



# A sociolinguistic perspective on accent and social mobility in the UK teaching profession

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## **A sociolinguistic perspective on accent and social mobility in the UK teaching profession**

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Abstract:	<p>A new interdisciplinary approach to understanding the role of accent in relation to intergenerational social mobility is introduced here. Sociological analyses that attend to accent often focus on broader regional distinctions, or construct limiting dichotomies of accents, rather than capturing the full variety and range of accents, often found at smaller geographic levels. Drawing on the case of the teaching profession, and using qualitative data collected as part of a study of teachers, we illustrate how integrating sociolinguistics into a sociological analysis of social mobility would allow us to combine the micro-geography of class, mobility and speech to a more granular level. The analytical tools provided by sociolinguistics, outlined here, could push forward work on understanding prospects for, and experiences of, social mobility.</p>



# A sociolinguistic perspective on accent and social mobility in the UK teaching profession

A new interdisciplinary approach to understanding the role of accent in relation to intergenerational social mobility is introduced here. Sociological analyses that attend to accent often focus on broader regional distinctions, or construct limiting dichotomies of accents, rather than capturing the full variety and range of accents, often found at smaller geographic levels. Drawing on the case of the teaching profession, and using qualitative data collected as part of a study of teachers, we illustrate how integrating sociolinguistics into a sociological analysis of social mobility would allow us to combine the micro-geography of class, mobility and speech to a more granular level. The analytical tools provided by sociolinguistics, outlined here, could push forward work on understanding prospects for, and experiences of, social mobility.

## Introduction

Accent and speech are central to how social class is distinguished in everyday life. Within sociology, language has been considered central to how racial and socio-economic differences are formed; language expresses the broader power structures present in society, be they gendered, racial, socio-economic or spatial or a combination of all of these (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991; Trudgill, 1974). In research on social mobility (defined here as movements in social class positions across generations) in the UK, accent, and in particular the classed geography of a range of accents, has tended not to be central to sociological enquiry. That is not to say that studies have ignored the central place of accent in the experience of working-class people who are upwardly socially mobile (Hey, 1997; Maguire, 1999; Friedman, 2014) but, with the notable exception of Addison and Mountford (2015), it has not always been foregrounded in academic research on the topic. Over recent years, there has been consistent media reporting of the de facto discrimination of particular geographical accents of largely working-class students and teachers across the UK (The Star, 2012;

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3 Garner, 2013). Whilst this has been explored from a socio-linguistic perspective (Author, 2016,  
4 2017, 2018), until now sociological research has not sought to draw on valuable concepts and  
5 theories from the field of socio-linguistics to address work on social mobility. In this paper, we  
6 introduce a socio-linguistic perspective on accent to highlight for the first time how a more  
7 granular understanding of particular geographical accents can be used to extend social mobility  
8 research and a spatially-nuanced class analysis more broadly. Thus, our rationale for this paper is  
9 not merely to fill a gap, but to explain why the gap needs to be filled in the first instance.

### 16 *Accent and social mobility in the teaching profession*

18 To explore how socio-linguistics can inform a sociological analysis of social mobility, we examine  
19 the experience of teachers from working-class backgrounds with strong regional accents. As has  
20 been established elsewhere (Maguire, 1999; 2005; Author: 2016; 2017; 2018) teaching is a  
21 profession where regionally specific working-class accents are often stigmatized by other  
22 professionals. Given the suggestion that there might be particular pressures on working-class  
23 people to adjust or silence geographically-specific accents in the teaching profession, teaching  
24 provides a well-suited occupational domain to explore socio-linguistic perspectives for sociology.  
25 Such pressures might be internally felt by individuals based on negative perceptions of their  
26 regional accents (Coupland and Bishop, 2007) and/or be based on the feedback by mentors during  
27 teacher training (Author, 2018). Furthermore, teaching also has an important role in the history of  
28 social mobility, underlining its relevance as an area to explore this topic. Over the twentieth  
29 century, teaching became a career path that was strongly associated as one of the key occupational  
30 destinations for upwardly mobile working-class people from a range of different ethnic and  
31 geographical backgrounds and especially women (Apple, 1988; Higginbotham and Weber, 1992).

43 For these reasons, the paper will provide examples of British teachers and the role their accent  
44 plays in the construction of a professional identity. In adopting this focus, we will discuss how  
45 geographically-specific accents suggestive of working-class origins are deemed a barrier to social  
46 mobility. Beyond this, the purpose is to also address an aspect of linguistic usage which is not  
47 specifically addressed in the Teachers' Standards within teacher training. While all teachers are  
48 expected to use what is known as 'Standard English' (see below), formally there is no explicit  
49 mention of a 'standard' accent in the official linguistic constraints on teachers' use of language  
50 and Standard English can, of course, be spoken in any accent. It could of course be the case,  
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3 however, that mentors and senior staff within teaching have specific ideas regarding accents  
4 deemed to be 'standard', perhaps tied to the need for teachers to display (as mentioned in the  
5 Teachers' Standards), 'articulacy'. Who decides, however, what is, or is not, an articulate accent?  
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7 The reality for many teachers from working-class and/or peripheral regions is that the denigration  
8 of particular working-class accents within the teaching profession is central to how the broader  
9 historical and contemporary stigmatization of working-class culture (Skeggs, 1997; Tyler, 2008)  
10 is expressed in this particular occupational field (whilst Skeggs (1997) and Tyler (2008) were not  
11 specifically talking about teachers per se, their wider point is relevant here).  
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### 18 *A sociolinguistic perspective on accent, class and social mobility*

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20 The association between accent and class in Britain is well-established and has a long history. In  
21 particular, the connotations of speaking with regional accents have tended to be quite negative  
22 (Evans and Iverson, 2007; Hughes et al., 2012). Coupland and Bishop (2007) in their study  
23 involving the rating of various British accents in terms of attractiveness and social prestige, found  
24 that accents tied to Birmingham, Glasgow and Liverpool were rated low in both categories, with  
25 the Birmingham accent referred to as 'the *bête noire* of British urban varieties' (2007: 84, original  
26 emphasis). Historically, much prestige was associated with the accent referred to as Received  
27 Pronunciation (RP), itself originally associated with the gentry, aristocracy and, from the 19th  
28 century onwards, the upper-middle classes of South-East England (Mugglestone, 2003).  
29 Nonetheless, there is evidence to suggest that more modern connotations of RP might involve  
30 negative attributes of 'affectation, social snobbery, arrogance' (Hughes et al 2012: 5).  
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40 Moreover, the issue of social mobility has become a central policy concern in the UK over the last  
41 decade (Roberts, 2012). In Britain, the UK Government's Social Mobility Commission has  
42 addressed the role of accent directly through their research. They showed how accent acts as one  
43 of the tools by which working-class candidates for careers in finance and life sciences are filtered  
44 out, as well as the great linguistic efforts that those who do succeed have to make in order to fit in  
45 (Moore et al., 2016: 92-93). We show here the value of a socio-linguistic perspective to facilitate  
46 a more in-depth understanding of accent in the sociological study of social mobility, especially  
47 considering the fact that, to our knowledge, there are no studies within socio-linguistics that have  
48 investigated accent in this manner.  
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3 Within sociology, there is also a similar lacuna when it comes to combining socio-linguistics with  
4 research on social mobility. Despite the centrality of language to Bourdieu's (1977; 1991) analysis,  
5 Bourdieusian analyses of social mobility have largely tended not to dwell on language and accent  
6 in great depth. The role of regional working-class accents as a key marker of difference amongst  
7 socially mobile individuals is often recorded, but tends to be largely mentioned briefly (Friedman,  
8 2014: 353; Friedman, 2016: 136-137). Lawler (1999: 17-18) and discusses in greater depth how  
9 regional working-class accents are associated with feelings of being out-of-place in middle-class  
10 educational or professional settings. By far the most detailed account is Addison and Mountford's  
11 (2015) exploration of the role of accent in demarcating class boundaries in higher education. They  
12 describe how RP is associated with intelligence by students from working-class backgrounds with  
13 regional accents, as well as discussing how university staff from lower socio-economic  
14 backgrounds adjust their register and accent when they are around academics. In this paper, we  
15 seek to build on Addison and Mountford's (2015) work and examine in a conceptually more  
16 detailed way how socio-linguistics can be combined with the sociological analysis of class, social  
17 mobility and education, using the teaching profession to explore these themes.

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19 To do this we combine Bourdieu's concept of 'linguistic capital' with a phonological  
20 understanding of regional working-class accents and RP. Whilst Bourdieu's concept of linguistic  
21 capital has been used frequently to discuss the symbolic prestige and economic advantages  
22 associated with particular languages in multi-lingual and post-colonial countries (Morrison and  
23 Lui, 2000; Smits and Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2003), the number of sociological papers that have  
24 examined how linguistic capital works in the UK context is relatively small (Reay, 1999;  
25 Zevenbergen, 2001). Of course, we should not forget that in certain contexts it is working-class  
26 accents that will have a degree of capital, certainly if the goal is to forge solidarity through shared  
27 working-class accents; in such cases, accents such as RP would perhaps not reflect capital at all  
28 (Milroy and Milroy, 1999). In the first section of the paper, we address how 'Standard English'  
29 and RP function more broadly as forms of linguistic capital through the school system. More  
30 specifically, we focus on how these forms of English may be changing, as well as examining the  
31 phonology of regional working-class accents that underpin the linguistic traumas associated with  
32 upward social mobility.

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3 This more nuanced spatial lens provides the second major contribution of this paper, as we show  
4 how socio-linguistics can be used to examine the micro-geographies of class and accent.  
5 Sociological analyses that attend to accent often focus on broader regional distinctions rather than  
6 looking at smaller geographical differences. Hey's (1997) analysis of how a 'northern' accent has  
7 particular working-class connotations recognizes the lack of nuance in using this broad regional  
8 framing, but does not really address how a more geographically detailed analysis of class and  
9 accent might be developed. In both older and newer work (Lawler, 1999; Friedman, 2014) the  
10 micro-geographies of class and accent are not really the core focus of research. Instead, it is the  
11 broader embodied experiences of social class that are the main focus. Maguire (1999) and  
12 Friedman's (2014) highlighting of the particular negative class associations of the Essex accent  
13 for socially mobile working-class people suggests that a more spatially-nuanced conceptualisation  
14 of class and accent could be developed. Incorporating socio-linguistics into an analysis of social  
15 mobility would allow us to combine the micro-geography of class, mobility and speech to a more  
16 granular level. One example of such a fine-grained approach is provided by MacFarlane and  
17 Stuart-Smith (2012) in their discussion of spatial distinctions of accent and class within Glasgow.  
18 They found that there was a distinctive, more middle-class Scottish accent which was associated  
19 by many research participants with the University of Glasgow and the School of Art. This was  
20 seen as differing markedly from a working-class Glaswegian accent. In this paper, we put forward  
21 the necessary sociolinguistic conceptual framework for a more granular spatial lens for  
22 understanding how accent, place and class combine. This allows us to think relationally about  
23 how language and accent are intertwined with particular, local spatial patterns of class formation,  
24 which shape and reflect broader relations of class domination and subordination.

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42 In the penultimate section of the paper, we provide an empirical example of how a spatially-  
43 nuanced, phonological interpretation of accent can be combined with a sociological analysis of  
44 social mobility. We focus on the experience of teachers in [Author's (2016; 2017; 2018)] studies  
45 of how teachers' regional accents have been policed by their mentors. [Author (2016, 2017; 2018)]  
46 found that some of the northern teachers he spoke to needed to modify their accents in southern  
47 professional settings, with the result that some perceive themselves to be linguistic 'sell-outs'. This  
48 abandoning of regional linguistic forms of working-class identity reflects how geographical and  
49 class identities combine in ways that are not accepted in certain professional settings. Building on  
50 [Author's] research of the context of teacher training, we see that it is often mentors who instruct  
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3 teachers to modify their accents in the construction of an identity deemed ‘professional’. We also  
4 draw on other studies (Maguire, 1999; Moore et al., 2016) to re-examine in greater depth how  
5 issues of geographically-specific working-class accents are central to experiences of social  
6 mobility.  
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### 10 11 12 13 **Changing forms of Linguistic Capital in Britain**

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15 Linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) refers to particular varieties of language that represent the most  
16 prestigious form within a given society, which in turn implies that its use will afford the speaker  
17 a degree of credibility and respect. However, there are implications to this language variety,  
18 notably tied to issues of power. Bourdieu argues that it is a matter of social reproduction, in that  
19 prestige forms are those that reflect the language use of those in power – traditionally, middle-  
20 class white men in Britain – and thus, this variety is socially dominant and is reproduced in schools.  
21 This is certainly the case with the variety of English known as Standard English, which is further  
22 reflected in the Teachers’ Standards in England (DfE, 2013a). Given that Standard English is the  
23 variety propagated in schools, the implication is that this is the language variety that is expected  
24 within not only educational contexts, but also high-profile careers, like Medicine, Law or the Civil  
25 Service. However, Standard English can, as mentioned, be spoken with any accent in light of this,  
26 and what are the implications for accents deemed ‘non-standard’ in Britain within the context of  
27 social mobility, even if Standard English is otherwise being spoken? In other words, while there  
28 is indeed a standard form regarding grammar, are there still notions of standard forms regarding  
29 phonology (i.e. the structure and features of accents)? Trudgill (2002:176) suggests that despite  
30 more egalitarian attitudes towards accent in Britain, with greater exposure to regional accents in  
31 the media, for example, ‘discrimination on the grounds of accent still, unfortunately, occurs in  
32 British society’. Thus, do individuals feel a need to modify their accent in the construction of an  
33 identity that they believe is more reflective of, and appropriate for, a more ‘professional’ middle-  
34 class occupation, with the teaching profession under discussion here as one example?  
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52 However, there is no longer a standard accent as such in Britain. While RP was historically  
53 regarded as the de facto standard accent (Trudgill, 2002), there is evidence that it is losing its  
54 prominence and symbolic prestige within Britain as a whole. Linguists (Przedlacka, 2001;  
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3 Mompean, 2006) in fact point toward a more recent British accent – Estuary English (EE),  
4 originally associated with the South-East of England – as a variety that is argued as becoming  
5 more prominent across the country. This is interesting for several reasons, not least as it could  
6 suggest the partial decline of traditional forms of 19th and 20th century upper/upper-middle class  
7 linguistic modes of expression (Griffiths et al., 2008).  
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12 Moreover, EE has phonological features that are a combination of both RP and Cockney  
13 (Przedlacka, 2001; Mompean, 2006). This suggests that it is essentially a combination of accents  
14 that, respectively, have connotations of both elitism and working-class status. In other words,  
15 might we consider EE to be a balance, an accent that is judged to be neither too middle-class nor  
16 too working-class? Indeed, Hughes et al (2012) argue that EE has evolved based on some degree  
17 of social levelling. This social levelling may be associated with the partial decline of traditional  
18 ‘gentlemanly’ tropes amongst the British elite which have been reported elsewhere (Griffiths et  
19 al., 2008) and in the UK, the BBC has seen a notable shift towards greater inclusion of regional  
20 accents (Mugglestone, 2003: 290-291). Tellingly, Cruttenden (1994:6) refers to a ‘regional RP’,  
21 arguing that RP has been affected by regional varieties, such as Cockney. This is important given  
22 that RP, while historically based in South-East England, has evolved into a class-based accent,  
23 irrespective of one’s region of origin, but is nonetheless susceptible to regional influences. What  
24 EE may represent is a new culturally dominant English accent, associated in particular with lower-  
25 middle to upper-middle-class individuals in London and the South-East (Altendorf, 2003). In the  
26 post-war period, RP was noted to be under threat and Gimson (1964. In: Beal, 2004: 189) predicted  
27 that ‘one of the regional standards will come to be recognised as the new national standard’ going  
28 on to highlight that ‘the speech of the educated classes of the south of England’, as opposed to that  
29 of the English gentry, would most likely provide this model. Altendorf’s findings rather support  
30 this conclusion and Maidment (1994) has similarly suggested that EE is situated on a spectrum,  
31 between Cockney and RP, falling somewhere between the two. It does seem to have risen  
32 alongside the partial decline of RP and the linkage between the two is clearly complicated  
33 (Mugglestone, 2003: 285-290). EE seems to represent both a democratising trend within English  
34 accents and the maintenance of a dominant south-eastern England middle-class accent, a softening  
35 of RP which allows it to sit within the broad class spectrum of EE.  
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3 This all reflects linguistic change in society, which in turn has implications for the role of accent  
4 in social mobility. However, while there is much research on attitudes toward accents in Britain  
5 (Coupland and Bishop, 2007), we have scant information on what exactly are the specific  
6 phonological features that deem certain accents desirable, and part of the ‘dominant’ classes, and  
7 others less so. In line with the shifting prestige of RP and EE’s rise, there is also evidence that  
8 regional accents which retain their regional flavour, but avoid more broad realisations have greater  
9 acceptance amongst younger generations (Coupland and Bishop, 2007). Again, this suggests a  
10 more ‘midway’ accent and is reflective of there being suggested standard accents across the  
11 country (e.g. a standard Liverpool accent, a standard Birmingham accent and so on). More recent  
12 sociolinguistic research (Author, 2018) points toward more legitimate accents in Britain – those  
13 that carry some capital, though not necessarily being symbolically dominant – as generally being  
14 those which may have regional influences but without the strongest or broadest regional accents.  
15 This, as mentioned, also reflects a desire to avoid a singular standard on the old model of RP  
16 dominance, but instead allows for multiple standards based on a given region. These intra-regional  
17 distinctions further suggest how sociology might seek to explore how micro-differences in accent  
18 within region are associated with regional class structures (Pearce, 2009). While British  
19 individuals arguably have a rather intuitive notion of what a ‘broad’ regional accent sounds like,  
20 we need to clarify and bring analytical precision to this on a phonological level.  
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### 37 **Insights from sociolinguistics: The phonology of accents**

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40 Accent is an unconcealed and overt expression of self that carries the possibility for instantaneous  
41 classed, racialized, gendered, and sexualised judgements to be made. It is an attribute that can be  
42 used to position oneself within the social world, as well as to be positioned by others. It is one  
43 element of how mechanisms of respectability and disgust shape and create class positions through  
44 assigning clothing, food, body types and forms of speech particular symbolic value (Skeggs, 1997;  
45 2004; Tyler, 2008). In this context accent modification in the context of moving into a middle-  
46 class occupation is not a simple ‘choice’, but carries with it substantial psychic and personal  
47 emotional cost and disruption to people’s sense of self (Reay, 2005; Lawler, 1999).  
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3 Notwithstanding the social positioning of accents, from a purely linguistic point of view, accent is  
4 nothing more than a particular system of pronunciation, made up of the placement of specific  
5 phonemes (units of sound) in specific contexts. Let us illustrate this by considering the word  
6 'back', with the transcriptions below based on an RP accent and that deriving from Liverpool  
7 (albeit a broad Liverpool accent):  
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12 RP            /bak/  
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15 Liverpool    /bax/  
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17 Both accents would use a short-a sound, but the phoneme used by the Liverpudlian speaker [x],  
18 referred to as a voiceless, velar fricative, is, in more everyday terms, the sound heard in the Spanish  
19 j – an aspirated 'h' made in the throat (e.g. imagine a strong 'h' sound). This is a very infrequent  
20 sound in English, with only Liverpudlian and some varieties of Scottish English employing it. The  
21 question is, essentially, is this one example of a specific sound, which others may make judgements  
22 about, that in turn causes the accent as a whole to be judged in a particular way? Certainly, given  
23 the infrequency of this sound in many Englishes, it could be regarded as a 'marked' form.  
24 Regardless of a particular accent's phonemic inventory, in this case the guttural nature of the  
25 aspirated h sound, the larger issue would appear to be a given accent acting as a linguistic symbol  
26 of the negativity attached to its region of origins. Thus, a stigmatised region and/or class level is  
27 attributed to the accent that is representative of such and subsequently, the speaker. Reaching  
28 further back, in analysing the contemporary and historical connotations of Liverpool's accent and  
29 the city's working-classness, Belchem (2006: 33) argues:  
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41            Scousers articulate a constant stream of prosodic patterns and segmental features which  
42 distinguish them unmistakably as Liverpudlians. Their identity is constructed,[...] by how  
43 they speak rather than by what they say. Instantly recognisable, the accent is the essential  
44 medium for the projection and representation of the local micro-culture, the 'scouse' blend  
45 of truculent defiance, collective solidarity, scallywaggery and fatalist humour  
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52 This highly specific local classed culture and identity is embedded within the accent and speech  
53 of Liverpudlians, this distinguishes the city even within the North (Belchem, 2006: 45-46),  
54 underlining the importance of a spatially nuanced analysis of accent. Belchem's analysis flags  
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the deep centrality of language and accent to collective and individual identities and the historical formation of accent as a constituent part of Liverpool's identity through various phases of migration and political struggle. Thus, certain sounds, in certain contexts, act as linguistic stand-ins, symbolic for the broader perceptions and actual histories attached to the area the accent derives from. Language and accent act as an embodied marker of geographical origins as well as class, and it is the combining of the two that shapes the difficult socio-cultural terrain that socially mobile individuals must traverse.

As mentioned, we need more information on the phonological realisation of an accent deemed to be working-class, not to mention regional accents deemed to be 'less broad', while nonetheless still tied to a specific region. What specific features of a given accent mark it as 'working-class' which in turn are tied into the negative stereotypes ascribed to different geographical working-class identities. We provide an illustration below that can help to shed light on this area. We focus on the Manchester accent, using the word 'Saturday' as an illustration. .

Broad	/saʔdɪ/
General	/satədi/
'Neutral'	/satədei/

The use of a glottal stop [ʔ] has often been regarded as a marker of 'less educated' and informal speech (Millar, 1997; Schlee, 2013). It is often associated with the Cockney accent, such as the pronunciation of *water*, in which there is a noticeable stop of air between the 'a' and the 't'. However, it is also heard in the North of England, with another example being *party*, which would be realised as /pa:ʔɪ/ with a broad Mancunian accent. Likewise, the reduction of the long-a sound in *day* to a short-i sound is also reflective of what might be considered a more broad Mancunian accent (hence, less 'standard'), but by avoiding the glottal stop, it is comparatively *less* broad. This ties in with individuals who declare they 'don't have an accent' (or an accent deemed to be 'neutral'); in reality, we all do of course, but the implication of such declarations is that the more local features (glottal stops, phoneme reduction) are absent and thus contribute to making the accent less recognisable as, in this case, Mancunian. In turn, this can work to eradicate the more negative stigma of a certain region/class by phonologically moving away from such.

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3 However, the factor that would mark a Manchester accent as being Mancunian, regardless of level,  
4 is the fact that words such as *party* would utilise a low, front vowel - [a]. This is a feature of  
5 Northern speech in general in certain words (e.g. bath), as opposed to what we would expect to  
6 hear in RP and Southern speech in general, which would involve a low, back vowel [ɑ]. To give a  
7 clear picture on this, imagine the word *bath* as realised in the North/Midlands of England, and its  
8 pronunciation in the South. Likewise, the word *party* has two broad realisations, certainly in  
9 England:

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17 North/Midlands      /pa:ti/ (here, a more ‘general’ version, hence no glottal stop)  
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19 South                    /pa:ti/

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22 Going further, we might suggest that reductions are a common feature of stigmatised speech, often  
23 beginning in childhood (e.g. being told not to drop one’s g’s, such as goin’ for going). Though  
24 Burridge (2016) regards reductions as a legitimate part of speech, it might be that reductions  
25 represent a collective category which is regarded, in higher social circles, as an example of ‘non-  
26 standard’ speech, however; in this case, non-standard as synonymous with working-class speech.  
27 Another specific example of a reduction is a sub-category known as elision, which involves the  
28 deletion of an actual phoneme.  
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34 For example, in Yorkshire, words such as ‘go’ might be realised, in more broad speech, as /go:/.  
35 This is contrasted with the pronunciation /goʊ/, which might be considered more ‘standard’, in  
36 light of the fact that the second pronunciation is based on the use of a diphthong (i.e. two individual  
37 sounds which combine to make a new sound – here, ‘o’ + ‘ʊ’). In broad speech, it is reduced to  
38 just one sound - [o] - referred to as a monophthong or pure vowel (this was also seen in the  
39 reduction from a long-a sound to a short-i sound in the Mancunian accent examples).  
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45 Despite the lack of a formally standardised accent, explicit or implicit expectations around  
46 particular accents and the devaluation of local working-class accents in professional contexts  
47 might be an issue for working-class people with strong local accents. Recent Social Mobility  
48 Commission research suggests how elite professions in finance and life sciences remain  
49 powerfully dominated by south-eastern accents associated with elite schools (Moore et al. 2016).  
50 What is notable from Moore et al.’s work is the differentiation of intra-London accents – there is  
51 a clear distinction between the forms of speech deemed acceptable in the elite London spaces of  
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3 high finance and those that might be used a short distance away in East London schools. The  
4 continued de facto expectation of specific accents in particular elite professions, suggests that  
5 there is a continued hierarchy of pronunciation even *within* London. Referring to a unified  
6 ‘southern’ accent is missing these kinds of nuances within cities themselves This implies the  
7 continued symbolic power of a particular form of south-eastern middle-class speech, even if the  
8 precise form of this speech and accent is changing and moving away from the conventional RP  
9 model (Mugglestone, 2003). The continued association between ‘good schools’, accent and elite  
10 employment strongly implies that despite the changes in RP, there remains a form of less  
11 accented, more formal English which retains significant symbolic value.  
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### 21 **Methods and data collection**

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23 There is a total of four studies (conducted from 2014 – 2017) which provided potential material  
24 for inclusion in this paper regarding the accounts of teachers and their accents; however, for  
25 purposes of space only a few accounts have been selected. Study one took place in 2014 and  
26 obtained, via questionnaire, the responses of 92 British individuals regarding accent modification.  
27 Six of these responses were from teachers, five of whom were established and one of whom was  
28 a trainee.<sup>1</sup> Study two took place later in 2014 and interviewed 11 trainee teachers from two  
29 Northern universities. Study three was conducted in 2015 and obtained the views of 15 trainee  
30 teachers from two Southern universities via questionnaire, which was chosen as a more feasible  
31 method to collect data given the distance involved with travel. Study four in 2017 interviewed a  
32 further nine established teachers who comprised a private primary school (six teachers); a state  
33 primary (two teachers); and a state secondary (one teacher). The criteria for inclusion in the studies  
34 were that the teachers had to be British or Irish; subsequently, all participants within the four  
35 studies were from Ireland, England and Northern Ireland and as such, were native speakers of  
36 English (and most relevantly, spoke with accents regional to the United Kingdom and Ireland).  
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48 The following regions were represented based on participants’ self-described accents: North of  
49 England – 20; South – 7; Midlands – 4; Northern Irish – 4; RP – 3; Republic of Ireland – 2; Scottish  
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54 <sup>1</sup> By ‘established’ teachers we refer to individuals who were already working within the teaching profession,  
55 whereas ‘trainee teachers’ refers to those who were enrolled on a teacher training course, specifically the PCGE  
56 (Postgraduate Certificate in Education).  
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3 – 1. Each of the four studies explored what role accent played in the construction of teachers’  
4 professional identities in terms of if teachers had chosen, or had been told by mentors/senior staff,  
5 to modify their accents at all to varieties deemed more ‘suitable’ for the teaching profession. In  
6 terms of the focus on class and social mobility, the teachers’ account selected for this study are  
7 those in which participants specifically referred to their class level within their responses – in this  
8 case, a reference to working-class origins. Though class is arguably in need of further unpacking,  
9 the fact that participants self-described this way is sufficient for the purposes of this paper in that,  
10 given this self-identity, it is one which would necessarily include accent as a symbol of class  
11 origins.  
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### 22 **Accent and social mobility in the teaching profession**

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24 In this section we present some examples of the comments that were made by mentors in order to,  
25 from their point of view, ensure the teachers were understood by their students. Teachers with  
26 strong regional accents experienced this as stigmatizing of their own class and geographical  
27 backgrounds. Notably, a secondary art teacher, Susan, with a self-described ‘strong South London’  
28 accent, was told by her mentor to write the word *water* with a capital T, as a means of avoiding  
29 the glottal stop in her speech. While the mentor felt that glottal stop usage was not ‘professional’,  
30 Susan (from Study Three) believed instead that it allowed her to be perceived by her students as  
31 more ‘real’. Susan explained:  
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38           He was very patronising and tried everything he could to change my accent...I struggled  
39 every day with the feeling that I was never good enough. Not good enough to teach, not  
40 good enough in the work environment and not good enough to pass the course.  
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44 Legitimate forms of speech such as that encouraged by Susan’s teaching mentor, have ‘to be  
45 sustained by a permanent effort of correction’, enacted across the field of education (Bourdieu,  
46 1991: 60). Her accent here was deemed by her mentor to be incompatible with her professional  
47 identity as a teacher, which she experienced as deeply undermining of her feelings of self-worth.  
48 However, whilst her accent did not serve as a form of legitimate linguistic capital within the  
49 terms set by her mentor and the normative expectations of teacher training, as she explained, she  
50 believed that through her identity and her accent she brought a bit of ‘reality’ to the school. By  
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3 this, Susan was referring to the fact that her otherwise unmodified accent signals to her an  
4 identity of someone who is proud of their class-, and regionally-based, roots, and does not see  
5 this as incompatible with the teaching profession. She further stated that this reality was based on  
6 the fact that her unmodified accent meant that she sounded ‘more like (the students)’ and  
7 different from the ‘normal teachers’. This overall suggests that, to Susan’s mind at least, an  
8 unmodified accent, one which signals working-class origins, need not have to change for a career  
9 in which she is otherwise qualified, and by choosing to keep it (linguistically) real, she believes  
10 that she is signalling that she is genuine, in part by not adopting an accent which is otherwise  
11 ‘fake’.  
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20 Her mentor, however, regarded her glottal stops as symbolic of an identity incompatible with a  
21 professional context. Susan explained that she is ‘very proud (to be) from Croydon, from the  
22 ‘ghetto’ as the kids call it’. Despite the pressures to adhere to legitimate forms of speech, the  
23 strength of Susan’s geographical and class identities expressed through her accent and the value  
24 she gained from this in her interactions with students could not be completely suppressed.  
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30 Likewise, a teacher from the Midlands, Agatha (from Study Three), was told by her RP-speaking  
31 mentor that it was ‘best to go back to where you came from’ if she could not use Southern  
32 pronunciation in words such as *bath* and *umbrella*. Agatha explained that ‘I feel that if I modified  
33 my accent it would impact on my personal identity, as I am not ashamed of the fact that I am from  
34 Leicester, and I feel some people’s comments imply I should be’. These examples reinforce the  
35 findings of Maguire (2005) that language and accent is a medium through which teachers’  
36 professional and class identities are policed and restricted. There is clear conflict between the  
37 classed and geographical identities of these teachers and the ‘professional’ identity they are  
38 expected to adopt through their voice. The benefits of sounding more ‘real’, with teachers with  
39 local working-class accents benefitting from ‘insider status’ with working-class students (Maguire,  
40 2005: 432-433), are ignored. This suggested ‘realness’ points not just to the self-perceptions of the  
41 teachers, but the perceptions of the students also. That is, if students hear a teacher with an accent  
42 perceived as working-class, then this might suggest to them that the teacher is not, put bluntly,  
43 putting on linguistic airs and graces by modifying to a less broad accent. Though this is but merely  
44 one perception, it is of course a possibility (and one which Susan believed to be true in her case).  
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3 Despite the formal recognition given to aspects of ethnic or religious diversity, standardised, class-  
4 based and a-spatial, non-localised forms of speech are still the norm for teacher training. RP may  
5 have declined in influence, but a homogenising, a-spatial accent still produces symbolic capital for  
6 teachers in the field of education and devalues those who do not adopt it (Bourdieu, 1977: 49). As  
7 one teacher put it, 'you say we've all got to sound the same which is a bit backwards'.  
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12 It is worth underlining the parallels here with Maguire's (1999; 2005) earlier work on experiences  
13 of accent and class in teacher training courses. Whilst as noted above there have been linguistic  
14 changes that have weakened RP, the notion of a standardised form of English in schools underlines  
15 how local, working-class accents remain stigmatized and 'inappropriate' for the language of  
16 teaching. As Ramsaran (1990) argued, the notion of a standardised form of speech and accent like  
17 RP which removes traces of one's region of origin from speech, still retains a powerful influence  
18 with implications for both upwardly mobile working-class teachers and students alike.  
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26 Adopting a 'professional' accent often involves a loss of self in order to achieve legitimacy within  
27 the profession. The evidence from these teachers suggests that accruing sufficient linguistic capital  
28 within teaching still relies on the silencing of local and more 'informal' forms of working-class  
29 speech. Furthermore, there are power implications to consider also, given that teachers are  
30 modifying their accents based on the directives of those who wield power over them in the  
31 workplace, such as mentors. While some teachers wish to retain their otherwise 'non-teacher  
32 accents', there is a perception that mentors on teacher training courses in schools and universities  
33 view them as inappropriate for the context of teaching. Despite the absence of a standard British  
34 accent, however, the word 'standard' (and non-standard) is nonetheless referenced in previous  
35 studies (Millar, 1997), suggestive of what might be considered a rather intuitive concept regarding  
36 an accent that is considered to be appropriate for certain professions and indeed the classroom.  
37 This paper suggests that the phonological reality for such accents is a need to avoid reductions in  
38 speech, such as glottal stops, with an ultimate realisation being an accent not being perceived to  
39 be associated with either upper middle-class or lower working-class identities. In short, there is  
40 still a policing of accent and class in the language of working-class teachers with local accents.  
41 The more archaic forms of RP are now less common, but the stigmatization and  
42 'inappropriateness' of local accents and speech has not changed; the symbolically dominant form  
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3 of language and accent within teaching remains a-spatial, thus serving to mark out teachers and  
4 students with local, working-class voices.  
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7 From Study One, an interesting account was provided by John, who recalled an interview for  
8 PGCE course. John is from Rossendale, in Lancashire, and describes his accent as marking him  
9 out as working-class, which he further described as having connotations of him being  
10 'straightforward' and a 'hard worker'. These were not the connotations felt by the interviewer,  
11 however. John explained that 'a couple of minutes into the interview, the man interviewing me  
12 said he was stopping the interview'. John went on to explain that this was based on his accent,  
13 with the interviewer's rationale being that 'headmasters would be afraid that the pupils would go  
14 home and complain to their parents that the man teaching English couldn't teach it himself'. John  
15 agreed to modify his accent in order to get a place on the course, but felt 'disgusted in (himself)  
16 for attempting to appease the man's bigotry'. This provides a clear example of the connotations  
17 one's working-class accent means to the speaker, versus the connotations to someone established  
18 in education; respectively, connotations of being 'straightforward' versus connotations of being,  
19 broadly, unprofessional.  
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30 In the state secondary school, a teacher from Bristol, Simon (from Study Four), admitted that he  
31 had modified his accent for a career in teaching, all too aware of what he perceives to be the  
32 negative connotations of his Bristolian accent. In terms of what this modification involves, he did  
33 not pronounce his r's in the classroom, thus adopting a non-rhotic accent. A non-rhotic accent is  
34 one in which the letter 'r' is pronounced only before vowels (e.g. red); in Bristol, where rhotic  
35 accents are the relative norm, the letter 'r' is pronounced in all positions within a word (e.g. car  
36 park).  
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44 The Bristolian accent has lots of connotations. Normally, things like village idiot, yokel,  
45 farmer, you know, friendly but stupid...agricultural...so because of that once I came into  
46 contact with people that had softer accents and accents from elsewhere...you have these  
47 kind of stereotypes that exist and it wasn't doing me any favours  
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53 While Simon did not reference class specifically, his references to connotations of farming and  
54 yokels are not suggestive of a middle-class background. He further explained that as a result of  
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3 modifying his accent to a variety that is less pronounced, it allows for him to be perceived in a  
4 more positive light:  
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8 (Modification) carries some power, that carries some respect and people assume people are  
9 educated and confident, as if they've broken free from the shackles of being poor or being  
10 thick  
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15 Simon strongly suggests that the perceptions of his otherwise unmodified accent are nonetheless  
16 relied on to such an extent to form negative judgements. As a teacher, modification was thus felt  
17 to be necessary to not merely fit in better, considering he teaches in Manchester, but to create a  
18 new identity of someone who is socially mobile; perceptions of being 'poor' and 'thick' are clearly  
19 at odds with such an identity. Given that rhotic accents in England carry connotations of being  
20 'unsophisticated' and lead to 'Farmer Giles' imagery (Barras, 2015:277), it makes sense that this  
21 one particular sound was removed from Simon's speech. In constructing a hoped-for identity  
22 (Hecht et al, 2001) via, partly at least, removing his 'r's, Simon in turn explained that this impacts  
23 on his otherwise personal, non-teacher identity. He explained that as a result of this upwardly  
24 mobile identity he has created, it means that 'you kind of present yourself, slightly fake, falsely to  
25 people.'  
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35 Linguistic standardisation here comes at great personal cost; the geographical and linguistic cost  
36 of adopting a 'successful' professional identity as a teacher are just as powerful here as other  
37 aspects of identity loss that occur when people are socially mobile (Reay, 2005). The psychic  
38 costs of linguistic discipline through standardisation of accent and speech also affect students,  
39 who revert to more standard forms of English at school as opposed to at home (Austin, 2014). In  
40 the case of Simon, the removal of his 'r's is an example of an identity forged on linguistic  
41 adjustment, which, while creating a professional identity, weakens his regional identity in the  
42 process. These tensions are similar to those discussed by Maguire (1999) and Lawler (1999),  
43 whereby accent comes to be a key dimension along which the tensions and ruptures involved in  
44 shifting class position are experienced. Maguire's work here is particularly relevant as it  
45 describes how a working-class teacher from Essex experienced prejudice and judgements  
46 because of her accent at a high-performing state school.  
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## Discussion and conclusions

Whilst existing sociological work has mentioned accent in the form of ‘regional accents’ and ‘RP’, and highlighted the social penalties often faced by those with ‘regional accents’, we have shown here that a socio-linguistic perspective can add a level of precision and detail that could be helpful in extending this work. A socio-linguistic examination of accent shows the intricate nuances of different accents, moving beyond these binaries of ‘regional’ and ‘RP’. Adopting this perspective shows, for example, that it does not make sense to speak of a ‘northern’ accent, or even a single ‘Manchester accent’, with a myriad of phonetic styles and features permeating speech patterns of different individuals and groups. These theoretical tools could help us go further in understanding the formation and crafting of social identities, and social class formation in particular. It could help, for example, in understanding the distinctions between those from similar social class backgrounds who are geographically dispersed, having grown up absorbing different kinds of phonetic styles and features. These phonetic styles and features are likely to be important identifiers in the ways individuals (regardless of class) come to subjectively experience and make sense of their identity. Further empirical work could use some of the tools outlined here to understand social identity formation for those growing up in different geographic locations. For example, it could explore the significance of phonetic styles in the ways young people craft their identities and make sense of themselves in relation to the ‘other’. Conceptualisations of social class identity have often been devoid of accent, despite its exposed and open nature which makes it an immediate identifying characteristic. Accent may be as powerful, if not more powerful, than other cultural and social dispositions in terms of the ways individuals position themselves and are positioned by others in the social sphere. Drawing on the sophisticated set of tools developed in socio-linguistics adds further nuance to existing conceptualisations of social class identity in the UK.

Socio-linguistic perspectives on accent could also further develop existing work on understanding prospects for, and experiences of, social mobility for different groups across the UK. It is the combination of social class identity and accent that shapes and defines the difficult socio-cultural terrain that socially mobile individuals must traverse. The example of the teaching profession drawn on here illustrates how accent adaptation can be an integral part of upward mobility for

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3 some. We can take the understanding of accent developed here, as a means to better understand  
4 just how inclusive high-status professions and occupations really are in terms of accent diversity  
5 or, as the case may be, there is a need to leave one's accent at the door (part of it anyway) before  
6 being admitted. Rivera's (2016) study of the hiring practices adopted by elite American firms  
7 showed that for one socially mobile individual, his particular Southern accent was seen as  
8 'charming' by recruiters. This example illustrates how different accents can carry very different  
9 interpretations and potential consequences for social (im)mobility. While this is focused on  
10 recruitment outside the United Kingdom, it still paints a relevant picture of the role that accent can  
11 play in terms of how people are perceived, perceptions that can point toward implied suitability  
12 for the job in question. A more comprehensive and detailed comparison of the role of accent across  
13 different occupations and professions would provide us with a more gradated view of how accent  
14 works differently as a barrier to acceptance and material advancement across different fields of  
15 middle-class life. Socio-linguistics could help push forward work on understanding processes of  
16 social (im)mobility by providing a more fine-grained lens to study how social mobility occurs (or  
17 not) in different occupations. It is particularly valuable at identifying how certain spatially specific  
18 accents (moving beyond just 'regional' accents in a UK context) might limit prospects for social  
19 mobility for some. For example, are specific Mancunian or West Country accents perceived  
20 negatively in certain professions? How inclusive are professions (and particular elite firms) of the  
21 variety of accent styles that exist in the UK and what are the implications for social mobility?  
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38 The difficult experience of being effectively split between two worlds and two identities has a  
39 particularly important linguistic dimension that is worthy of greater sociological enquiry. For  
40 some, a personal identity linked to one's classed identity with all its various dispositions might not  
41 be a comfortable fit in the professional realm. To then abandon aspects of one's personal identity  
42 – here, accent - in order to create a better fit can lead to a sense of not belonging completely to  
43 either identity (of course, the possible 'benefits' of being able to socially navigate multiple worlds  
44 must also be recognised, as discussed by Abrahams and Ingram (2013)). From a purely accent-  
45 based perspective, this can lead to what might be called 'linguistic homelessness' [Author, 2018]  
46 as we saw earlier in the case of the Bristolian teacher. Adopting this socio-linguistic perspective,  
47 further work is needed to understand the social consequences of moving into spaces where an  
48 individual's accent in particular is marginalised and excluded (above and beyond their social class  
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3 identity). In addition to social class, geographic location is one area of enquiry gaining momentum  
4 in sociological work on social mobility, and an accent based perspective is one lens that could help  
5 to more precisely foreground spatial inequalities relating to social mobility.  
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For Peer Review

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