeably regional accents can have negative implications for the workplace (see Sharma et al., 2020), including contexts such as finance (Moore et al., 2016), library work (Lippi-Green, 1997), and banking in Britain (The Sutton Trust, 2017).

In terms of the implications for accent within the British teaching profession, information is limited. Garner (2013) reports on an OFSTED² inspection in which a teacher from Cumbria (in Northern England), but teaching in the South of England, was told at an inspection to sound ‘less Northern’. Addison and Mountford (2015) investigate the speech of both teachers and students in higher education settings in England, notably in terms of class perceptions and the ways in which broad regional accents are perceived to be disfavoured in higher education, lacking social capital, and the overall perception of a need to ‘fit in’, with regional accents sometimes perceived as not being an appropriate fit. In terms of the particular phonemes which serve as linguistic examples of broad accents, examples are now provided. To illustrate, words such as *back*, *face*, and *baby*, if respectively realised with broad Liverpool, Yorkshire and Newcastle accents, would sound thus [bax], [fe:s], and [bræbi]. Such identifiable features are referred to as phonological giveaways (Baratta, 2021), or as salient features (Labov, 1972). But regardless of who is doing the listening, if individuals seek to present an image of being upwardly mobile, such broad accents might be perceived incompatible for certain professions.

² OFSTED stands for Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills, an organisation in Britain dedicated to maintaining (and improving where necessary) standards for schools and teaching.

Likewise, it is accents that are perceived, to some extent, as being regionless (and simultaneously not reflecting a working-class background), that are arguably perceived as standard (Bibby et al., 2017).

3 Research question

This research is guided by the question: what are the implications for two British trainee teachers of having a broad regional accent?

4 Research methodology

I conducted three studies from 2014 – 2015. My first study (Baratta, 2016) obtained the views of 92 British participants from a range of locations and professions, using a questionnaire to explore their accents in terms of: a) how accent defined them and contributed to their personal identity; b) instances in which they had chosen to modify their accent, or been told to, and the rationale for such modification; and c) how accent modification impacted on their personal identity, if at all. Six of the responses came from teachers and the nature of their responses led to the following two studies, which focused solely on teachers in Britain. Study two interviewed 11 trainee teachers from two Northern English universities, with study three again using a questionnaire to obtain the views of 15 trainee teachers from two Southern English universities. For both studies two and three (Baratta, 2018), the questions remained the same, but with a questionnaire being used for study three. This was a necessary compromise for data collection, which otherwise would have involved multiple instances of travel and expense.

A notable departure from study one in terms of focus is that studies two and three did not focus on identity but instead focused solely on instances in which teachers had been told to modify their accents as part of their teaching role. From here, rather than ask participants to explain how modification impacted on personal identity, I instead focused on something more concrete – the teachers' immediate feelings on the matter. These three studies provided me with a great number of accents, including from the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland, though the majority of accents were English.

Out of a total of 32 teachers, only two teachers' accounts have been provided in this paper; the first teacher is from study two, self-identified as having a Huddersfield accent; the second teacher is from study three, self-identified as having a South London accent (see Table 1 below, which provides an overview of each study, in terms of identifying key aspects such as the teachers' accents, and whether they were told to modify or not). The two teachers will be identified in the paper as T1 and T2, respectively. This decision to focus on just two teachers is first and foremost based on purely practical concerns, as the kind of qualitative depth this paper seeks to provide within the word limits cannot be accomplished for larger numbers of teachers' accounts. Second, the two accounts have been selected as they illustrate the mentors' rationale for accent modification for all the teachers in studies two and three (Baratta, 2018) – the need to be understood. Again, this does not suggest, nor can it imply, that this is a nationwide issue. Nor can the accounts of just two teachers hope to speak for other teachers who have been provided with accent-based guidance or directives. But what can hopefully be gleaned from these two accounts are the ways in which accent is relevant in the context of teaching, more so when teachers are in training to become fully-fledged teachers and enter the profession; as such, what is deemed to be a 'professional' accent?

Finally, it is acknowledged that the presentation of these two accounts might seem one-sided. That is, we have two teachers who were told by mentors to modify their accents during training, yet there are thirteen teachers from the three studies (Baratta, 2016, 2018) who were *not* given accent-based guidance or directives. However, there are two points to mention in this

Table 1

Presentation of Teachers' Backgrounds

Study #	Self-identified accent	Teaching level	Asked to modify language use?
Study 1	Rosendale	Primary	Yes
	Manchester	Primary	No
	Glaswegian	University	No
	Stockport	University	No
	Barnsley	University	No
	Rochdale	EFL, secondary	Yes
Study 2	Huddersfield	Primary	Yes
	Stoke-on-Trent	Primary	Yes
	Manchester	Primary	Yes
	Broad Manchester	Primary	Yes
	Derbyshire - Yorkshire mix	Primary	Yes
	Warrington, so a Manchester-Liverpool mix	Primary	No
	Nottingham	Primary	Yes
	Rochdale	Primary	Yes
	'Not quite posh enough for RP' (the teacher is from Portsmouth)	Secondary	No
	Liverpool	Secondary	Yes
	Derry, Northern Ireland	Secondary	Yes
Study 3	Midlands	Primary	Yes
	Medway	Primary	Yes
	South London, quite strong	Secondary	Yes
	Irish, Dublin	Secondary	No
	Estuary English	Secondary	No
	RP/Lancastrian	Primary	No
	'Standard English'	Secondary	No
	A mixture of Cockney and Irish (Republic of Ireland)	Secondary	Yes
	Mostly RP with some Estuary English	Primary	Yes
	A happy medium between Estuary English and RP	Primary	No
	Mild Belfast	Secondary	No
	Southern English	Primary	No
	Well-spoken Northern Irish	Primary	Yes
	Irish, but not strong	Primary	Yes
Newcastle	Secondary	Yes	

regard. First, it is arguably the case that accent-based guidance provides us with a clearer picture in terms of what the particular issues might be in the minds of mentors – and the teachers themselves. The act of providing guidelines for teachers' accents suggests that the accents are,

to some extent, judged to be problematic. Once this is explained in phonological terms, then we have a more precise discussion as to what the salient features in question might be for certain accents and more broadly, for teaching; this is something currently lacking in the specific context of the British teaching profession. Second, the two accounts provided here nonetheless offer variety in that we have two teachers provided with accent directives, who reacted to the guidance in very different ways, based in large part on how these two individuals understood what is meant by the development and projection of a ‘professional’ teacher identity.

5 Data analysis and results

The first account is from T1, an individual from Huddersfield in the Northern English county of Yorkshire, who teaches at the primary level. The second account comes from T2, a secondary Art teacher from Croydon, South London, who described her accent as strong South London. Both teachers also identified as being working class, with their accents arguably a reflection of such.

T1 was told to modify his accent by his mentor in specific phonological terms that indeed involved removal of the more salient features – the phonological giveaways tied to his region of origin. T1 illustrated this with the expression *go home*, in which, as he put it, the ‘teacher me’ would realise this expression as [gou ho:m]. This still allows for an overall Yorkshire accent to be used for teaching, but a variety that is “shined up a bit” (Baratta, 2018, p. 129), as T1 explained. T1 then referenced his self-described ‘home me’, which would realise the expression thus [gə hə:m]; the use of the schwa vowel in place of the long [o] sound is clearly identifiable to Yorkshire (Finnegan, 2015). T1 also referenced removing glottal stops from his speech, a feature often thought of in connection with Cockney speech, but now found throughout England (Baranowski & Turton, 2015). However, T1 was in complete agreement with the need to modify his accent and regarded the directive in largely neutral terms. As he explained, there is a constant need to make students “enunciate and speak properly” (Baratta, 2018, p. 127). While T1 also explained that there is a “richness to be had” (p. 128) regarding the variety of accents in Britain, his view regarding accent within teaching is that teachers need to be understood by their students and in turn, students need to be understood in society. Thus, T1 explained the need to speak with a less regional accent as a means to be better understood by his students but also, to act as a linguistic role model of sorts, so that the students would in turn emulate his speech. T1 even felt that his students respected him based on his teacher accent but also based on his own instruction to students to adjust their accents, such as avoiding glottal stops. Given that T1 was teaching in his home region during his training placement, it seems unlikely that a broad accent would be difficult to understand. But if we consider the wider societal considerations, then a broad Yorkshire accent might, outside this region, be less understood. Though speculative, it may well be that T1 is exhorting his students – by self-demonstration – to avoid broad accents so as to avoid negative stereotyping for their future. This reflects the views of a primary school principal in England as reported in several British news outlets, who instructed his students to avoid 10 expressions which were effectively banned from the classroom, some of which were accent-based (e.g., *somefink*), as a means to create a more professional persona for their future careers (Fricker, 2013). That T1 used the word ‘proper’ in relation to his, and students’ speech, is telling. Notions of ‘proper’ speech can be a controversial issue, but for T1, and the school principal referenced, this idea is tied to avoidance of specific regional sounds to create more positive perceptions in the future workplace.

T2 explained that she was “very proud” (Baratta, 2018, p. 156) to be from Croydon, and as such, she was proud of her accent as a phonological symbol of her regional – and class-based

– origins, acknowledging that Croydon is referred to as “the ghetto” (p. 156). As with T1, she took pride in her origins associated with a specific part of a city; thus, we can see the intersection of class and region (Donnelly et al., 2022). For T2, her accent served to benefit her teaching, as she explained that she can “easily relate to students...because I sound more like them” (p. 156). Thus, an accent shared by teachers and students, especially if it is a stigmatised accent, can serve to build a strong rapport, as T2 believes. T2’s mentor was somewhat of an outlier, in that in addition to referencing the need to be understood, he had also told T2 that she needed to use an accent deemed ‘professional’ for teaching. As a phonological example of an ‘unprofessional’ accent by implication, T2’s mentor instructed her to write the word *water* with a capital < t >, as in *waTer*, in order to remind her to avoid the glottal stop. Here, then, is a clear phonological giveaway, one which serves to signal pride in T2’s regional and class origins, but signals unprofessionalism, at least in speech, according to her mentor. T2 further explained that her mentor “was very patronizing and tried everything to change my accent” (p. 155), causing T2 to feel that she “was never good enough” (p. 155). For T2, however, her accent *is* professional, because she believed it helped her students to approach her and perceive her more positively.

6 Discussion of results and key findings

Findings based on the discussion of just two individuals do not constitute a firm base on which to generalise to the wider population of British teachers, nor do the full results from 32 British teachers (Baratta, 2016, 2018). However, the purpose of these studies was never to make generalisations in the first instance but rather, to simply investigate the role that accent plays in British teaching, whether positive, negative or neutral, and from here, determine what insights, if any, can be gleaned from the sample. On that basis, the results suggest that for these two teachers, their regional accents per se are not necessarily proscribed for teaching; it is the broad nature of their accents that appears to be the issue. This reference to broad accents (and by implication, neutral or mild accents) is arguably reflective of terms used by people within society, as well as being referenced in studies focused on accent (Baratta, 2018; Strycharczuk et al., 2020). The phonological implications are a removal of the more readily distinctive sounds, those that identify an individual immediately to a region, be it a city region or indeed a locality within a city, and with this, suggested working-class origins. The *societal* implications of such modification are that individuals are arguably perceived better, precisely because their modified accents give less clues to regional – or class-based – origin.

Though speculative, it might be the case that within the teaching profession, and other professions connected to social mobility, individuals might choose to lessen their broad accents (Baratta, 2018; Donnelly et al., 2019, 2022; Sharma et al., 2020). This in turn might signal to interlocutors – in this case mentors – that such individuals seek to present a more ‘fitting’ image for the context. Phonologically-speaking, this means modifying accents which suggest working-class status, precisely by removing the more salient features, or, phonological giveaways. The need to ‘fit in’ and develop linguistic capital as a means to do so was clearly illustrated in the study of Addison and Mountford (2015), which was focused on higher education. Within my paper, while there was no specific discussion from mentors or teachers regarding ‘fitting in’ or developing more linguistic capital, it is strongly suggested that these notions are implied, given the directives for ‘professional’ language, a point over which T1 and T2 disagree.

Overall, however, there is little linguistic clarity for teachers in Britain on any official level, beyond the need to use standard English (which can be spoken using any accent). The linguistic guidance that was provided to trainee teachers in particular within the entirety of my studies appears to be based, officially, on mentors’ desire to ensure the teachers they train are

understood by their students (Baratta, 2016, 2018). Again, however, by implication students are being prepared for the world beyond school, and thus accent intelligibility, as demonstrated by their teachers, might be regarded as code for speaking with a less stigmatised accent. As Addison and Mountford (2015) make clear, “being able to ‘talk the talk’ can have a significant return on investment in this game of worth because of how talking and accent is coded with symbolic value” (p. 10). While their study provided more depth and specificity in terms of class perceptions within higher education, my study has sought, in part, to provide phonological clarity regarding accents perceived as working-class, those perceived to be notably regional.

7 Conclusion

Based on the results from a sample of merely two teachers, there is no room to generalise. What can be stated, however, is that we have an insight into the experiences of these two teachers in particular, even though they are teaching different subjects, at different levels and using different accents. The commonality is that they both have accents self-described as ‘strong’ and ‘working-class’. Thus, rather than generalise, I instead seek to merely ask whether or not the experiences of these two teachers might be similar for others with broad accents? While this appears to be the case when taking into consideration the results of my overall studies on this matter (Baratta, 2016, 2018), only a large-scale study across the UK and involving a variety of taught subjects could give us a more comprehensive picture as to the reality when broadly-accented teachers enter the teaching profession. For the one mentor who explained to T2 the need for ‘professional’ speech, perhaps it could be argued that while this is somewhat of a blunt directive, it could be seen as nonetheless more honest – a reflection of what society, and even students’ parents, might indeed believe. If so, this could mean that accents deemed compatible for British teachers are those which avoid the broader varieties and instead seek to sound more neutral, as has been described. The result would be that the negative connotations associated with such accents, often based on class assumptions are diminished, if not removed, and teachers are perceived to be more professional as a result.

However, in the absence of any specific or official accent-based guidance in Britain, teachers’ accents may continue to be discussed between themselves and mentors during training. A joint discussion between teachers and mentors could be a useful starting point to initiate a conversation on this topic, leading to updated standards, to include a full description of what exactly the expected accent standards are. On the other hand, this might also appear prescriptive, which is arguably what some teachers wish to avoid regarding their accents. In either case, whether official or unofficial, this small-scale study at least implies that there are expectations for accent within British teaching beyond these two individuals. For some teachers, being told to modify their accent is regarded as an inconvenience at least, prejudicial at worst (Baratta, 2018). A vast array of accents is heard outside the school gates, so to include those accents within the classroom – including broad varieties – could help students with similar accents feel empowered, because ‘sir/miss sounds like *me*’.

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About the author

Alex Baratta is a sociolinguist, researching language and identity; linguistic prejudice; and linguistic rights within educational contexts. His research has included topics such as the ways in which certain accents are proscribed in British teacher training; the societal means of codifying expanding circle varieties of English, such as Korean English; and even the role that accent plays in the cinematic character of James Bond. Alex has presented his work globally at prestigious conferences in locations such as South Africa, Singapore and Australia, published in high-ranking journals including *World Englishes* and *Linguistics and Education*; and his upcoming book with Routledge (2024) is focused on the use of China English in Chinese students' academic writing.

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