



Sometimes it's not what you say but what accent you use to say it



Janet Holmes
WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

WHY do accents arouse such passion? A student recently referred me to an interesting internet essay labelled "Talking proper". It reminded me of an item about Tom Cruise that I had stored away on this topic. A newspaper report claimed that Cruise was "so taken with new British friends David and Victoria Beckham's English accents that he's trying to learn the lingo himself. [Victoria] will say things like 'bloody hell' and 'blimey'. And she'll say 'come on chaps' to her sons. Tom loves hearing it all and is building up a bit of an Anglo vocabulary himself."

Although it confuses accent (just pronunciation) and dialect, this snippet is an indication of the prestige of a particular accent in a particular context. Posh Spice found the ideal context for her London English – in LA it sounds very special and attractively "English".

Accents of any language arouse strong reactions, especially in their local environments. Linguists have had great fun demonstrating that people are quite prepared to make judgments about people's personality, intelligence, and even their height based on hearing a short snippet of their speech on a recording device. And before you snort with derision, think about your image of Geoff Robinson or Kathryn Ryan and check out whether height features in that image.

Linguists have demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that judgments about accents are socially based. When you play people recordings of a range of

accents in languages they don't know, they have no basis for assessing them. The results are random. Just as many people rate a particular accent highly as give it a low rating on social and aesthetic scales. In other words, you judge an accent on the basis of your associations with the accent. And you also judge people on the basis of the associations of their accents. So if a person sounds Maori or Chinese or oh-so-British, then you draw on your stereotype of those groups in your assessment. If they sound working class, you assume they have a low-status job and a low income and they are not very well educated. If they sound like a High Court judge, you rate them highly on intelligence, competence and profession.

In England, with a few exceptions, urban accents rate lower than regional accents, and the Birmingham accent comes out lowest in almost every study that has been undertaken. Despite the popularity of the Beatles and the Liverpool soccer team, the Liverpool accent is also not highly rated. It is lumped at the bottom of the accent league tables with Belfast. Cockney does not rate highly either, but "young RP" associated with the young royals (and with St Diana) is very prestigious – that's what Posh Spice uses.

RP is Received Pronunciation or a Real Posh accent (as one of my smart students labelled it!). It is the most highly regarded accent of British English in the top social circles. Children acquire it in English public (ie private – that's the British again!) schools, and it

is the accent used by those from "the top drawer", about 3 per cent of British society. Though it was once prescribed usage for news-readers, it is no longer heard much in New Zealand, and when it is, many people consider it astonishingly old-fashioned or weird.

New Zealand has its own socially based accent scales of course. People who use a "broad" New Zealand accent are generally rated low on social status, education and intelligence, and judged to be unreliable. People who sound like Hewitt Humphrey or Bernadine Oliver-Kerby are rated as intelligent, competent and highly educated. In New Zealand, we really should know better. There are so many counter-examples – people who have broad Kiwi accents who are successful, intelligent people with high-profile public roles – Tim Shadbolt, Helen Clark and Mark Sainsbury.

But employers continue to make judgments based on accent, refusing an interview to people who don't sound intelligent to them. And landlords claim that the flat has been taken if they don't like the sound of the Maori, Samoan, Indian or Chinese accent of the inquirer on the phone.

It is time we grew up and realised that something as superficial as accent is not a dependable indicator of a person's intelligence or reliability. We can do better than Tom Cruise.

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Talking proper: From left, Tom Cruise, wife Katie Holmes, Victoria and David Beckham who all share the limelight but sound very different. Photo: REUTERS