Level: B2: Upper Intermediate

Skill: Reading

Why accent bias is a dirty game

Talking your way to success: accent bias in the workplace

"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.

I've always had voice crushes but not for grand, stentorian types. I love voices that sound unusual or have a slightly broken crack.

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.

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.

"It's a dirdy 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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?

LIVEWORKSHEETS

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- Drag and drop the words with the correct definition.
- Check your answers and your understanding of the words by using them to complete the example sentence under each definition.

hierarchy | overcome | posh | prejudice | represent | tribe

1. someone who talks or behaves in a way that is typical of people from a high social class

.....

Emma has a very .....accent. She sounds like a duchess.

2. a group of people with its own distinctive tastes, interests, ways of dressing or behaving, etc.

.....

Looking at his suit and tie, he probably belongs to the Wall Street .....

3. be an example of a particular quality or type or speak or act officially for another person, group, or organisation

.....

She .....her company at the conference last week.

4. a system for organising people according to their status in a society, organisation, or other group

.....

The CEO is at the top of the management ..... .

5. an unreasonable opinion or feeling, especially the feeling of not liking a particular group of people

.....

There is a lot of ..... against people over the age of 50, so it's difficult for them to find good jobs.

6. succeed in dealing with or controlling a problem

.....

We are prepared to do what it takes to ..... these obstacles.

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