

## Talking your way to success: accent bias in the workplace

### 1 Warmer

bias = an attitude that you have that makes you treat someone in a way that is unfair or different from the way you treat other people

a. Briefly discuss these questions with a partner and then share your answers with the rest of the class.

1. Are there different regional accents in your country? Can you name any of them?
2. Do you think people are biased towards different accents?
3. Do you think the way someone speaks influences how successful they are in their career? How?

### 2 Key words

a. Read the definitions and find key words in the article that match. The section number is given in brackets to help you.

Check your answers and your understanding of how the words are used by using the same word to complete the example sentence after each definition. You might have to modify the word slightly to use it in the sentence.

Then read the complete article to see how each of the key words is used in context.

1. a word to describe the way someone talks or behaves that is typical of people from a high social class \_\_\_\_\_ (subtitle)

*I think he's trying too hard to seem \_\_\_\_\_ now that he's earning a bit more money.*

2. a feeling of love and admiration for someone, often someone you know you cannot have a relationship with \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 1)

*I've always had a \_\_\_\_\_ on Cate Blanchett. She is so gorgeous.*

3. a special benefit that is available only to a particular person or group \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 3)

*Only senior executives enjoy the \_\_\_\_\_ of travelling business class.*

4. pronounce words clearly so that they can be easily understood \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 3)

*She joined a theatre group to learn to \_\_\_\_\_ more and improve her public-speaking skills.*

5. easy to recognise because of being different from other people or things of the same type

\_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 4)

*Everyone knows when her boss is calling her because she chose a \_\_\_\_\_  
ringtone for him.*

6. an upper limit set on the number or amount of something \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 6)

*During the recession, the company set a \_\_\_\_\_ on end-of-year bonuses.*

7. chances of success, especially in a job or career \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 6)

*Since cardiologists will always be needed, these specialists have decent future job*

\_\_\_\_\_.

8. unfair treatment of people because of their social class \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 8)

*Because of the high degree of income equality in Norway, there is not much \_\_\_\_\_.*

9. the social class that consists of people who do not have much money, education, or power

and usually work in manual jobs (=jobs that involve physical work) \_\_\_\_\_

(paragraph 11)

*Our parents immigrated here from Ireland, and we grew up in a \_\_\_\_\_ area.*

10. the ability to move easily from a lower social class to a higher one \_\_\_\_\_

(paragraph 11)

*Some people argue that education is the single greatest path to \_\_\_\_\_.*

11. very dangerous or harmful, especially to someone's moral character \_\_\_\_\_

(paragraph 11)

*Many people are now suffering due to the \_\_\_\_\_ effects of the country's  
broken social welfare system.*

12. things that make you want to do something or to work harder because you know that you will

benefit by doing this \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 13)

*With the hope of engaging their team, they are offering \_\_\_\_\_ like  
scholarships, performance awards, and free gym membership.*

## Why accent bias is a dirty game

PRINCE HARRY MAY HAVE ADOPTED A TRANSATLANTIC TWANG, BUT A POSH VOICE STILL HELPS YOU GET A TOP JOB

JO ELLISON

- 1 Kirstie Alley, the American actress and comedian who has died at the age of 71, was one of my first voice crushes. Born in Wichita, Kansas, in 1951, Alley looked like a real dame, all big hair and power shoulders. And she had a voice to match, with a cool Midwestern swagger and a throaty rasp.
- 2 I've always had voice crushes but not for grand, stentorian types. I love voices that sound unusual or have a slightly broken crack.
- 3 This year we have been robbed of some especially fine examples: along with Alley, we lost Robbie Coltrane, whose deliciously strong south Glaswegian brogue remained undimmed throughout his acting career; Angela Lansbury, the London-born actress who moved to Hollywood and spoke with a gorgeous warbly, slightly mangled transatlantic poshness; and Queen Elizabeth II, one of the last public figures who actually spoke the Queen's English, a voice so plummy with class privilege she could barely enunciate a vowel.
- 4 All were in possession of fabulously distinctive voices, all represented a different social tribe. In some ways they represented the vestige of an era in which your voice truly announced your past. In the UK, one could be forgiven for thinking that such accents have now been eroded in the drift to glottal drawl.
- 5 "It's a dirty game," says Prince Harry in the second Netflix trailer to promote his tell-all documentary, his "Ts" made carefully more matey lest we remember he was born at the very zenith of the "hierarchy" he seems intent on bringing down.
- 6 But despite the sludge of accents we now hear across the media, it transpires they are still the source of powerful prejudices that most must overcome. In the incredibly depressing BBC documentary *How to Crack the Class Ceiling* this week, the broadcaster Amol Rajan examined how accent bias still contributes hugely, if unwittingly, to our advancement in an employment market where our prospects are still determined by the way we sound.
- 7 Using studies by researchers at Queen Mary's department of linguistics, Rajan revealed that 70 per cent of newsreaders across the UK's main news channels speak in received pronunciation, despite representing only 10 per cent of a population in which 75 per cent have accents he described as "industrial working class". Moreover, he offered further evidence that within the civil service, banking and legal sectors, people who sounded southern and metropolitan were far more likely to progress.
- 8 The show's case studies made for a pitiful exposé of the classism that still exists in the UK: Chris, born into poverty in Hull, was concerned that his northern accent made him sound "stupid" to employers, while barrister Paige worried about getting a pupillage because she didn't sound the part. None of the people interviewed spoke like the people before whom they sat.
- 9 And despite advice and leadership training, none got the jobs they seemingly deserved. Even the extraordinarily sharp Seth, who hoped to become a journalist, concluded that while he had a starred first degree and the dean's prize for being brilliant, his rural Somerset accent would probably be deemed too "local" to break the world of "prestige" news.
- 10 The programme was less about "how to" crack the class ceiling than whether it could actually be done. Meanwhile, a bunch of people in black shoes and wacky socks, who sounded like Young Conservatives, described their corporate efforts to overcome class bias.
- 11 Despite the inclusive rhetoric, class divisions in the UK are still appallingly pronounced. Last month it was reported that only 21 per cent of senior leadership positions in the City are held by staff from a working-class background. And that the UK has one of the poorest rates of social mobility in the developed world. In the UK, we may have softened up our Ts and toned down our outward poshness, but classism remains as pernicious as it was some 50 years ago.

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12 Voices can be a powerful weapon: sometimes they open doors. But it's incredibly sad to think that still, in 2022, the way you speak determines the extent to which you can advance. I only experienced voice shame while working in the south of Ireland, early in my career, where I was uniquely conscious that, every time I spoke, my colleagues heard 400 years of colonial rule. They were always very nice about it – they had the world's best accent, too. But as a consequence I played down my posher inclinations to give myself a more Artful Dodger "alwight matey" tone.

13 Along with new Square Mile incentives to raise the number of people with working-class backgrounds to elevated leadership roles, I hope the documentary prompts employers to embrace a broader choir: the constipated tremolo we hear throughout the media sounds just as foreign, peculiar and dissonant as any local accent ever could. A diversity in voices makes the world a greater place. Why work with Harrys when you could have a Hagrid on the desk?

## Glossary

Received Pronunciation: an accent that is considered to be the standard pronunciation in the UK.

FT

Jo Ellison, December 9, 2022.

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## 3 Understanding the article

a. Find answers to the questions in the text. Give as much detail as possible.

1. Which four great voices passed away in 2022?
2. Why does Prince Harry say 'diry' instead of 'dirty'?
3. What is examined in the documentary *How to Crack the Class Ceiling*?
4. What is so shocking about the statistics of newsreaders' accents across UK media channels?
5. According to the show, what led Chris, Paige, and Seth to not get the jobs they wanted?
6. What evidence does the writer give for pernicious classism in the UK?
7. Has the writer ever pretended to have a different accent? Why?
8. What does the writer hope the documentary will achieve?

## 4 Business language

a. How many syllables are in these words from the article? Identify the stressed syllable in each word.

1. advancement
2. career
3. classism
4. consequence
5. divisions
6. employer
7. inclusive
8. metropolitan
9. prejudices
10. social

**b. Identify and circle the schwa /ə/ (always unstressed) sound in each word.**

Examples: social, investment, little

1. advancement
2. classism
3. consequence
4. divisions
5. employer
6. metropolitan

**c. Now practise reading these sentences. You can try reading them in different accents and see if the emphasis of the words changes.**

1. The NGO's mission is to help reduce social divisions and classism in the US.
2. Recruiters need to be aware of their own prejudices and follow inclusive hiring practices.
3. Consider the consequences over time of employers who neglect to review their diversity policy.
4. Career advancement is more difficult for first-generation graduates.
5. The industrial zone is located outside the metropolitan area.

## 5 Discussion questions

**a. Discuss these questions.**

- What different English accents do you know?
- Are you surprised to read about classism in the UK? How does it compare to social equality where you live?
- Do you think people should learn to 'polish' their accents? Why (not)?
- What incentives can governments provide for companies help people from working-class backgrounds develop towards leadership positions?

**Extension**

Go to [www.dialectsarchive.com/](http://www.dialectsarchive.com/) and explore different accents in the UK or other countries.

## 6 Wider business theme – diversity in the workplace

### Situation

According to a recent investigation, the multinational company you work for has realised that only 7 per cent of senior leadership positions in the organisation are held by staff from a working-class background. HR is now looking to find ways to put policies in place to combat discrimination and to support all employees to advance in their careers.

### Task

You are attending an online meeting to discuss what the first action points should be: implementing a non-discrimination policy or providing a training and development programme for employees.

- a. First, make a list of the pros and cons for each.  
Consider: impact (who would benefit and how), cost, duration and implementation.
- b. Then complete your role card, which will provide the baseline for your own personal agenda during the meeting.
- c. Then hold a meeting in which a decision must be made.

### Extension

Write an email to the rest of the staff (the ones who did not attend your meeting) informing them of the decision and the reasons that led to it.

### Role cards

<p><b>A</b> You believe that company policy needs to change first. Only by ...</p>	<p><b>B</b> Coming from a working-class background, you think that policy ...</p>
<p><b>C</b> You don't think it's an HR problem but a company-wide issue. Therefore, it's important for all employees to ...</p>	<p><b>D</b> You think this problem needs to be solved top-down, by training senior managers and ...</p>
<p><b>E</b> You believe that employees coming from a working-class background need to receive training opportunities to ...</p>	<p><b>F</b> You believe that the company needs to give employees coming from a working-class background ...</p>