This study examined the effect of regional accent on the attribution of guilt. One hundred and nineteen participants listened to a recorded exchange between a British male criminal suspect and a male policeman. Employing the “matched-guise” technique, this exchange was varied to produce a 2 (accent type: Birmingham/standard) x 2 (race of suspect: Black/White) x 2 (crime type: blue collar/white collar) independent-groups design. The results suggested that the suspect was rated as significantly more guilty when he employed a Birmingham rather than a standard accent and that attributions of guilt were significantly associated with the suspect’s perceived superiority and social attractiveness.

A rich tradition of social psychological research, conducted across a range of speech contexts, has found that accent may affect listeners’ impressions of speakers (see Giles, Hewstone, Ryan, & Johnson, 1987; Giles & Powesland, 1975). It is now widely accepted that standard accents are rated more positively than nonstandard accents, especially on traits associated with competence or status (e.g., intelligence or literacy). For this reason, accent use may systematically (dis)advantage speakers in such institutional contexts as job interviews, medical consultations, and classrooms (Kalin, 1982).

The extent to which this work can be extrapolated to legal contexts is an important question. After all, appraising speakers’ competence and credibility is an everyday practice within many legal settings: police interviews, lawyer-client exchanges, insanity hearings, and of
course, criminal trials. The effects of accent on attributions of guilt would appear to be an issue of particular concern, yet it has received comparatively little research. An exception is Seggie’s (1983) research, which investigated the effects of three local accents—British received pronunciation (RP), broad Australian, and Asian—on Australian raters’ attributions of guilt. Participants listened to a recorded conversation in which an alleged criminal pleaded his innocence and then assessed his guilt. Seggie found that the suspect’s accent significantly influenced raters’ responses but that the nature of this influence varied as a function of crime type (blue collar vs. white collar). More guilt was attributed to the broad Australian accent when the suspect was accused of assault (a blue-collar crime), whereas more guilt was attributed to the RP accent when the suspect was accused of theft (a white-collar crime).

The present research aimed to further document the evaluative consequences of accent in a legal context. We investigated the influence of an English regional accent, the Birmingham or “Brummie” accent, on listeners’ attributions of guilt toward a criminal suspect. The Brummie accent has been featured in accent evaluation research since the early 1970s and, like other “third-class” urban accents, has generally been evaluated more negatively than either rural regional or RP accents (e.g., Giles, 1970; Giles, Baker, & Fielding, 1975). In light of this trend, we might expect Brummie-accented suspects to receive higher ratings of guilt than standard-accented suspects, which is the main hypothesis of this study.

As Giles and Coupland (1991) observed, accent evaluation depends on sociolinguistic context, and it is misleading to treat language attitudes as abstracted responses. Accordingly, our research also examined the effects of two contextual variables on the attribution of guilt, the suspect’s race and the type of crime committed. Although evidence of racial bias in the domain of legal decision making is mixed (see Mazzella & Feingold, 1994), some research has shown that attributions of guilt may be influenced by “crime related racial stereotypes” (Sunnafrank & Fontes, 1983). For example, in a mock jury study, Gordon (1993) found that Black defendants who were accused of assault were evaluated as guiltier than White defendants who were similarly accused.

The second contextual variable, crime type, has been directly examined in two studies of language attitudes. In a South African study, Dixon, Tredoux, Durrheim, and Foster (1994) found that a “Colored” suspect who switched from English into Cape Afrikaans speech was rated as more guilty by White English-speaking listeners than a suspect who did not exhibit speech divergence. Regardless of such accommodative shifts, however, listeners’ attributions of guilt were stronger when the suspect was accused of a blue-collar crime (e.g., assault)
rather than a white-collar crime (e.g., check fraud). Seggie’s (1983) research in Australia located a similar, if somewhat more complicated, pattern. As noted above, Seggie found that accent interacted with crime type to shape assessments of guilt, a finding that may reflect social stereotypes about the likely actions of suspects with standard and nonstandard accents. Being associated with a working-class culture, a Brummie speaker might cue similar stereotypes and expectations.

The main hypothesis of the present research, then, was that a Brummie-accented suspect would elicit stronger attributions of guilt than a standard-accented suspect. In addition, the study tested whether race of suspect and crime type would qualify this effect. The study employed a 2 (accent type: Brummie/standard) × 2 (race of suspect: Black/White) × 2 (crime type: blue collar/white collar) factorial design. All independent variables were instituted as between-subjects variables; the main dependent variable was participants’ attributions of guilt. The study took place in the Department of Psychology at the University College–Worcester. The sample consisted of 119 White undergraduate psychology students (24 men and 95 women, with a mean age of 25.2 years), who participated as part of their course requirements. As our focus was on the reactions of individuals who did not speak with a Brummie accent, participants who grew up in Birmingham were excluded from the sample.¹

Having been randomly assigned to the eight conditions, participants were asked to listen to a 2-minute recorded conversation that was based on a transcript of an interview that occurred in a British police station in 1995. The conversation featured a middle-aged male police inspector interrogating a young male suspect who pleaded his innocence to a crime of which he had been accused. Actors hired for the purposes of the study played both speakers: A standard-accented student in his mid 40s played the role of inspector; the role of suspect was played by a student in his early 20s who spoke with a standard accent. He was a natural code-switcher who grew up near Birmingham and had lived in various parts of England.

To manipulate accent types, we created two matched guises (see Giles & Bourhis, 1976) of the police interview: a guise in which the suspect spoke with a standard accent and a guise in which he spoke with a Brummie accent. In a pretest designed to establish the validity of these guises, the Brummie guise (M = 6.4) was rated significantly higher than the standard guise (M = 3.14) in terms of strength of accent,² t = 13.65, df = 40, p < .001, and more than 95% of raters (n = 40) were able to identify the regional identity of the Brummies speaker. Moreover, confirming the success of the matching process, the guises did not differ significantly in terms of loudness, t = -1.15, df = 40, p > .05, or pitch, t = .025, df = 40, p > .05, though the Brummie guise was rated as higher than the RP guise in terms of speech rate, t = 5.76, df = 40, p < .001.
Because in authentic speech contexts, urban accents tend to be faster than both rural regional and RP accents (Wells, 1982), we decided not to try to eradicate this difference.

The two contextual variables were manipulated by varying the information given to respondents (see appendix). Crime type was manipulated by having the suspect accused of different criminal acts, either armed robbery (blue-collar condition) or check fraud (white-collar condition). This manipulation was based on previous psycholegal research in which crimes involving actual or threatened violence (e.g., armed robbery) has been classified as blue collar, whereas crimes involving deception or breaches of trust (e.g., fraud) have been classified as white collar (Gordon, Michels, & Nelson, 1996; Shapiro, 1990). The race of the suspect was manipulated by varying the racial cues provided to respondents. At one point in the taped interview, the police inspector provided a physical description of the person who committed the crime, and this description was systematically altered across experimental conditions.

Having listened to their version of the tape-recorded exchange, participants completed two sets of rating scales. First, they rated the suspect’s guilt on a 7-point bipolar scale ranging from innocent to guilty. Second, they rated the suspect more generally by completing the Speech Evaluation Instrument (SEI), an “omnibus” measure of language attitudes (Zahn & Hopper, 1985).

As a preliminary step, we examined how the independent variables affected participants’ scores on the SEI. The SEI measures language attitudes on three dimensions: Superiority, Attractiveness, and Dynamism. Three-way ANOVAs conducted on each factor revealed only one significant result—a main effect for type of speaker on Superiority ratings, $F(1, 111) = 90.02, p < .001$. Inspection of the marginal means showed that the Brummmie suspect was rated lower in Superiority ($M = 3.83$) than the RP suspect ($M = 5.24$), and the corresponding $\eta^2$ coefficient (0.45) suggested that this was a powerful effect. Thus, our data reaffirm the well-documented tendency for nonstandard speakers to score lower on competence-related ratings than standard speakers (Giles & Coupland, 1991).

To address the study’s main hypothesis, we performed the appropriate three-way ANOVA on participants’ guilt ratings. A significant main effect for speaker accent only was found, $F(1, 111) = 4.72, p < .05$. The Brummie suspect was rated as more guilty ($M = 4.27$) than the RP suspect ($M = 3.65$), an effect of moderate strength, $\eta^2 = 0.041$. This result broadly supports Seggie’s (1983) Australian data, suggesting that attributions of guilt may also be affected by accent in a British context. In addition, there was a significant three-way interaction $F(1, 111) = 4.83, p < .05$. Follow-up Newman-Keuls tests indicated that the Brummie accent/Black suspect/blue collar cell had significantly higher guilt ratings than the five other cells.
Finally, we conducted a stepwise multiple regression analysis, treating guilt as a criterion and the SEI dimensions as predictors. This indicated that the suspect’s Superiority, $\beta = -.41, t = 2.86, p < .05$, and Attractiveness, $\beta = -.30, t = 2.24, p < .05$, significantly predicted guilt but that Dynamism did not, $\beta = .24, t = 1.38, p > .05$. Together, the Superiority and Attractiveness factors accounted for 13% of the variance in respondents’ guilt ratings, $R^2 = -.13, F(3, 115) = 5.49, p < .002$.

Although causal inferences cannot be drawn here, these results may provide a starting point for further work. One hypothesis, for example, is that nonstandard speakers are perceived as guiltier than standard speakers because their testimony is deemed less assured and therefore more closely associated with shiftiness or related criminal stereotypes. Testing this kind of hypothesis, of course, will require the use of a more sophisticated range of linguistic and evaluative measures than was employed in the present study.

This study also suffers from some rather obvious limitations of external validity. Perhaps most important, attributions of guilt are generally made in a far richer evidentiary context than we have provided, and it is likely that strength of evidence will moderate any effects of accent on legal decision making (cf. Gordon, 1993). Moreover, accent may interact in complex ways with other social markers (e.g., a suspect’s gender and age) to shape legal judgments. Nevertheless, the study has highlighted the relevance of a topic that has not been researched sufficiently: Do some accents sound guiltier than others?

APPENDIX

Excerpt from the transcript of the taped exchange between suspect (S) and police officer (PO).

PO: Okay, would you like to just briefly tell me what your understanding is of the arrest?
S: Well, eh, I was told last night that I was arrested on suspicion of armed robbery/check fraud?
PO: Okay. Are you involved in that robbery/fraud?
S: No, I’m not.
PO: In any way, are you involved in that robbery/fraud?
S: Not in any way whatsoever. It’s absolutely not true, not true at all. I speak only for myself and I am not involved in any armed robbery/fraud, in any way whatsoever.
PO: Well the person that carried out this crime is described as male, White/Black put at 5’9” tall. . . .

Note. The type of crime and race of the suspect variables were manipulated by varying the transcript as indicated.
NOTES

1. Worcester is a city located about 60 kilometers from Birmingham. Although both cities are part of the (English) Midlands, their populations are distinctive in terms of both group identification and local dialect. In the present research, about 40% of the sample were local to Worcester, while the remainder came from various other parts of Britain. As noted above, all participants who were born in or were currently living in Birmingham were excluded from the sample as they may have responded differently to the matched-guise manipulation than participants from other areas. To minimize demand effects, data were not collected about the proportion of standard- and nonstandard- accented speakers in the sample, nor were participants asked to identify their social class. Clearly, either of these variables could have influenced the study’s results.

2. Strength of accent was measured on a 7-point scale. The nonstandard guise’s mean rating of 6.4 (SD = .87) suggests that the Brummie accent was perceived as broad rather than mild.

3. The complete transcript of the conversational exchange found in the Appendix is available from the first author upon request.

REFERENCES


