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Pronunciation and Prejudice: a sociolinguistic perception study of Scottish accents



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Introduction

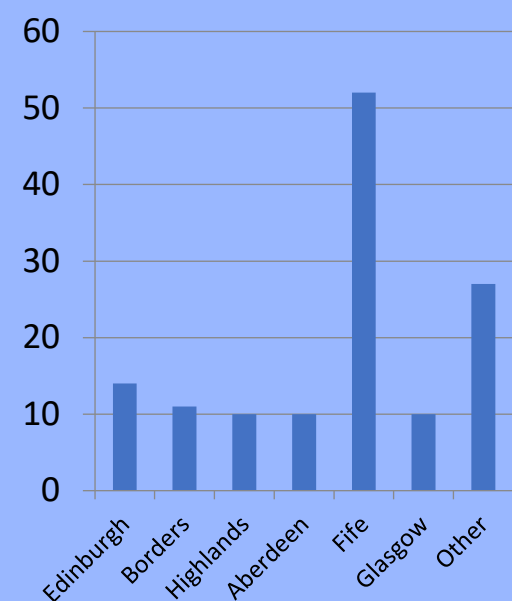
Where we live and/or were brought up tend to be evident from our accents, as there are large variations on how the English language sounds and is used. The word 'posh' is often used to describe the speech of someone sounding upper-class, and changes in the class structure in the UK has seen negativity directed at those thought to be 'posh'. This study will investigate what 'posh' speech sounds like across Scotland.

Research Questions

Do listeners' preconceived opinions on Scottish accents align with their opinion upon hearing the accents?

Does someone sound more 'posh' when reading aloud, compared with their own spontaneous speech?

listener location count



total = 134

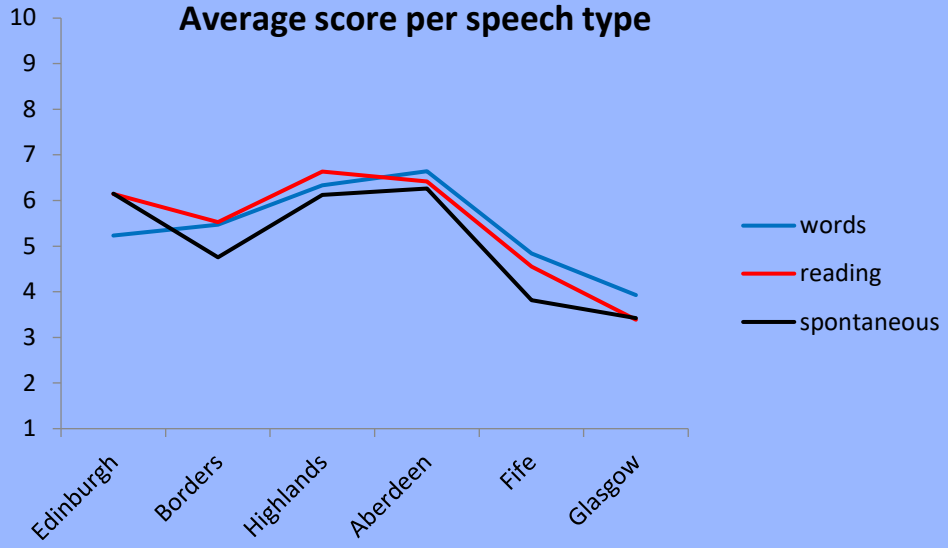
Methodology

- Snowball sampling was used to recruit age- and gender-matched (males, 20-29) speakers from 6 different areas of Scotland: Aberdeen, Borders, Edinburgh, Fife, Glasgow and Highlands / Islands.
- The participants were asked to record themselves reading a few sentences from an online news article, and detailing the process of making a cup of tea. Speakers were also asked to say the words 'and, from, thought, imagine, beautiful, yellow, the', as previous research indicated listeners could correctly guess an individual's social class upon hearing only these words (Kraus et al. 2017).
- Speakers were instructed to speak as naturally as they do in conversation with those they are familiar with, as this is where the most deviation from typical 'norm' standards of speech occur.
- Recordings were cropped to include the central sentence from the reading passage and an approximately 8 second-long clip of spontaneous speech with as little dysfluency as possible.
- The experiment was conducted using online software *Gorilla*, which participants (listeners) could access using a link advertised on social media.
- Before hearing any recordings, participants were asked to rank the 6 accents from most to least 'posh'. The recordings were then randomised and played to listeners with the opportunity to replay each recording once. Listeners were kept unaware of where the speaker was from, and rated each recording on how 'posh' the voice sounded on a 1-10 point scale (1 being the least and 10 being the most 'posh').



Results

Average score per speech type

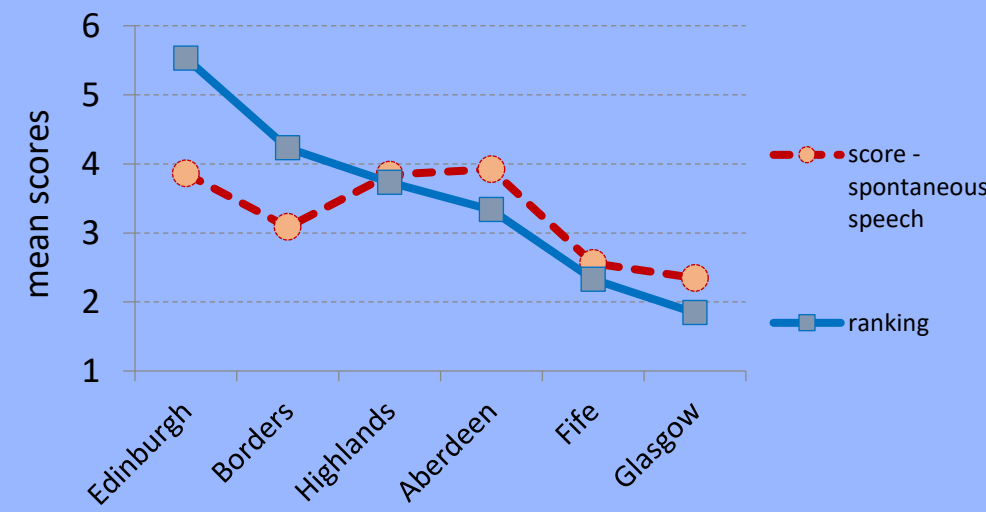


69% of respondents ranked Edinburgh as the most 'posh' accent. There was agreement on this among listeners from all areas, including those from Edinburgh and outwith the focus areas.

60% of respondents ranked Glasgow as the least 'posh' accent, including those from Glasgow. Respondents from Edinburgh and the Borders ranked Fife as least 'posh'.

Individual listeners' responses showed no strong agreement in rating different speech types. Overall, however, spontaneous speech was rated as less 'posh' than reading.

Ranking vs. Rating



Spontaneous speech was overall scored as sounding less 'posh' than reading (Wilcoxon signed rank test $z=-4.0772$, $p<0.00001$, $n=124$).

To answer the research questions, analysis of the data focused on:

- average reading vs average spontaneous speech scores,
- average spontaneous speech vs average ranking score

per speaker location

The data collected on words was not used for analysis, as spontaneous speech better reflects circumstances where listeners make social judgements in natural conversation.

- The 1-10 rating score was transformed into a 1-6 score to allow for comparison with the 1-6 ranking.
- Compared with the ranking, upon hearing the speakers, Edinburgh still scored high and Glasgow still scored low.
- In a binary comparison, the Edinburgh speech sounded more 'posh' than the Glasgow speech ($p<0.00001$).
- The blue line may be steeper as participants had to use a ranking – they could not just assign a score.
- The red line may be flatter as people are less prejudiced when they hear the voice, or there may be less difference between accents upon hearing them compared to preconceived judgements.

Potential Factors Affecting Results



Considerations for Future Research

Future research in this area should consider including qualitative data to gain further insight into *why* listeners hold certain judgements.

As the choice of words in the spontaneous speech section may have impacted results, future research investigating the effect word choice has on 'poshness' perception would be interesting.

Respondents may have used different reference points for what they consider to be 'posh'. Future research comparing the most and least 'posh' accents in this study to other UK accents would give a broader picture on the perception of Scottish accents.

Contribution

This topic is particularly interesting as the wealth gap in Scotland increasing further separates the upper and lower classes and there is a great divide socially, as well as economically, between the 'posh' and the 'poor'.

Previous research in the UK has focused on perceptions given by listeners from England about English speakers. This study provides data on how Scottish accents are perceived, by people from those same areas. This project focused on comparisons among different regional accents, whereas other perception studies have looked at opinions on 'standard' accents.

Learning

This project has allowed me to develop my skills in working independently, designing and creating an experiment using online software, understanding research methods, data analysis, and given me a deeper interest in sociolinguistic research.

References

GORILLA, <https://gorilla.sc/>

KRAUS, M.W., PARK, J.W., and TAN, J.J.X., 2017. Signs of Social Class: The Experience of Economic Inequality in Everyday Life. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 422–435.



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