

C1-C2 Worksheet: How Accents Shape The Way People Are Judged

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Article

A recent Guardian feature on linguist Valerie Fridland's work explores a stubborn form of social prejudice: the tendency to size up people almost instantly from the way they sound. Accents are often treated as harmless markers of place, yet listeners routinely pick up on them as clues about class, education, intelligence and trustworthiness. These assumptions do not simply map onto pronunciation; they come across as judgements about character. Fridland argues that accent bias is embedded early, sometimes before children fully understand the social categories they are using.

The problem is not that people notice difference. It is that institutions can fall back on prestige accents as if they were neutral standards of credibility. In job interviews, classrooms, courtrooms and political debate, certain voices may be singled out as more polished, competent or believable, while others are heard as informal, suspect or less educated. That can hold back speakers whose language is perfectly effective but socially marked. It also means accent reduction is not just a personal choice; it may reflect pressure to sound acceptable to people with more power.

Awareness will not iron out every inequality, but it can help listeners push back against their own subconscious reactions. Accent is not a flaw to be corrected; it is a record of geography, community, migration and identity. A more inclusive culture would ask whether speakers are being understood, not whether they sound prestigious enough. The deeper challenge is to become more attuned to how quickly ordinary listening can carry over into unfair judgement.

True/False

Decide if each statement is True (T) or False (F).

1. The article suggests that people often make quick social judgements based on accent.
2. Fridland is presented as arguing that accent bias begins only in adulthood.
3. The article says accents may be used as clues about class, education and intelligence.
4. The writer claims that prestige accents are always neutral measures of credibility.
5. The second paragraph suggests that accent bias can affect institutions such as interviews, schools and courts.
6. The article says accent reduction is always only a private preference with no social pressure involved.
7. The final paragraph presents accent as connected to identity and community.
8. The article argues that listeners should focus only on whether a speaker sounds prestigious.

Phrase Match

Match the phrases (1-10) to the correct definitions (A-J).

Phrases (1-10)	Definitions (A-J)
1. size up	A. to rely on something familiar
2. pick up on	B. to limit someone's progress
3. map onto	C. to continue into another situation
4. come across as	D. to quickly judge or assess
5. fall back on	E. to seem or appear
6. singled out	F. to resist or challenge
7. hold back	G. to remove problems or differences
8. iron out	H. to notice something subtle
9. push back against	I. to be chosen or treated separately
10. carry over into	J. to correspond to or connect with

Synonym Match

Match the words (1-10) to the correct synonyms (A-J).

Words (1-10)	Synonyms (A-J)
1. prejudice	A. intellect
2. credibility	B. rooted
3. embedded	C. bias
4. prestige	D. unconscious
5. subconscious	E. welcoming
6. assumptions	F. status
7. intelligence	G. defect
8. inclusive	H. sensitive
9. attuned	I. believability
10. flaw	J. beliefs

Use the new language

Please choose 5 words or phrases and make your own sentence using the new word or phrase.

Discussion Questions

Student A

1. Have you ever felt judged because of the way you speak?
2. Which accents do people usually consider attractive, intelligent or friendly in your country?
3. Do you think accent matters in job interviews?
4. Is it useful or unfair to change your accent to fit in professionally?
5. Can you usually tell where someone is from by listening to them?
6. Do you enjoy hearing different accents in English?
7. Has learning English changed the way you think about your own accent?
8. What makes someone easy or difficult to understand when they speak?

Student B

1. To what extent is accent bias a form of social class prejudice?
2. Should schools and employers actively push back against accent discrimination?
3. Does asking someone to sound more professional sometimes mean asking them to sound less like themselves?
4. How far should pronunciation teaching focus on intelligibility rather than accent reduction?
5. Can a society be genuinely inclusive if some voices are still treated as less credible?
6. Why do prestige accents continue to carry authority even when they are not linguistically superior?
7. Could AI voice tools make accent bias better or worse in the future?
8. What responsibilities do listeners have when they react negatively to an unfamiliar accent?

Answer Key

True/False: 1=T, 2=F, 3=T, 4=F, 5=T, 6=F, 7=T, 8=F

Phrase Match: 1=D, 2=H, 3=J, 4=E, 5=A, 6=I, 7=B, 8=G, 9=F, 10=C

Synonym Match: 1=C, 2=I, 3=B, 4=F, 5=D, 6=J, 7=A, 8=E, 9=H, 10=G

Example sentences with the phrases

1. Interviewers may size up candidates before they have said very much.
2. Good teachers pick up on pronunciation problems without embarrassing students.
3. Regional accents do not always map onto simple ideas about class.
4. A confident speaker can come across as more competent in a meeting.
5. Under pressure, people often fall back on familiar assumptions.
6. Some speakers are singled out because they sound different.
7. Accent bias can hold back talented people in professional settings.
8. Training may help organisations iron out unfair hiring practices.
9. Speakers should be able to push back against unfair judgements.
10. Attitudes learned in childhood can carry over into adult life.