The impact of British accents on perceptions of eyewitness statements

Lara A. Frumkin and Amanda Thompson

Abstract

The current study looked at the impact of British regional accents on evaluations of eyewitness testimony in criminal trials. Ninety participants were randomly presented with one of three video recordings of eyewitness testimony manipulated to be representative of Received Pronunciation (RP), Multicultural London English (MLE) or Birmingham accents. The impact of the accent was measured through eyewitness (1) accuracy, (2) credibility, (3) deception, (4) prestige and (5) trial outcome (defendant guilt and sentence). RP was rated more favourably than MLE on accuracy, credibility and prestige. Accuracy and prestige were significant, with RP rated more highly than a Birmingham accent. RP appears to be viewed more favourably than the MLE and Birmingham accents, although the witnesses' accents did not affect ratings of defendant guilt. Taken together, these findings show a preference for eyewitnesses to have RP speech over some regional accents.

KEYWORDS: ACCENT; EYEWITNESS; ACCENT PRESTIGE THEORY; FAVOURABILITY

Affiliations

Lara A. Frumkin: Open University, Milton Keynes, UK.
email: lara.frumkin@open.ac.uk

Introduction

Justice is handed down in courtrooms, where the guilty receive their punishment and the innocent are acquitted. Society trusts the justice system to be free from bias when administering the law. This is not always the case, and there is limited experimental research exploring the impact accent may have in the courtroom. The research that does exist tends to assess defendant accent (Dixon and Mahoney 2004; Dixon, Mahoney and Cocks 2002;), although there are a few eyewitness studies in the United States and Spain (Frumkin 2007; Kurinec and Weaver 2019; Sobral Fernandez and Prieto Ederra 1994). Additionally, there are actual cases in the United States (*Clifford v Commonwealth of Kentucky* 1999; *Zimmerman v State of Florida* 2013) which show that witness accent may influence the court. The current study will assess eyewitness accent in the United Kingdom, which has not been studied previously.

Many features are used when making judgements about people, and accents are one of these. Accent refers to the way words are pronounced, while dialect is the grammatical structure used by a certain group (Rickford 2002). In a courtroom, accent is considered to be an extra-legal factor, as it is not usually relevant to the case being tried and yet it can influence how people are viewed and judged. Not all accents are perceived equally, but rather negative or positive views are based on the listener, not always the status of the accent. However, of the studies that have shown how accents are rated, most tend to confirm that there are certain accents that are generally viewed more favourably than others (Lev-Ari and Keysar 2010; Moyer 2013; Thorne 2005).

In 2013, the US court case *Zimmerman v State of Florida* showed that the way a witness speaks may have an impact on case outcome. The key witness for the prosecution in the case, Rachel Jeantel, was on the phone with her friend Trayvon Martin when he was murdered. Multiple media outlets commented negatively on the way Jeantel spoke while on the stand, relaying what she heard the night of the murder. Zimmerman, the defendant accused of murdering Martin, was ultimately acquitted. Although we cannot know if Jeantel's testimony was the deciding factor for acquittal, it does raise questions about the impact speech plays in witness testimony. If our speech and accent are well thought of, we are more likely to be convincing, liked and thought of in generally positive ways (Hosoda and Stone-Romero 2010; Lev-Ari and Keysar 2010; Morales, Scott and Yorkston 2012; Mugglestone 2003). Lippi-Green (1994) has shown that discrimination in the United States is partially based on the way one speaks and has been evident for many years, affecting judgements about justice. In Jeantel's

case, her African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) was not regarded as credible (Rickford and King 2016).

Misunderstanding accented speech, or dialect, can also affect judicial judgements. Only recently, as judges in the US city of Philadelphia were reviewing court transcripts, it came to light that the court transcribers were incorrect in recording AAVE (Jones *et al.* 2019). The fact that trained court reporters struggle to accurately record words used by defendants and witnesses leads to concern about miscarriages of justice at least partially due to accent, dialect and speech patterns. It is very possible that lay people (jurors) might also misinterpret words, phrases and expressions.

Issues around accent in courtrooms is one that has arisen repeatedly over the years. *Clifford v Commonwealth of Kentucky* (1999) found that a witness made claims about a defendant's voice sounding 'black'. The court felt racial identification based on accent could have negatively affected juror attitudes towards the defendant, leading to a miscarriage of justice. Accent can helpfully identify speakers, but may also lead to biased judgements (Bayard *et al.* 2001; Foon 2001; Fuertes *et al.* 2012; Hansen, Rakić and Steffens 2017; Kinzler *et al.* 2009; Rakić, Steffens and Mummendey 2011), which is clearly of concern in courtroom settings. There are additional, broader issues around race and perceptions of people in the United States that may or may not be as prevalent in other countries such as the United Kingdom.

Ratings of people based on the way they speak fits well with accent prestige theory (APT) (Anderson *et al.* 2007; Fuertes, Potere and Ramirez 2002). This theory uses two dimensions, status and solidarity, to explain how people value particular accents. The former is comprised of intelligence, education and social class, while the latter includes friendliness, trustworthiness and kindness. This may explain why people tend to favour high-status accents (the quest for status) and/or those that are familiar to them (the comfort of solidarity). This framework helps to theorise why listeners may form judgements on the basis of the accent, which in turn influences how well the message is received.

Some UK accents

Many researchers have reviewed accent in detail (e.g. Coupland and Bishop 2007; Kerswill and Torgersen 2017; Lev-Ari and Keysar 2010; Malarski 2013; Moyer 2013). The purpose of this section is not a comprehensive account of accents, but rather to briefly highlight some research about three accents that are of relevance to the current work: Received Pronunciation (RP), Multicultural London English (MLE) and Birmingham.

High status accents such as RP yields high prestige ratings, especially when compared with other UK accents (Anderson *et al.* 2007; Coupland and Bishop 2007). However, recently RP, with only 3% of the population speaking it (Workman 2015), has started to lose its seat of prominence (Coupland and Bishop 2007). Coupled with that, many people who speak with regional accents are quite proud of their accents and the links it provides to their identity, for example, MLE (Kerswill and Torgersen 2017) and Liverpudlian (Thorne 2005). Those speaking with RP are still often seen as reputable based, it appears, in part on their accent (Coupland and Bishop 2007).

Even though some UK regional accents are gaining traction, there are others that continue to be thought of unfavourably. For example, anecdotal reports by Workman (2015) are that people associate a Birmingham accent with criminal activity, and criminal activity with low intelligence. Academic research across more than forty-five years reveals the Birmingham accent is consistently one of the least well rated in the United Kingdom in terms of prestige, intelligence and attractiveness (Clark and Asprey 2013; Coupland and Bishop 2007; Giles 1970). Work by Thorne (2005) shows that raters feel the Birmingham accent sounds lazy and uneducated.

Prestige ratings are high for urban London speakers compared with the Birmingham accent (Coupland and Bishop 2007). Recently, researchers have begun studying MLE, the multi-ethnic speech of London (Cheshire *et al.* 2011; Kerswill and Torgersen 2017). Work to date has studied some aspects of how MLE is perceived, for example, how it is portrayed in the media (Kerswill 2014), but has not specifically examined the way it might be rated in courtrooms. As the current study used a London-based sample it will be interesting to see if individuals rate their own MLE accent higher than another regional accent (i.e. Birmingham) because of familiarity, the solidarity component of APT.

A study in Spain showed just that; listeners rated speakers with regional accents higher if the accent was one spoken in a location that was geographically closer to the listener than if it was physically further away (Sobral Fernandez and Prieto Ederra 1994). One caveat with this study is that one of the accents is from the Basque region, which has a strong identity of being different from the rest of Spain. This finding could have confounded whether it is the accent or other aspects of identity that led to solidarity. Still, speakers of non-Basque accents that were from geographically closer locations to where the participants lived were still rated higher than those speakers whose accent indicated they came from further away.

Accent in court

There is some research to date that has specifically considered the impact of perceived accents on evaluations of criminal activity (Cantone *et al.* 2019; Dixon and Mahoney 2004; Dixon, Mahoney and Cocks 2002; Frumkin 2007; Kurinec and Weaver 2019; Moyer 2013; Rickford and King 2016; Seggie 1983). Most are studies that have assessed defendants speaking with different accents. For example, Dixon, Mahoney and Cocks' (2002) work reveals that defendants speaking RP were evaluated as less guilty than those speaking with a Birmingham accent. A follow-up study by Dixon and Mahoney (2004) indicated that suspected criminals with the Birmingham accent were rated as more likely to be re-accused of a crime and typically viewed as more criminal when compared with the RP speaker. Seggie (1983) revealed that speech is directly related to perceptions of type of crime. This research found that individuals speaking with an RP accent had more guilt assigned to them by participants when the crime was theft, while people with Australian accents were thought to be guiltier of violent crime. US-based research has shown that speakers with typical Mexican-American and black accents were found guilty more often in a case of negligence than white-sounding speakers (Cantone *et al.* 2019). Taken together, this research shows that accent can affect views of involvement in criminal activity and might be attributed differently based on the accent with which one speaks.

Turning specifically to witnesses in a legal setting instead of defendants, the only noteworthy research is that conducted in Spain (Sobral Fernandez and Prieto Ederra 1994) and the United States (Frumkin 2007; Kurinec and Weaver 2019; Rickford and King 2016). Sobral Fernandez and Prieto Ederra (1994) studied regional accents in a courtroom (see above for a brief description of that study and its support for APT). Rickford and King (2016) have written about the *Zimmerman v State of Florida* (2013) case, reporting that in the sixteen-plus hours of jury deliberation, Rachel Jeantel's testimony was not mentioned (see above regarding why her statement was possibly perceived negatively and disregarded). This is startling, given she was the prosecution's star witness.

In the United States, General American English (GAE) speakers are rated higher than those with other variants of English (e.g. southern, Boston, New York accents). Kurinec and Weaver (2019) used mock jurors to study the impact of accent and race amongst jurors. Witnesses speaking with AAVE were rated as less professional and less educated, and generally received more negative overall evaluations than standard GAE speakers.

Frumkin's (2007) study looked at the impact of accent and ethnicity in relation to evaluations of eyewitness testimony given by mock German,

Lebanese and Mexican eyewitnesses speaking with and without a foreign accent. The native accent conditions were rated more favourably than their foreign-accented counterparts. Ethnicity also had an effect, as Lebanese eyewitnesses were rated lowest, while German and Mexican were rated somewhat higher. Still, all ethnic groups were rated lower in the foreign accent condition than in the native accent condition (Frumkin 2007). This study indicates that individuals who have lived all, or the majority, of their lives in the United States rated people with foreign accents lower than those with native accents, and that there was a hierarchy of foreign accents. These studies provide valuable findings on accent and eyewitness evaluations.

The courtroom is an area where it is important to understand the impact accents might have on a prospective juror. While this has been studied with a Spanish sample twenty-five years ago, and more recently with US samples, no comparable studies have been conducted in the United Kingdom. These studies may be useful as models for what might happen in a UK courtroom. However, there are differences between courts in the United Kingdom, the United States and Spain, and we do not have evidence of how eyewitness accent may impact on ratings of favourability in the United Kingdom. There is research on how British accents are generally perceived, and how defendant accents are perceived, but these have not used a visual court-room setting, instead having only used audio recordings of defendants.

Existing UK research shows that accent makes a difference in how defendants are rated. US and Spanish findings show that witnesses are rated differentially depending on the accent with which they speak. No one should be judged on the basis of their accent, yet academic research and legal cases show this happens all too regularly. Courts need an evidence base to draw upon when thinking about how accent may or may not make a difference. One only needs to look at the Philadelphia courts or Rachel Jeantel's testimony in *Zimmerman v State of Florida* (2013) to understand the urgency of the issue. This problem is not isolated to the United States; UK courts need to address this as well.

The current study attempts to shed some light on how regional UK accents might affect trial outcomes. This could have implications for the criminal justice system. Research has already shown that UK defendants are judged, at least in part, on their accent. An eyewitness is not being judged as a defendant by the jury, but rather is in the courtroom to provide additional information about a crime. The witness' accent should be irrelevant, as it is only judgement about the content of the testimony that should be considered. This research will investigate if differential ratings of favourability ((1) accuracy, (2) credibility, (3) deception, (4) prestige and (5) trial

outcome, guilt and sentencing) are given to witnesses who speak with RP, MLE or a Birmingham accent.

Method

Design

Three accents were measured and selected based on previous research. RP has traditionally been rated highly (e.g. Coupland and Bishop 2007), so it was chosen. As the Birmingham accent has traditionally been poorly rated (e.g. Coupland and Bishop 2007; Workman 2015), it was also selected. The participants were based in east London, so an MLE accent was selected. Participants viewed a video of a mock eyewitness providing testimony with an (a) RP, (b) MLE or (c) Birmingham accent.

Based on previous research, there were two research questions to be addressed. First, as RP was most highly rated in defendant studies, would it also be most highly rated with witnesses? Will witnesses speaking with RP accents be rated more favourably than witnesses with regional accents, thus providing support for the status dimension of APT (Anderson *et al.* 2007)? Second, in line with the solidarity dimension of APT (Anderson *et al.* 2007), will listeners rate those from the same region as themselves more favourably than UK speakers from Birmingham? The hypotheses are as follows.

> **Hypothesis 1:** There will be a significant main effect of accent on the dependent favourability variables (accuracy, credibility, deception, prestige, guilt and punishment). RP will be considered significantly more favourably than either of the regional accents.

> **Hypothesis 2:** MLE will be favoured (on accuracy, credibility, deception, prestige, guilt and punishment) over the Birmingham accent due to the location of the study (i.e. east London).

Participants

Ninety-four university student participants (forty-two males, fifty-two females), mean age 29 years, range 18–80, participated in the study. Four participants were excluded from the study as they were not born in the United Kingdom, giving a total of ninety participants (thirty-eight males, fifty-two females). Participants were eligible for jury service in the United Kingdom as they were UK citizens and a minimum of 18 years old. It should be noted that while UK juries are obviously not only selected from a university student pool, a meta-analysis (Bornstein *et al.* 2017) showed

that this is an ecologically valid way to study courtroom judgements. No compensation was provided to participants. Notices were put up in the School of Psychology, in order to recruit participants.

Measures and materials

Video testimony was provided by a trained actor in a set designed to look like a UK courtroom. This is different from the other UK research, which has used audio testimony and consequentially should increase the ecological validity of the study. The testimony was two minutes long and was identical in each of the conditions, with the exception of the accent (RP, MLE, Birmingham) in which the testimony was delivered. The actor was a white British male in his 50s. He provided testimony about a crime of aggravated assault and positively identified the male defendant.

Using the matched-guise technique (Kang and Rubin 2014; Lambert 1967; Lambert *et al.* 1960), all features of the testimony were controlled (e.g. speed, tone and sound of voice, hand gestures, physical appearance, courtroom), so that only the accent of the witness varied. There are drawbacks to using the matched-guise technique. It is possible that even a trained actor may make linguistic mistakes which might be noticed by the listener. There was some degree of quality control, in that the actor was provided with authentic accents from which to practice, and as an actor is used to mimicking different voices and accents. While the London-based sample may not notice slight mistakes in the non-local accents, they are likely to be sufficiently familiar with what RP and Birmingham speakers sound like to be able to identify the accents as non-local yet native British. As an additional control, three speakers from each of the accent groups, MLE, Birmingham and RP, were asked to listen to the accents. The researchers used speakers who use RP-like speech as we could not find true RP speakers. They were in 100% agreement that the accents were representative of their groups.

The researchers reviewed several pieces of eyewitness testimony from a number of criminal court proceedings along with testimony provided in previous research. Using these as a model, testimony was created by the researchers. Real testimony was not used because of the possibility participants might be aware of the case. Using several pieces of real and fabricated testimony from prior studies, the researchers were able to devise a realistic, albeit fictional, piece of testimony.

A two-part self-report questionnaire was used with sections on demographics and favourability impressions of the witness. The demographic section included questions about age, sex, ethnic background, nationality (to omit non-UK nationals from the study), whether the participant was

born in the United Kingdom, and where they lived in the United Kingdom. The favourability impressions of the witness section asked questions about the accuracy, credibility, deceptiveness and prestige of the witness, and guilt and sentence lengths that should be assigned to the defendant. The favourability questions used a Likert scale from ranging from 1 to 10 (from 'not at all' to 'very much'). An example of a question is as follows.

How credible do you think the witness is?

Not at all	Not very	Somewhat	Quite	Very much so
1 2	3 4	5 6 7	8 9	10

An even numbered scale was used so that participants could not choose a completely neutral option, and instead were forced to have at least a slight opinion towards favourable or unfavourable even if they chose 5 or 6. Participants were given some descriptions (as above) to correspond to the scale numbers. Sentencing lengths were measured on a different scale and were derived from the UK judicial system guidelines, with participants being given four sentence length choices (i.e. 3–5 or 4–6 or 7–10 or 10–16 years' imprisonment). It should be noted that participants were not asked to identify the accent they heard in the questionnaire, as the researchers thought that would give away the hypotheses of the study.

Procedure

Participants were given an information sheet about the study and, once read, signed a consent form if they were willing to participate. Participants were informed that they would be participating in a study about eyewitness testimony, but were not told they would be providing ratings based on accent. They were randomly allocated to view one of three two-minute video recordings.

This process continued until the number of participants for each condition reached the minimum number ($n = 30$) required for the design of the study, as determined by a power analysis ($p = 0.05$). There were thirty participants for each of the accent conditions, RP, MLE and Birmingham. The video consisted of an extract of mock eyewitness testimony in which only the witness was visually present, although the voice of a barrister asking questions is heard. No other information about the mock case was presented, as the research was designed to measure the impact of the witness accent. Further information about the case could have muddied the participant's ratings of the outcome variables. After viewing, participants were

given the questionnaire for completion. They were debriefed following completion of the questionnaire.

Results

There was an overall trend that RP yielded the most favourable ratings when compared with MLE and Birmingham accents for accuracy (M = 7.93), credibility (M = 7.27), prestige (M = 6.80); the lowest ratings of witness deception (M = 6.69); and the highest levels of defendant sentencing (M = 3.60) (see Table 1 and Figure 1). The means are in line with what was expected, based on hypothesis 1. With respect to defendant guilt, surprisingly RP received the lowest rating (M = 5.59), with the MLE condition receiving the highest levels (M = 6.70) (see Table 1 and Figure 1). Note: it was expected that the more favourable the accent, the more likely the

Table 1: Favourability means (M) and standard deviation (SD).

	RP ($n = 30$)		MLE ($n = 30$)		Birmingham ($n = 30$)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Accuracy	7.93	1.53	6.46	1.56	5.96	1.89
Credibility	7.27	1.84	6.00	1.50	6.31	1.90
Deception	6.69	2.82	7.35	1.83	7.54	1.90
Prestige	6.80	1.63	5.35	1.60	4.62	1.94
Guilt	5.59	2.53	6.70	1.35	6.00	1.83
Sentence*	3.60	1.89	2.90	1.18	2.04	1.46

* Sentence was measured on a 1–4 scale, with 1 being the lowest sentence length. Other variables were measured on a 1–10 scale.
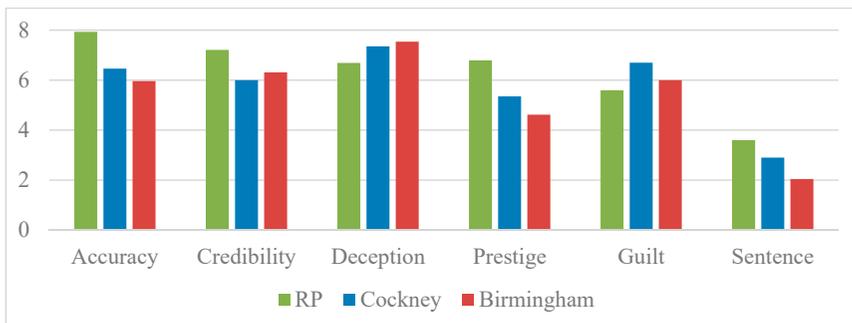

Figure 1: Favourability means.

defendant would be found to be guilty, as the stimulus was a positive identification of the culprit by the prosecution's eyewitness.

The mean ratings for MLE were higher than the Birmingham accent for accuracy (MLE: M = 6.46; Birmingham: M = 5.96), prestige (MLE: M = 5.35; Birmingham: M = 4.62), guilt (MLE: M = 6.70; Birmingham: M = 6.00) and sentence (MLE: M = 2.90; Birmingham: M = 2.04), in line with expectations from hypothesis 2. Contrary to predictions, they were lower for credibility (MLE: M = 6.00; Birmingham: M = 6.31) and deception (MLE: M = 7.35; Birmingham: M = 7.54) (see Table 1 and Figure 1). Confidence interval (CI) ranges for the RP, MLE and Birmingham accents may be found in Figures 2–4.

A multiple regression was conducted including the six favourability variables (accuracy, credibility, deception, prestige, guilt and sentence) as dependent variables with the independent variable of accent (RP, MLE or Birmingham). The analysis yielded significant findings for four of the
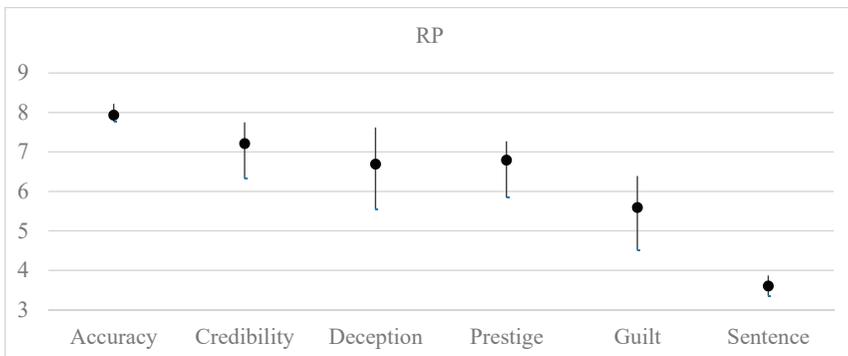
Figure 2: RP mean and confidence intervals.
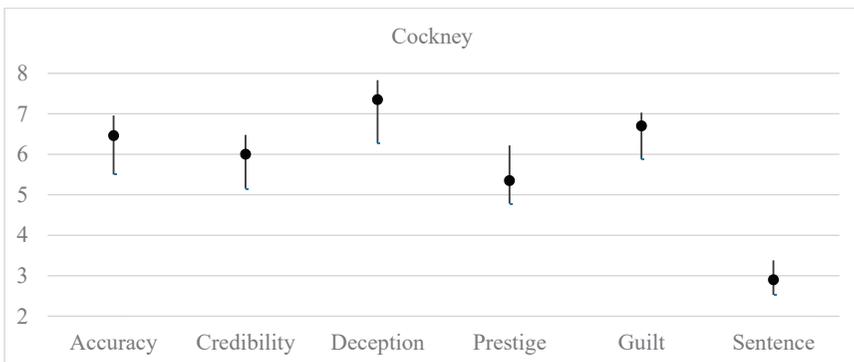
Figure 3: Cockney mean and confidence intervals.
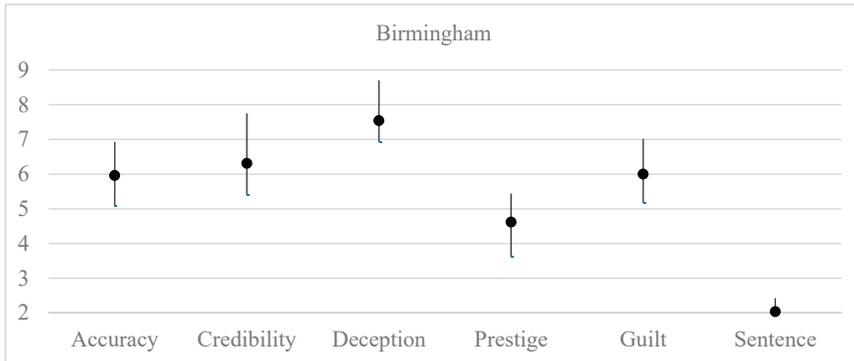
Figure 4: Birmingham mean and confidence intervals.

dependent variables: accuracy ($F = (2, 78)$ 10.56, $p = <0.01$, eta² 0.21), credibility ($F = (2, 78)$ 3.55, $p = <0.05$, eta² 0.083), prestige ($F = (2, 78)$ 11.41, $p = <0.01$, eta² 0.23) and sentence ($F = (2, 78)$ 5.32, $p = 0.05$, eta² 0.062).

Follow-up protected t-tests showed differences in the predicted direction between RP-MLE for accuracy (t (89) = 2.47, $p < 0.05$), credibility (t (89) = 2.31, $p < 0.05$), prestige (t (89) = 2.89, $p < 0.05$) and RP-Birmingham for accuracy (t (89) = 1.94, $p < 0.05$) and prestige (t (89) = 2.02, $p < 0.05$), partially supporting hypothesis 1. No significant differences were found between the regional accents MLE-Birmingham, contrary to hypothesis 2.

Table 2 shows significant correlations as would be expected between a number of the variables. Accuracy was significantly correlated with credibility, prestige and guilt. Credibility was significantly correlated with these variables as well as with deception. Prestige and deception were significantly correlated, and deception and guilt were correlated. Sentence was only correlated with guilt.

Table 2: Favourability correlation matrix.

	Accuracy	Credibility	Deception	Prestige	Guilt
Accuracy					
Credibility	0.60**				
Deception	0.21	0.60**			
Prestige	0.41**	0.48**	0.26*		
Guilt	0.28*	0.50**	0.50**	0.16	
Sentence	0.22	0.19	0.19	0.20	0.43**

* Correlation is significant at 0.05 (2-tailed).
** Correlation is significant at 0.01 (2-tailed).

Discussion

The goal of this study was to investigate whether accent impacts favourability ratings of eyewitnesses in a criminal case. APT (Anderson *et al.* 2007), discussed above, attributes an individual's ratings of particular accents to two dimensions, status and solidarity. The status dimension appears to provide a valid explanation for understanding the significant findings from this study. In the current study, the message itself and the courtroom were identical, and the same actor was used to control for style of speaking across the accents. All variables other than accent were kept constant; the setting, the witness and the verbal testimony. Therefore, the most restrained conclusion for the significant findings is that it was accent that affected different ratings. If the testimony and its message were the most important features of the eyewitness statement, as they should be, there should have been no differences in ratings of the eyewitnesses across the accent conditions.

The data supported hypothesis 1, indicating that there was a significant main effect of accent on favourability variables. As predicted, RP does make a difference in the courtroom compared with regional accents, in line with the status dimension of APT. However, hypothesis 2 was not supported. There were no significant differences between local MLE and the Birmingham regional accent. This is a heartening finding, in that people did not rate the accent geographically closest to them more positively than a more distant regional accent, contrary to APT's solidarity dimension.

The finding that RP speakers are rated better than regionally accented speakers is in line with previous research highlighting the importance of accent in presenting a message (Coupland and Bishop 2007; Giles 1970; Lev-Ari and Keysar 2010; Morales, Scott and Yorkston 2012; Mugglestone 2003). The current research supports the more substantial finding that accent yields differential ratings in mock courtrooms (Cantone *et al.* 2019; Dixon and Mahoney 2004; Dixon, Mahoney and Cocks 2002; Frumkin 2007; Kurinec and Weaver 2019; Sobral Fernandez and Prieto Ederra 1994). These results further the research by showing that not only defendants but even witnesses can be rated differently in UK courtrooms based on their accent.

Since this study only looked at a single rater or juror in a mock courtroom setting, it is difficult to be certain if the effect would be the same in an actual trial. Courts, of course, use juries and group decision-making, which may be different from the individual ratings used in the current study. Still, the use of individual ratings is typical in studies of this sort, and they serve as a proxy for the group ratings of the jury room. However, we do have

some evidence from actual court trials. Based on recent concerns in the Philadelphia Courts and *Zimmerman v State of Florida* (2013), there is evidence that accent-based judgements may well occur in courtrooms (see the 'Introduction').

The non-significant findings were the variables of deception and guilt (RP-MLE and RP-Birmingham) and the RP-Birmingham comparison on credibility. It is possible that listeners feel that an RP speaker is more accurate, credible and prestigious, but may be equally as deceptive as any other speaker. It is unclear why and further investigation is required. With regard to guilt, it is possible that listeners who were willing to make judgements about the witness may have been unwilling to judge an unseen defendant as guilty based on the witness alone. This is perhaps the most optimistic finding of the study and one that may give confidence that even when factors affect ratings of favourability, they may not impact the consequential ratings of guilt. Even though accent makes a difference as to how witnesses are judged in the courtroom, those judgements, at least based on this study, did not impact the guilt or innocence of the defendant. The non-significant finding of credibility when comparing the RP- and Birmingham-accented witnesses cannot be explained at present. It is also interesting to note that guilt and sentencing were significantly correlated, and the lowest level of guilt ($M = 5.70$) and the highest level of sentencing ($M = 3.60$) are both found with the RP speaker. There are numerous possible explanations for both of these results, but hypotheses and investigation into those are required to understand the findings.

The second hypothesis looked at the differences between two regional accents, MLE and Birmingham. There were non-significant differences in the paired comparisons, with the MLE accent rated higher. The lack of statistical significance could be as a result of the Birmingham accent being viewed more positively in recent years than it had been previously (Coupland and Bishop 2007; Thorne 2005). Alternately, it could be familiarity with the Birmingham accent, for example through increased mobility, the fact that London and Birmingham are not that far apart, that the British are not unfamiliar with regional accents within the country or through the variety of accents heard on television shows. As Leach, Watson and Gnevsheva (2016) note, there is less feeling of distance for those people who speak with accents that are commonly heard, for example on television. Some politicians (e.g. Angela Raynor) speak with regional accents rather than adopting an RP-sounding accent, as they did in the past, which may also increase familiarity.

This study did not investigate familiarity with each of the accents, but assumed knowledge based on being British and living in the London area.

The participants are used to hearing an MLE accent near where they live and study. The researchers might have underestimated familiarity with the Birmingham accent, leading to feelings of solidarity with speakers of it.

In summary, the results provide three important findings regarding accents. First, and partially supporting hypothesis 1, accent impacts evaluations of eyewitness testimony related to accuracy, credibility, prestige and sentence. Second, this study shows that local and non-local regional accents do not yield different ratings. This suggests that people may not feel as socially distant from those who live geographically further away from them than was previously thought. Third, and perhaps the most positive of all, witness accent does not appear to be associated with attributions of defendant guilt. This is an encouraging finding for the courtroom, and although it needs corroboration, it does indicate that justice may indeed be blind to one extra-legal feature, some eyewitnesses' accent.

Limitations and future research

There are several limitations to the current study. First, it considered a restricted number of accents and was therefore only able to provide limited results with respect to British regional accents. A second limitation is the amount of information provided in a two-minute video of mock testimony. It could be argued that it did not provide sufficient information for the mock jurors to be able to form an adequate opinion of the case at hand. A third limitation is that we did not ask the participants to identify their own accent. In part, this is because most were believed to have an MLE accent, but in a university setting may try to speak a version of RP. It was unclear if having those data would have yielded useful findings. In retrospect, it would have been good to have that information.

Future studies could create a more complex courtroom interaction. For example, studies could use additional actors in the vicinity of the witness box, increasing the realistic setting for the mock jurors to formulate their evaluations. Similarly, the introduction of a defendant, examination and cross-examination of the eyewitness by a barrister could have implications as to how the witness is perceived. Other studies could employ a similar design to this one, but have a longer piece of testimony, different levels of seriousness of crime and a greater range of UK accents. Further studies should investigate how APT's concepts of status and solidarity may be relevant to accents in courtrooms. Additionally, future studies could build on this one to investigate where and what triggers witness accent to yield judgement of guilt beyond only ratings of witness favourability.

Conclusion

The current study shows certain accents to be a significant predictor of some perceptions of eyewitnesses in the courtroom. This corroborates other research on how individuals with non-standard accents are viewed (Lippi-Green 1994).

The current study sought to control for individual differences through the use of the same actor in all conditions. It further controlled for changes in speech pattern, significantly reducing the likelihood of other factors influencing the evaluation. Significant findings were revealed on four of the variables – accuracy, credibility, prestige and sentence – with no significant findings on whether the defendant was deemed guilty or innocent. This latter finding is an exceptionally important one, in that accent discrimination does not appear to automatically occur in a courtroom at any time someone has a less prestigious accent. While accent discrimination may not always occur, it appears to have occurred in cases such as *Zimmerman v the State of Florida* (2013), *Clifford v the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (1999) and in the Philadelphia courts in 2019. It is important to find the nuances that trigger its occurrences.

In sum, the current study adds valuable information to the small body of existing research on the effects of accent on eyewitness testimony. This study shows that accents do impact some ratings of witnesses, but not the more consequential decision about conviction or acquittal. The specific accent and favourability variables assessed have corroborated some previous research findings (Cantone *et al.* 2019; Dixon, Mahoney and Cocks 2002; Frumkin 2007; Kurinec and Weaver 2019), but more work is needed to determine if accent is consistently a factor that affects how witnesses are perceived in the courtroom.

About the authors

Lara A. Frumkin is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the Open University in the UK. She received her PhD in Community and Social Psychology at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. Her research is in social and community psychology, focused on how witnesses are perceived based on extralegal factors.

Amanda Thompson obtained her BSc in Psychology at the University of East London and went on to gain her MSc from University College London in Countering Organised Crime and Terrorism.

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