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Key skills communication Level 3 - Regional Accents

Tuesday 15 March 2005

Source Booklet

- This booklet contains source material for the level 3 communication test *Regional Accents*.
 - The test questions will be based on this material
 - You must hand in this source booklet at the end of the test, along with your test paper and answer booklet
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The level 3 communication test will assess your ability to:

- select and read material that contains the required information
 - identify accurately, and compare, the lines of reasoning and main points from the text and images
 - synthesise the key information in a form that is relevant to the purpose
 - select and use a form and style of writing that is appropriate to the purpose and subject matter
 - organise relevant information clearly and coherently, using specialist vocabulary when appropriate
 - ensure text is legible and spelling, grammar and punctuation are accurate so that meaning is clear
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How you say it puts the accent on success

As the third millennium begins, one fact hasn't changed: modern Britain remains obsessed with how you speak. "People read a lot into accent – from it they make deductions about a person's job, his character and his status," said Andrew Hamer, a researcher in accent and dialect at Liverpool University. Or, as Henry Higgins put it, almost a century ago, in George Bernard Shaw's play 'Pygmalion': "The moment an Englishman opens his mouth, another Englishman despises him." Say 'a-bite the hicc' and you brand yourself upper-class. 'A-bowt the howse' makes you middle class. 'A-baht the 'ahs' labels you working class.

The idea of a 'proper' English accent goes back to the 18th century when the renowned writer and critic, Samuel Johnson, was sneered at for his provincial Staffordshire accent. Since the 19th century, speaking properly has meant Received Pronunciation, or RP. Fostered by the private school system, it was the traditional voice of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as it announced wars and coronations. It is considered to be the most prestigious accent and people tend to make positive judgements about those who speak RP. They are perceived as more intelligent, determined, self-confident and ambitious, as well as being wealthier.

By contrast, regional accents have often been seen as provincial or working class. However, today just 3% of Britons speak RP, according to Hamer, and regional accents remain a dynamic force. One survey indicated that those with a regional accent are thought of as more good-natured, down to earth, talkative and humorous. Nevertheless, although TV programmes such as 'EastEnders', 'Coronation Street' and 'Byker Grove' have broadened the appeal of regional accents, a hierarchy still exists.

As late as the 1980s, employers placing job advertisements could still stipulate 'well-spoken candidates' and, according to Andrew Hamer, there is some anecdotal evidence – though no scientific data – that those with less-favoured accents still suffer discrimination from employers. Equally, however, there is also no hard evidence that an RP accent gives people an edge in the jobs market. An example of this is Boris Johnson, editor of 'The Spectator', who claimed he was fired from the BBC for having 'too plummy' a voice. It is also well known that an

upper-class English accent is likely to incite hostility in many parts of Scotland. According to Edwina Currie, Tory MP for Derbyshire South and originally from Liverpool, "Nowadays I would say, the biggest discrimination is against 'Oxford posh'".

Recent research by spoken communication consultants, the Aziz Corporation, showed that Scots and business people from the West Country were seen by leading company directors as being on the fast-track to success because their accents were perceived as indicating above-average honesty, reliability and an inclination to work harder. Khalid Aziz, chairman of the Aziz corporation, which interviewed 100 leading directors, said: "As a nation we are still obsessed with accents and what we think they tell us about other people; these results prove that popular preconceptions still exist." Still there are signs that 'proper' accents are losing some clout. Braving criticisms from traditionalists that it is 'dumbing down', the BBC has increasingly recruited regional voices.

These days, though, identifying accents is much more difficult. In 'The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language' David Crystal, a linguistics expert at the University of Wales, attributes this to increased mobility. "In many countries it is becoming less common for people to live their whole lives in one place, and 'mixed' accents are more the norm. Also, as towns and cities grow, once-distinct communities merge, with a blurring of speech patterns. And nowadays, through radio and television, there is much more exposure to a wide range of accents, which can influence the speech of listeners or viewers even within their own homes." However, there is some evidence that regional accents are growing even stronger in urban areas.

On the other side of the Atlantic, a similar message is emerging. Although new research claims that "over 50% of business people feel that their voice is a liability in helping them influence others", researchers advised that job seekers should not try to change their accent. Instead, according to Dianne Markley of the University of Texas, job interviewers should realise that "assumptions they make based on accents may actually mean they are not making the best decision possible".

Source: Based on 'How you say it puts the accent on success', Daily Telegraph, 2 January 1997

Regional accents can hurt job opportunities

Recent Research

The long-held suspicions of Scousers, Brummies and others that they suffer discrimination at work or when applying for jobs because of their accents has been borne out by new research. The accents of Liverpool and Birmingham are regarded by some employers as particularly 'negative', a survey of recruitment consultants found.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) found that accents were seen as crucially important by up to 50% of employers. Another consultant said: "Accents communicate background, education and birthplace and, frankly, some backgrounds are more marketable than others. I would advise anyone with a regional accent to upgrade. Politicians and lawyers do it, so why shouldn't others?" A majority of recruiters agreed that people with strong regional accents were most likely to suffer discrimination.

Indicator of Intelligence

One Dorset woman interviewed during the survey said she had no idea of the strength of feeling about accents until she moved to London. "As soon as I opened my mouth, people would be queuing up to do yokel impersonations and some would even slow down or speak more loudly when they were talking to me," she said. "One boss even ordered me to stop answering the phone."

Unfortunately, the report states, it is often assumed that accents from traditional working class areas equate with a lower level of intelligence.

"You've got to learn to speak

This discrimination is not helped by people such as the novelist Beryl Bainbridge, who once advocated elocution lessons to rid school-children of what she deemed "nasal, stupid" regional accents. "You've got to learn to speak properly. You don't take people seriously who speak badly," the novelist said at a recent awards ceremony. Bainbridge herself took lessons to purge her Liverpool accent, a distinctive brew of Irish, Scottish and Lancashire tones dating from the late 19th century.

Restricted Opportunities

Companies are increasingly waking up to the value of diversity in their workforce, but the problem is that the focus of diversity has rested rather exclusively on issues such as ethnicity and disabilities," says Sandi Mann, senior lecturer in occupational psychology at the University of Central Lancashire. "As a result, class has become the acceptable face of discrimination."

Those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, often identified by their provincial accents, are afforded fewer career opportunities and employers are getting away with it, Dr Mann believes. This is manifested by a lack of access to training and recruitment in general with employers considering accent as the biggest give-away sign of a lower social background. "Because some people make assumptions, often subconscious, that the lower the class, the lower the intelligence level, people with regional accents of traditional working class areas are often the first to get the cold shoulder at job interviews," says Penny Hardwick, a speech therapist from Hertfordshire.

She has found that accents from Birmingham, Liverpool and the West Country cause by far the most barriers in today's workplace. Like many elocution specialists, Hardwick reports an increase in clients asking her to rid them of such inflections for the sake of their careers.

Training is the latest area of office life to be hit. According to the CIPD study, those in higher social classes are more likely to receive training. It is not that people from working classes don't want training. Mike Cannell, the survey's author, insists: "There is a real thirst for learning within the employee groups that are less likely to get the training. Indeed, the study found they were three times less likely to turn down training opportunities."

Whether we like it or not, nearly all the evidence suggests that people who speak with what is perceived as a working class accent are likely to face discrimination in employment. The question is, how to deal with this form of prejudice.

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editor@vopinions.com

Regional Accents – what are your views?

Following a TV studio discussion on regional accents, the BBC has posted the comments of some of the programme's contributors on its website, inviting viewers' feedback.

"I thought that prejudice against regional accents had died out and it's sad if it is returning. I have lived in London for about 20 years and my accent has definitely softened, but I love regional accents. I think everybody should have one. As long as your grammar is good and you can speak properly then no one should take any notice of your accent."

Liverpudlian poet, Roger McGough.

"I have done some radio work, but I don't think that my Birmingham accent would help if I wanted to make it a permanent job. Scottish accents work really well on the radio, but you don't hear many Brummies. I don't think it's discrimination – just that my nasal tones don't come over that well."

Former Arsenal and England footballer, Alan Smith.

"Managers, often from higher social classes, think, 'If you speak my way, you'll understand me better. If you think my way, we'll work better together.'"

Michael Carroll, counselling psychologist specialising in workplace conflict.

"I have never tried to change my Brummie accent and no one has ever been rude about it, but I do think people have tended to look down their noses at the Brummie voice. We should hang on to regional accents and not try to iron them all out. That would be so dull."

Former Government Minister, Clare Short.

"Our own research showed that people found a northern accent more acceptable."
A spokesman for HSBC Bank on why their telephone bank, First Direct, was located in Leeds.

"We do not discriminate against accents and neither do we have a preferred regional accent. Our recruitment policy is one of fair selection and accent makes no difference to the ability to do the job."

A spokesperson for the BBC.

"I spend half my life trying to persuade people that there is no connection between accents and intelligence, social situations or criminality."

Linguistics expert Prof. David Crystal from the University of Wales.

"My research shows that Received Pronunciation (RP) is no longer seen as essential as it used to be in many jobs. People's accents are becoming less defined with RP disappearing altogether. In other words, it is becoming increasingly difficult to tell which social class people are from."

Paul Coggle, senior lecturer in modern languages at the University of Kent.

"When you are at a job interview, relax and be yourself. Your accent is part of who you are. There is no way of knowing whether the person making these decisions loves your accent or not."

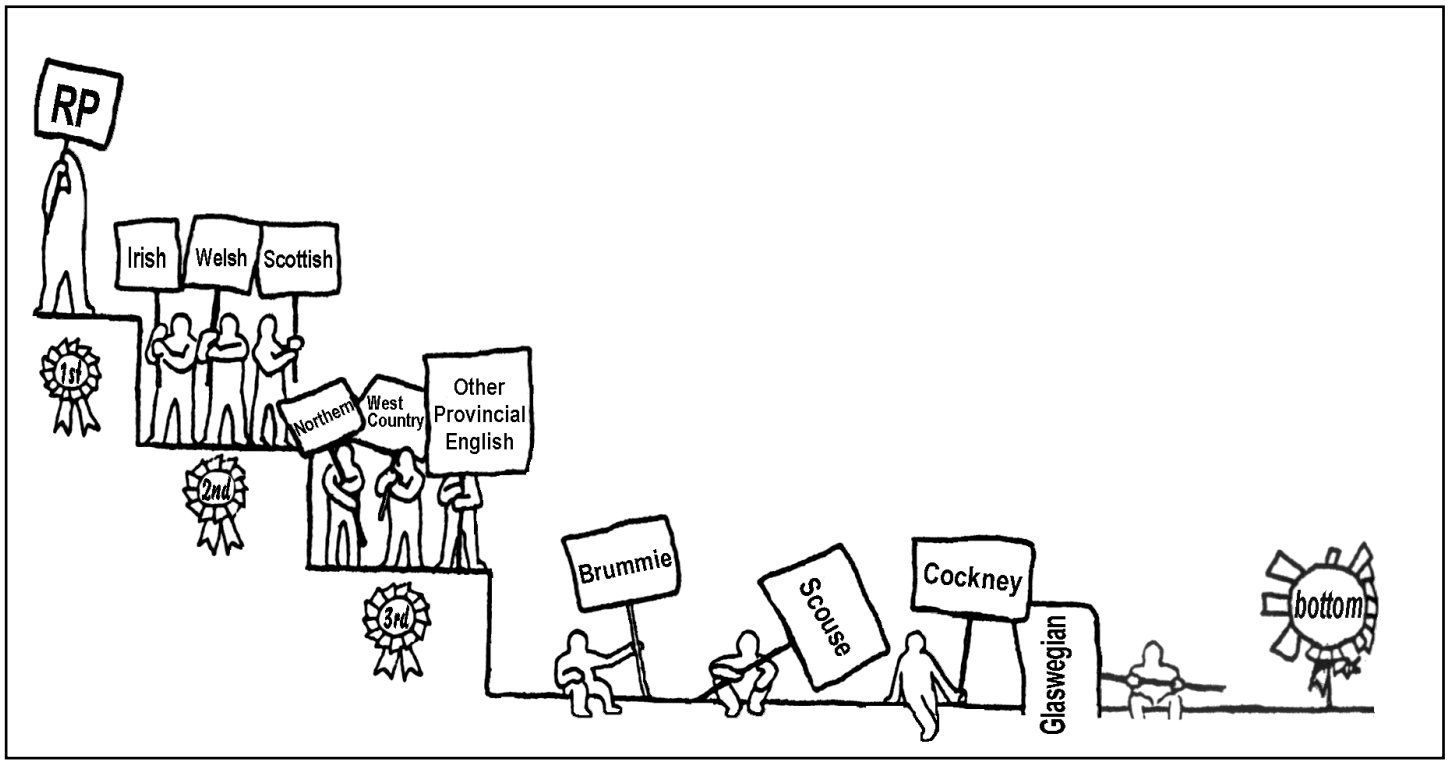
Dianne Markley, linguistics professor at the University of North Texas.

"I come from a working class area of Birmingham and I did think my accent might have affected my chances of getting through the university selection interview. Ironically, the professor who interviewed me had a strong Liverpudlian accent and since then being a Brummie has never been an issue."

Tony Morris (aged 20), Oxford University undergraduate.

‘The point of regional pronunciation is to enable one tribe of pronouncers to feel superior to another.’

(Philip Howard, The Times, 1993)



Source: 'English Language for Beginners', M.Lowe and B.Graham, Writers and Readers Publishing, Inc.

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