

Posh premium: Do posher sounding people really earn more?

Why some people believe the way you speak affects how much you get paid

[Felicity Hannah](#)



Classy lady: Steph McGovern has sparked a new pay gap debate over the so-called ‘posh premium’ enjoyed by people speaking with an RP accent

(Rex)

It’s a frustrating truth that many workplaces consciously or unconsciously discriminate against certain groups.

Women, to take a well-known example, are often paid less than men for doing the same work. And data released by the TUC last summer revealed that [black workers do not get paid as much as their white colleagues](#) with the same qualifications – missing out, on average, on £1.20 an hour.

Now BBC reporter Steph McGovern has suggested that she earns less than her “posher” sounding peers and told *The Sunday Times* she was once told she was “too common” to be a BBC presenter.

The idea that accent could be affecting salary is an uncomfortable one. That's partly because of connotations of classism but also because, except for ludicrously clear-cut cases such as Jacob Rees-Mogg's received pronunciation, it can be hard to define what "posh" or "not posh" sounds like, let alone whether it's affecting someone's chance of earning a high salary.

Accentism

Dr Rob Drummond is a senior lecturer in linguistics at Manchester Metropolitan University and is currently [compiling stories of accentism](#), looking at both social class background and country of origin.

"Generally speaking, there is more regional variation at the lower end of the social scale – so people from working class backgrounds *tend* to have stronger regional accents," he explains.

"The higher up the social scale you go, the more people start to sound the same... This is because RP/SE England accents have always been seen as more prestigious, something to aspire to in the educated circles."

Such prestige is merely chance-based, as London, Oxford and Cambridge were the regions with all the power when pronunciation started to standardise in the late 18th century. Had history and geography dealt a different hand, perhaps a Geordie twang might have become the accent to project status.

Of course, it all comes back to money. Drummond says: "This means that, consciously or otherwise, people with stronger regional accents are seen as coming from poorer backgrounds, which then brings in all the other issues of snobbery, educational performance and so on.

"This can go in their favour in some instances – certain regional accents are still seen as 'friendlier' [and] 'trustworthy', which is why some accents are preferred in advertising and call-centres but can go against them in other areas."

Discrimination

Jenny Jones, head of employment law at Harrison Clark Rickerbys, says it can be considered unlawful to discriminate against someone because of their accent but that there's little protection for those with regional voices.

"The Equality Act 2010 prohibits discrimination against employees, workers and certain other groups, on the grounds of race which includes their 'ethnic or national origins'," she says.

"Accents can be an intrinsic part of having a particular national origin and increasingly apparent as the language of the workplace in the international business community is often not an individual's first language.

"The discrimination may be direct, for example, 'I'm not going to promote him – I don't like the way he speaks', it may be unlawful harassment [such as] mimicking someone's accent and poking fun at it, or it may be indirect, for example, 'only people who speak with an English accent are eligible for this job', where this is not justified.

"What the law does not currently prohibit, however, is discriminating against someone because they have a regional accent if that accent is not associated with their ethnic or national origin.

Yet she recommends anyone who feels concerned to lodge a grievance with their employer to draw attention to how they feel. “Regional accents are a rich and accepted part of our heritage and an employment tribunal would expect an employer to take such a grievance seriously, meaning that a poor or no response might lead to a claim of constructive dismissal.”

Drummond also urges people to challenge accentism at every opportunity: “Just with any form of discrimination, it is fundamentally wrong that someone can be disadvantaged purely as a result of something so arbitrary, and something they were simply born into.

“For some reason it’s still socially acceptable to openly mock people’s accents, yet most people wouldn’t dream of doing the same in relation to someone’s ethnicity, gender, or sexuality.”

Strong not swanky

Georgie Frost, a broadcast journalist and voice coach, says the evidence clearly shows accent and background affects earning potential.

“Eight in 10 employers admitted to making discriminatory decisions based on accent, according to a study by UK law firm Peninsula. And only last year, researchers from LSE and UCL produced a report suggesting those from working class backgrounds, who are more likely to have regional accents, get paid almost £7,000 less than colleagues from more affluent backgrounds.”

However, the vast majority of people who come to Frost for voice coaching do not want to sound posher, they want to sound more self-assured.

“The vast majority of people, particularly women, who come to me, do so because they want deeper, clearer, more authoritative, resonant voices. One client said after a lesson that she felt ready to face her boss and ask for a pay rise. With a strong voice comes confidence.”

The rain in Spain falls. Mainly.

Some people will read this and wonder if they need to play down a regional accent in order to secure the promotions and pay rises their skill set deserves.

Voice coach Judith Phillips says accentism is about a lot more than how you speak: “You enter a minefield around all this stuff in this country as it’s really about class and the dominance of the south, and the English public school system’s influence on public life too. I do think this is fading, thank god, but we can’t be complacent.

“I celebrate diversity of accents. Why should everyone sound southern and middle class in a Shakespeare play?”

Frost agrees that playing down an accent is not the answer to the societal snobbery behind the prejudice. “I would never tell someone to get rid of their accent, we are blessed in this country with such a rich array of regional variation, although, certainly on air, giving a speech or in a job interview, you may want to soften it, work on diction and not use some colloquialisms that others won’t understand.”