

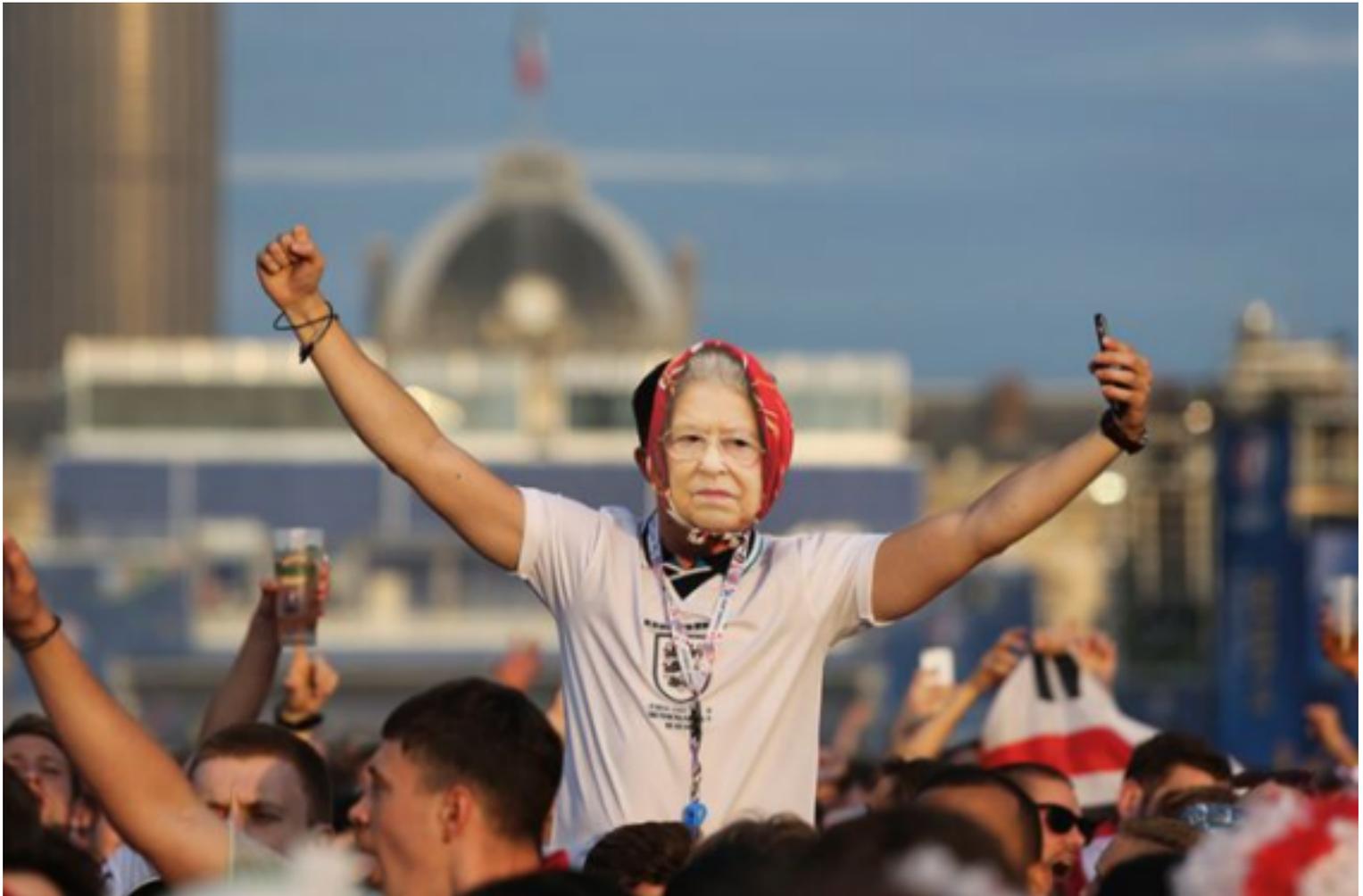


Snobbery against regional accents is hurting university teaching

Quiet acceptance of accent discrimination damages efforts to make classrooms more inclusive, says Katerina

Loukopoulou September 28, 2017

By [Katerina Loukopoulou \(/author/katerina-loukopoulou\)](#)



Source: Getty

Few organisations are as committed to policies encouraging diversity and inclusion as universities, but one form of discrimination remains silently accepted in academia.

I'm talking about prejudice against regional and foreign accents (/node/584322). While universities have made huge strides to stamp out discrimination against staff and students based on the nine protected characteristics of the Equality Act 2010 – such as race, sex, religion and disability – accent bias has eluded current good practice.

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Consider the issue of teaching and learning: it is quite common to encounter sessions about accent reduction or received pronunciation (RP) as part of presentation skills training for students, especially for international students or native speakers with strong regional accents.

Allowing for varied accents in the classroom should be part of the wider drive to create an inclusive curriculum that will appeal to the widest possible range of ears.

However, very little research exists on the role of different accents – foreign and regional – of students and staff in either classrooms or syllabus content. Inspired by Hamid Nacify's landmark 2001 book *An Accented Cinema*, I have started developing a project about pedagogic strategies that may facilitate the embedding of accents into the curriculum, mainly in the discipline of Film studies, but I hope that it will have wider application across other disciplines.

The project poses several uncomfortable questions for the academy and attitudes towards accents. For example, does unconscious bias against certain accents exist in higher education? If so, does this bias also act as a barrier to inclusive learning and teaching, as well as career progression for staff?

Curriculum design is often predisposed not only towards an anglophone syllabus content, but also towards RP. In the field of Film studies, for example, it is common to encounter modules with generic titles such as "Film narrative", where 95 per cent of the syllabus content consists of anglophone Films of predominantly "neutral accents" – for example, the US "Hollywood accent" or British RP accents. This unacknowledged preference prevents students from exposing themselves to what voice coaches Helen Ashton and Sarah Shepherd call "diversity (<https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/uk-accents-not-what-you-say-how-you-say-it>) that we can hear".

Having taught and reviewed numerous Film studies courses, I have noticed a pattern: unless a module title incorporates geographical specification, such as "British Cinema" or "French New Wave"), then the syllabus content of most introductory courses will conform to an anglophone-RP agenda.

I decided to tackle the issue after one particular incident in the classroom. After a screening of an extract from the highly acclaimed 2011 Channel 4 documentary *The Story of Film*, directed and narrated by Mark Cousins, some of my students expressed distaste for his Irish-Scottish-accented voiceover. "A David Attenborough-style narration would have made it so much more credible" was one of the comments, exposing preconceptions caused by the lack of familiarity with a non-RP accent. Documentary Film has for so long been burdened by authoritative-neutral-accent-voice-of-God narration that slight variations still stand out as exceptions.

The problem intensifies when comments about a speaker's accent turn into evaluative judgements about their intelligence, credibility, trustworthiness or simple ability to communicate. Research in this area is growing; cognitive psychologists Shiri Lev-Ari and Boaz Keysar have investigated (<http://pubman.mpg.de/pubman/item/escidoc:1837436:5/component/escidoc:1837698/LevAriKeysar.pdf>) the question "Why don't we believe non-native speakers?", while sociolinguist Bettina Beinhorn has shown how "perceived intelligibility (http://doe.concordia.ca/copal/documents/6_Beinhorn_Vol5.pdf) [of accented speech] is influenced by factors such as familiarity with the relevant accent".

It highlights the question of whether students and staff with regional or foreign accents (/node/587274) encounter biased attitudes. At Middlesex University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/middlesex-university>), I will be collaborating with colleagues who teach the BA English module "Global Englishes" to address some of these questions and to co-create accented resources with our diverse body of students by drawing on their own experiences and small research projects.

Confronting accent prejudice is about not just valuing students and staff but improving the classroom experience. If, for example, international students become self-conscious about their accents and do not feel comfortable contributing to class discussions, seminars and oral presentations, then all learners lose out. The same applies to students from the North of England, Wales, Ireland or Scotland who are studying at universities in southern England.

So let's equip future generations of students with flexible speaking and listening skills (/node/42419) that will empower them with knowledge of difference and diversity as it is vocalised around them. A diversity of accents should be welcomed as a rich teaching resource rather than seen as a distraction from a mono-accented orthodoxy of higher education.

Katerina Loukopoulou is a senior academic developer for the Faculty of Arts and Creative Industries at Middlesex University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/middlesex-university>).

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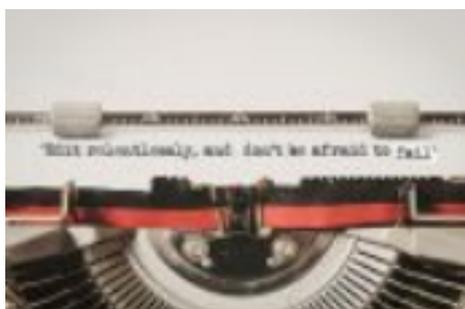


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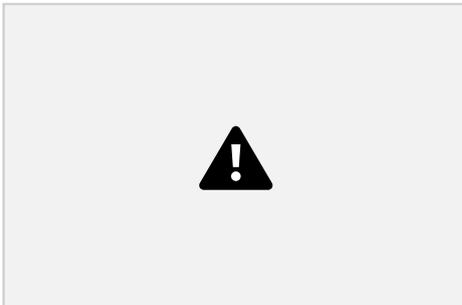
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