Do accents matter in modern Britain?

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A report has found evidence of 'accentism' – discrimination against people because of how they speak

Once, so long ago that it could have been in another life, I was required to take a voice test by the BBC. I had been previously recorded reading the Autocue and, confounded perhaps by barely submerged cadences from the East End, someone found cause to worry. So off I went to the chief voice trainer – a man whose honey-coated, phonetically immaculate delivery made him a legend inside the corporation and beyond. He listened as I read a script that he had rattled off that morning on the Today programme. I just about passed muster. "Your voice is not my voice," he said kindly. "But I think you'll do."

Do accents still matter? Last week Dr Alexander Baratta from the University of Manchester spoke of "accentism", where people are discriminated against because of how they speak, and likened it to racism. In [a study](http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/28225710), he asked people why they changed their accents and how it made them feel. A third of those questioned said they were "ashamed" about flattening out their accents. But what was the alternative? We all want to get ahead; for the most part, the best way to do that is to "fit in". Still, there is a price, the professor says. Facing the world with a voice that is not your own can "undermine your sense of being".

And perhaps that's right. But it must depend on the level of confidence and self-worth that existed at the outset. Think of all the migrants from years past who tinkered with their names to better enable them to make a success of life in Britain or America. They altered something pretty fundamental and survived with psyche intact. [I've written](https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/jul/19/names-rahul-call-me-rob) of the friend who christened his children with traditional Asian names, then changed them to completely different British names "to make it easier for them". We are all chameleons when necessary.

Of course accents should not matter. No one should feel compelled to change the way they interact. If they do so because it works to their advantage, that's different. Then it's about choice, not obligation or coercion.

In multiracial, multilingual, multicultural Britain, the answer – as ever – is reasonable accommodation. The responsibility of the listener is to be tolerant, celebratory perhaps, and to adapt when necessary. The requirement on the speaker is to make themselves understood, whatever lilt they choose.