

LANGUAGE & EDI AT WORK

What is bias?

Bias is the brain's way of perceiving patterns and simplifying information, meaning that everyone has bias, either positive or negative. Although, bias is not inherently bad, because it is the brain's way of processing information, it can easily lead to discrimination against marginalized groups in the workplace and affect how we interact with other people. To curtail and minimize the negative effects of bias, the Equality Act (2010), for example, provides legal protection against nine protected characteristics: race, age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, sex, pregnancy and maternity, disability and religion or belief.

However, there is no explicit mention of language, which is a route for bias against social groups and the vehicle through which the protected characteristics are extensively exercised. Consequently, although it is unacceptable not to hire someone based on their gender, many people face greater obstacles in their careers based on aspects of their language, such as their accents, which often derive from those same social characteristics.

What is language discrimination?

Language discrimination is discrimination against people based on their linguistic identity or language use. Examples include accent bias, interactional bias, and exclusive language. Research suggests that all people, and therefore also recruiters, have specific social associations with certain accents and voices. Unfortunately, this can influence judgements of competence, and affect interaction during interview and workplace interactions. According to the Accent Bias Britain project (www.accentbiasbritain.org), language bias can impede career progression at three stages: pre-interview, interview, and post interview.

Pre-interview

Studies undertaken in the United States (Bertrand & Mullainatha, 2004) and the United Kingdom (Wood et al., 2009) shows that language-related bias can even be exercised before a person has had the chance to speak: CVs with names commonly associated with ethnic minority groups receive significantly fewer replies from potential employers than identical CVs with typically white names.

During interview

In an interview situation, unconscious or conscious language discrimination can arise in numerous forms, including accent bias, bias via conversation structure and response, and the use of inclusive language. All three of these forms of bias are also concerns in the context of post-interview interactions, in the workplace.

What is accent bias?

Accent bias refers to the snap judgements and social stereotypical assumptions we make about people when they speak. Numerous studies have shown that a 'posh' or standard (Received Pronunciation) accent is likely to be judged as more intelligent than a working class or global majority (ethnic minority) accent in the UK, even though a person's accent derives from their social background, not their intelligence. A survey of employers by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2006) found that 76% employers admitted discriminating based on the basis of accent, but only 3% included accent as a category in diversity policies.

Bias via conversation structure and response

Another type of language-related bias evident in both interview and workplace interactions is bias via conversation structure and response type. This simply refers to preference for communication styles used by the interviewer or dominant culture. This results in bias against 'different' communication styles, evidenced by negative interviewer responses such as lack of nodding, change of topic, interruption, lack of encouragement candidate.

This bias is also displayed in non-verbal cues and inconsistent feedback during interviews such as eye gaze, smiling, backchanneling, facilitative overlap vs. awkward interruption and casual remarks and cultural references. Similarly, in the workplace, employees who have different ways of speaking are often ignored. Consequently, language bias can subtly, even unconsciously, convey (dis)preference, undermine confidence in candidate's subsequent turns and heighten anxiety in certain candidates.

Inclusive language

Inclusive language is defined as "language that avoids the use of certain expressions or words that might be considered to exclude particular groups of people". This covers language used in emails, social media marketing, job-ads, websites, and all forms of communication. However, language is fluid and connotations, and meanings of words change quickly. It therefore important to prioritise the application of inclusive language principles and practices rather than learning specific appropriate phrases.

Why Inclusive language?

Language is a powerful tool, and a growing body of research highlights how people are affected by labels used towards them, demonstrating how important inclusive language is. One study found that using gender-exclusive language can "make individuals feel ostracized from a larger group", especially in the case of women. Another found that using gender-inclusive language could "help reduce gender-based discrimination against women and other gender minorities. Additionally, inclusive language is believed to be important for business success. It can increase creativity and improve employee performance in the workplace.

Post-interview

The effects of language bias extent beyond the interview stage. According to a report by the Social Mobility Commission (Ashley et al., 2015), even in cases where these effects are overcome (or absent) in interviews, they may persist in the workplace. Accent bias, interactional bias and can result in:

- Isolation from colleagues
- Subtle impediments to career progression
- Processes of both other- and self-exclusion

Guidelines

Below are some best practices and guidelines for communication:

Race and Ethnicity

The fluid and dynamic nature of language has resulted in varying reference terms associated with race and ethnicity and makes it often challenging and confusing to use inclusive language. As Hult and Huckin state: *"The best rule of thumb is to call people by whatever term they prefer, just as you should pronounce their personal name however they want it pronounced. If you are unsure of what to use to describe a certain group of people, just ask members of that group"* (p. 725-726)

Beyond individual preference, there are some important general points to remember in terms of race and

ethnicity in language. It is always good to avoid the use of race or ethnic slurs or outdated terms. It is also best to avoid the use of minority and use international or global majority. Also use names of a country instead of a continent (e.g. Ghana rather than Africa), because being specific helps to avoid stereotypical bias.

Gender & Sexuality

Many of the above recommendations help with careful language around gender and sexuality as well. In the trans community, for example, people use different terms to describe themselves (e.g. trans, trans woman, or transwoman) which have different connotations. Similarly, some people indicate their preferred pronouns and these should be noted and used. It can be complex and confusing but awareness and open discussion is important. Inclusive terms such as 'Assigned sex', 'everyone', 'colleagues', 'they', 'them', 'workforce', 'folks', 'team' are preferable to biological sex, generic pronouns, opposite sex, 'guys', 'lads', 'gents', 'ladies'.

Disability & Neurodiversity

The APA Manual of Style also recommends using "emotionally neutral expressions" when describing people with disabilities: *"a person with AIDS rather than an AIDS victim, a person with emphysema rather than a person suffering from emphysema"* (p. 76).

Therefore, it is more appropriate to use terms such as 'people with disabilities' or 'people diagnosed with schizophrenia', rather than using essentialising labels such as 'the disabled', or 'schizophrenics'. However; 'autistic people' is sometimes preferred in the community over 'person with autism'. Once again, an open approach to respectfully enquiring about preferred terms can be useful. Other problematic terms are 'wheelchair bound', 'suffering from' and 'special needs'.

Religion

It is common practice to use 'church' to refer to any place of worship. Use 'place of worship' or 'house of prayer' if unsure. Here too, it is important to pay attention to labelling/terminology or categorisation. This is because the association of labels with particular meanings can be exclusionary or misclassify people e.g. assuming Indians are associated with Hinduism.

Accent awareness

The Accent Bias Britain project conducted research into whether training interventions have any effect on reducing differential rating of people based on accent alone. They found that, due to the low levels of awareness of accent as a form of bias, simple awareness-raising significantly reduced recruiters' reliance on accent for information about competence. They recommend showing recruiters the following brief text before interviewing:

Recent research has shown that, when evaluating job candidates, interviewers in the UK may be influenced by the candidates' accent. In particular, they tend to rate candidates who speak with a "standard" accent more favourably than candidates who speak with "non-standard" accents. This is an example of "accent bias". The focus should be on the knowledge and skills of the candidate, not their accent. Please keep this in mind when assessing the suitability of candidates.

The web resource also offer a free 15-minute interactive tutorial on accent bias for potential recruiters: <https://accentbiasbritain.org/training-for-recruiters/>

Conclusion

It is important to be mindful of the following: context, person you are talking and the setting. Also, don't be afraid to ask.

“Inclusive language is more than replacing specific words with more acceptable terms: it's about changing long-held attitudes and habits we don't think twice about but that the youngest of children, who are just learning to speak and read, hear over and over”.

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References:

Accent Bias Britain; www.accentbiasbritain.org