

“Oh I’d definitely pronounce my ‘th’s in a job interview”

Irish university students’ attitudes towards the effects of a strong Irish accent on the  
outcome of a job interview in Ireland

Bachelor’s thesis

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## JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Vaikka monessa englanninkielisessä maassa on tehty laajoja aksenttikartoituksia ja -tutkimuksia, Irlanti on jäänyt suhteellisen huomiotta tällä saralla. Suurin osa aksenttitutkimuksista Irlannissa on keskittynyt maan pääkaupunkiseudulle, eikä muualla maassa puhuttavaa englantia ole juuri tutkittu. Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena on määrittää irlanninenglannin eri aksentteihin kohdistuvia ennakoasenteita analysoimalla tutkimuksen kohderyhmän omia asenteita ja kielenkäyttöä.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen kohderyhmänä toimivat irlantilaiset yliopisto-opiskelijat, ja kielenkäytön kontekstina kuvitteellinen työhaastattelu Irlannissa. Tutkimuskysymysten avulla pyrittiin selvittämään kokevatko opiskelijat työnhakijan vahvan irlanninenglannin aksentin vaikuttavan (kuvitteellisen) työhaastattelun lopputulokseen ja muuttaisivatko opiskelijat omaa puhettaan työhaastattelussa vaikuttaakseen sen tulokseen? Tutkimus toteutettiin sähköpostilla linkkinä Irlannin yliopistoihin lähetetyn nettikyselyn avulla. Kyselyn vastaukset analysoitiin esittämään prosentuaalisia tuloksia opiskelijoiden näkemyksistä.</p> <p>Vaikka tulokset osoittavat, että enemmistö vastaajista ei arvioi muuttavansa omaa puhettaan haastattelussa eikä vahvan aksentin vaikuttavan haastatteluun, noin kolmasosa vastasi aksentin mielestään vaikuttavan työhaastattelutilanteeseen. Myös noin kolmasosa ilmaisi aikomuksensa muuttaa omaa puhettaan haastattelutilanteessa. Tämä tutkimus toi johdonmukaista lisätietoa aksenttien koetuista eriarvoisista asemista Irlannissa. Tulokset ennemmin herättävät aiheesta jatkokysymyksiä, kuin antavat kokonaisvaltaisia vastauksia. Tutkimus osoittaa tarpeen kattavammille asennetutkimuksille Irlannissa aksenttien herättämistä asenteista ja niiden vaikutuksista.</p>	
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis is focused on attitudes and behaviour, from a sociolinguistic point of view. Firstly, it is concerned with the attitudes of Irish university students towards the linguistic aspects of a job interview conducted in Irish English, in Ireland. The specific focus is on the hypothetical link between any strong variety of spoken Irish English used by the interviewee, and the possible effects of that spoken variety, or accent, on the outcome of that interview. Secondly, the aim is to find out whether the attitudes of the students motivate them to alter their own accents in such an interview. There are other subordinate foci as well, which will be explained in more detail in section 3 below.

The motivation for choosing this topic stems from an academic background. While the thesis will likely not cover enough ground to beneficially support any existing studies on Irish English, it may well clear way for future studies of this topic. Hickey (2011), for example, notes that by the time of the publication of his article, no studies had been made of varieties of Irish English spoken in any specific major city in Ireland, apart from the capital. Therefore, in a way, this thesis could be seen as my attempt to get a foothold in the studies of Irish English, or this study could function as groundwork for later studies, to eventually achieve better understanding and avoidance of ambivalence and discrimination based on accents.

For this thesis, I selected a variety of a particular language, and the study examines attitudes towards aspects of linguistic equality of that language in a certain social setting, from the point of view of the target group. As the concept of linguistic discrimination in itself is too vast to study or cover in a short thesis, the focus is directed on the workplace context, more specifically on job interviews. However, since this study is based on attitudes and self-evaluated, predicted behaviour, no concrete interview situations will be studied.

The chosen variety of language is Irish English, the variety of English spoken in the Republic of Ireland, and unless stated differently, all mentions of accents in this study are some variations of an Irish English accent from the Republic of Ireland. There is a significant amount of research on Irish English: its history, development, and the role of English as a language in power in Ireland, have been studied by e.g. Harris (1991), Kallen (1997), and Filppula (1991, 1999). The current state of Irish English and the future prospects of it have been studied by, for example, Hickey (2011, 2013) and Moore (2011). According to Hickey (2011) the language can be referred to by several different forms e.g. Hiberno-English or Anglo-Irish, however the simplest of them, Irish English, has the most advantages and is therefore the preferred choice.

The primary data of this thesis were collected by an online questionnaire sent to different academic institutions (see Appendix 1) in Ireland to reach Irish university students. The research was conducted with mixed research methodology, in which a mix of both qualitative and quantitative methods was used to gather and analyse the data. The background literature of the thesis will be presented in the succeeding segment, followed by a more detailed introduction to the methods and data. After that, the results of the study and their analyses are introduced, and the thesis will be concluded with a discussion on the topic and some general conclusions. The appendices, which include the institutions contacted in Ireland regarding this study and the questionnaire utilised in data collection, can be found at the end of the thesis.

## **2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

As the study at hand is concerned with attitudes towards the hypothetical effects of Irish English accents on the outcome of a job interview in Ireland, as well as the respondents' own behaviour, or the presumptions of their likely behaviour in such a setting, the key elements are drawn from foci of sociolinguistics. The notions of linguistic profiling and linguistic discrimination will be presented in more detail below, since the hypothesis of the study predicts possible agreement on discriminatory behaviour towards certain linguistic features, i.e. an accent, used in the interview by the interviewee, thus linking these issues to this thesis.

The following sections will more elaborately introduce the background literature, by the further information on some of the key concepts employed in this study, of which the first introduced will be the target language.

### **2.1 Irish English**

In addition to the academic motivations discussed in Section 1 above, the personal motivation for this thesis came from a single utterance by my Irish friend: "Oh I'd definitely pronounce my th's in a job interview.". By "th"s she refers to the voiceless dental fricative /θ/, which is commonly realised as a voiceless alveolar plosive /t/ in English spoken in the south of Ireland (Hickey 2013: 80). Therefore, my friend suggested she would deliberately change her way of speaking from a clear regional accent, to a milder one. This statement inspired me to investigate whether other Irish students felt the same; whether a job interview is seen as a situation in which one would feel motivated to alter one's accent. Hickey (2013) notes that clear condemning attitudes towards the

alveolarisation of the dental fricative exist, and the repositioned sound is considered a representative of a lower socio-economic status.

To gain an adequate understanding of Irish English and its role in Ireland, one must look to the history of English in Ireland. One of the main reasons behind the variety of accents in such a small country can arguably be said to be the uneven introduction and spread of English. The language was first brought to the country around the 12<sup>th</sup> century with the Anglo-Norman invasions and early settlement. The language was, however, restrained to the East Coast, in the province of Leinster, until the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Harris 1991: 37).

English was later spread farther in the country by more settlers from England and Scotland, thus first only affecting the provinces of Leinster on the East Coast, and Ulster in the north. English spread to the rest of the country, to the provinces of Munster and Connacht, later on. Once English had been introduced it was naturally mixed with the native language, Irish, resulting in certain ways of pronunciation and loan words, among other linguistic features. Even though the native language, Irish, and the later established language English co-existed for centuries, English conquered the role of the language used by the majority in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Kallen 1997: 139–157). As Filppula (1999: 10) describes, the shift in the language in power in Ireland moved from Irish, to Irish and English, to English and Irish, and lastly to English.

As a whole, the process of learning English in Ireland with an Irish influence was “cumulative” which well explains the Irish accent. There was little contact between the Irish-speaking people and the English-speaking people in Ireland mainly for the scattered occupation of the land, which led to Irish citizens teaching each other English. As a result, the members of different communities themselves taught the new language to the others with a strong influence of Irish, giving the turn to a new teacher, which resulted in the teaching being more and more influenced by Irish, hence the appropriate term “cumulative” (Filppula 1991: 51).

It is suggested that the modern, yet more rural varieties of Irish English, are more influenced by the Irish language, in regards of their pronunciation, semantic structure, and vocabulary. Their urban counterparts, however, seem to more correspond Standard English (Harris 1991:41). Therefore, it could be argued that the rural varieties of Irish English are perhaps less comprehensible, or less clearly structured (for examples, see Hickey 2011) to members of different language communities, be it foreigners or Irish people from other parts of the country. Moore (2011: 42) emphasises the longitudinal separation of East and West, or perhaps Dublin and the rest of Ireland, as the predominant areas of urban and rural, in regards to accents in Ireland, by highlighting two

negatively distinguishable bodies of Irish English as: working-class Dublin and rural Ireland. Rural Ireland according to Moore's (2011: 53) description included Cork and Galway, both of which are among most populated cities in Ireland. This is yet further supported by Hickey (2013: 83) by explaining that the division of English in the south of Ireland, thus excluding Northern Ireland and northern counties of the Republic, is between the east coast and the rest of Ireland.

## **2.2 Linguistic profiling**

The prejudices formed against a certain group who share the same linguistic features can be also referred to as linguistic profiling, which can in turn lead to linguistic discrimination. This refers to negative behaviour based on prejudices, or otherwise acquired negative attitudes, towards a speaker of a certain variety of language, and the aim of this behaviour is to produce linguistic inequality between the interlocutors (Skutnabb-Kangas 1995: 42). The notion of *linguistic profiling* is as a way of identifying a member of a speech community by distinctive features in their speech. Two forms of profiling exist: discriminatory and preferential (Baugh 2003: 155).

Baugh (2003) explains that in relation to racial inequality in the United States, discriminatory linguistic profiling can be problematic for those who do not share the "preferred" way of speaking of the majority. Baugh (2003: 155) adds that often the intellectual traits of people are connected to their language use. This may well contribute to prejudices of individuals towards a certain variety of language and the community using it. The idea behind the notion could be transferred to further examine the possible linguistic inequalities and power relations between different varieties of Irish English, in this case in the hypothetical and experiential setting of a job interview, from the point of view of students. It could be argued that linguistic profiling by the interviewer can, in addition to their own beliefs and the context, result in certain attitudes, which can in turn affect their behaviour and decisions regarding the outcome of said interview.

This issue will be discussed later in the study in relation to some of the findings, yet it cannot be fully applied to the study at hand, since the data consist of attitudes and opinions of the students, rather than any documented behaviour of either party in job interviews.

### 2.3 Style-shifting and bidialectalism

The action of adjusting one's language use differently depending on the social situation one is in is referred to as *style-shifting* (Irvine 2002: 21–43).

Irvine (2002: 27) explains that the notion of *style* simply refers to the notion of register in another word. Irvine claims the term *register* to be simply the term preferred by British academics, whereas some Americans have adopted the alternative, *style*. Moreover, she provides helpful definitions of the differences between the notions of *register* and *dialect*. She describes the difference of the terms as being “functional” in nature, by explaining that while a dialect reflects a place, speech community, or origins of an individual, a register is more closely interwoven with the social surroundings of the individual, and the situation they are involved in (Irvine 2002: 22-27). Therefore, *style* could be seen as an indicator of a social aspect of a situation, and the perceived role of an individual in it, linking it to the present study.

An example of this rises from the study conducted in Northern Ireland, by Douglas-Cowie (1978: 37–51) in which the subjects interviewed for the study would alter the way they spoke depending on the interviewer. They would, for example, according to Douglas-Cowie (1978) speak with more defined language when in contact with a fieldworker from England; in other words, make distinct shifts in the style of their speech they felt appropriate for the situation. Baugh (2003: 158) also reported the young African American subjects of his own study, conducted in 1983, to “adjust their speech to fit their immediate social circumstances”. A third study confirming the same phenomenon by Smith & Durham (2012: 57–88) in Shetland, discovered changes in the way the subjects spoke, depending on the situation and company. I intend to examine the data in this study for such examples.

Smith & Durham (2012: 57–88) further discuss the matter of *bidialectalism* as a possible reason behind the behaviour of the subjects in their study. *Bidialectalism* refers to the changes people may make in their speech based on the immediate social context. It is described as extreme style-shifting, in which the subject completely switches from one variety of language to another, without the two varieties overlapping (Hazen 2001: 85). The possibility of bidialectalism in relation to this study, or similar studies, will be discussed more in section 5.

### 3 DATA AND METHODS

In this section, I will introduce the data and explain the methods employed to analyse them. I will begin by presenting the research questions, followed by the hypothesis set for the study. Next, I will move on to the data, the collection, as well as the ethical issues related to this study, and the rationale behind the selected data. Finally, I will present the methods of analysis.

#### 3.1 Research questions and hypotheses

The primary research questions were:

- Do Irish university students perceive a link between a strong Irish accent used in a job interview in Ireland and the outcome of that interview?
- Would the students themselves alter their own accent in a job interview?

While I intend to find out answers to these questions, attention will be drawn to a few sub-questions when analysing the data and discussing the results. The sub-questions are partially response-dependent, and will be utilised in case of certain responses to the main research questions. These questions are:

- Is the effect of an accent perceived as negative, positive, or neutral?
- Is this a conscious action from the students' part?

The general hypotheses set for this study are: I predict the students to see some kind of a link between accents used in an interview and the outcome of that interview, moreover, possibly a negative link when a stronger variety of Irish English is employed; and that the students alter their own accents in different social settings such as this, but are likely not conscious of this phenomenon.

This is based on both earlier research and my own experiences. As briefly discussed in section 2.1, the notion of *rural* in Irish English seems to cover the entire country par from Dublin and the east coast below it. Moore (2011) raises an interesting point about the attitudes of the new Irish generation, and their willingness to obtain an urban, wealthy lifestyle, as well as represent it to the rest of the world. The attempt to acquire this lifestyle can be thus seen as an excuse to abandon any "ruralness" from one's speech, and speaking with a regional accent could be viewed as backwards behaviour, therefore a factor best avoided in, for example, job interviews.

### **3.2 Data collection**

Below I will present the ways in which the data were collected, selected, and analysed for this study.

#### *3.2.1 The questionnaire*

The data were collected between February 15<sup>th</sup> and March 1<sup>st</sup> 2016 as replies to the questionnaire (see Appendix 2) which could be accessed online by the respondents. The questionnaire included altogether 17 sections, of which the first four were questions on demographics, and the following question types were: four multiple choice questions, three Likert scale statement sections, of which two were partly analysed, five open questions, of which three were compulsory for all, and finally a section for open comments or questions regarding the questionnaire itself.

The questions following the demographics were placed in a random order, as it has been argued to help maintain the interest of the respondents (Schleef 2013: 50). I found this important, since the target group were young students, and the topic could be viewed as uninteresting to them. Furthermore, it has been suggested to be useful to include items in the questionnaire which are simple to answer and process to increase the likelihood of a respondent finishing the questionnaire, even though the object would be to leave them unanalysed (Lavrakas 2004: 903). As an example of this, I utilised statements in the Likert scale sections, which I had no intention of analysing or using for the present study. This was an attempt to keep the respondent preoccupied with a lot of material, which I thought could enable them to respond to each statement more sincerely, due to the likely desire to finish the questionnaire fast.

#### *3.2.2 Methods of collection and ethicality*

I contacted six different institutions (See Appendix 1) in Ireland, to reach their students, the target group, via email, possibly through a collective mailing list. After weeks of exchanging e-mails, I managed to spread the link to the survey to two institutions in Ireland. The Students' Union of National University of Ireland in Galway (NUIG) posted the link on their Facebook wall, resulting in approximately 20 replies. The other institution, University College Cork (UCC), allowed me to send the link to the questionnaire, along with a freely-worded description of the intentions in the

form of an e-mail, through a UCC mailing list to all students with a UCC email account. This resulted approximately in 100 replies. I received the remaining replies from my personal contacts and their contacts in Irish universities. Altogether I received a total of 138 replies in the space of the two weeks the link to the questionnaire was open.

The anonymity of the students was guaranteed by not requiring to fill any information regarding identity. The statement “All respondents and replies will remain anonymous throughout the entire thesis process. It is impossible to identify a respondent based on the answers to this questionnaire.” was on the bottom of every page of the questionnaire. All respondents were presumably adults, since the minimum age to choose for oneself was 18.

### **3.3 Data selection**

For both the purpose of the results of this study, as well as reasons arising from problems in data collection, I decided to analyse all of the data, rather than drafting a smaller focus group from the total of 138 respondents. I wanted to gain as detailed and vast a grasp of the issues at hand as possible, which could be achieved by using as much information as possible, yet keeping in mind the size and scope of this study. In addition, I wanted to have as varied a set of data as possible, since I am aware of the complexity of accents in Irish English, and especially the vast number of them. Including as many respondents as possible, based on their geographical demographics, would exclude the possibility of studying a bias, one-county opinion. What strongly contributed to this decision was the lack of success I had sending out the questionnaire. Had my attempts been more successful, and the target group more geographically varied, I would have chosen a more concentrated sample.

### **3.4 Methods of analysis**

Due to the short nature of the thesis and the lack of an appropriate amount of data for a larger study, neither the differences and/or similarities between female and male respondents will be discussed in the analysis, nor any geographical or experiential differences.

The analyses of the results are based on my own interpretations of the replies. The aim was to convert as much of the data as possible in quantitative form, to receive a thorough view of the attitudes of the students in percentages. In most of the analyses I used a bipolar approach, in which I

established a negative, a positive, and a neutral case for each reply, and then examined all the replies to suit at least one of the groups. In the case of the Likert statements, I combined the alternatives of “Disagree” and “Disagree a little” to create a negative pole, and “Agree” and “Agree a little” to create a positive pole, while the neutral option “I don’t know” was analysed as a pole of its own. In most open questions, I read the reply and, as objectively as possible, categorised the text as one of the three options I set for the analysis. The neutral replies in these cases consisted of either replies not showing any lenience towards either of the ‘charged’ poles, or were irrelevant to the question.

## **4 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

The analysed data and results will be presented in the following section. To achieve clarity with such a large amount of data, the section is divided into smaller parts. First are the results in relation to the main research questions and sub-questions, then the hypotheses. I will distribute the analysed sections of the questionnaire under each research question, with which the questions directly correlate, thus presenting the analyses by research question.

The questions chosen for analysis are ones that pose immediate relevance to the research questions, thus several sections of the questionnaire have been left unanalysed.

I will begin with the first of the main research questions and its sub-question.

### **4.1 First research question and sub-question**

The first research question and sub-question I set for this study were as follows:

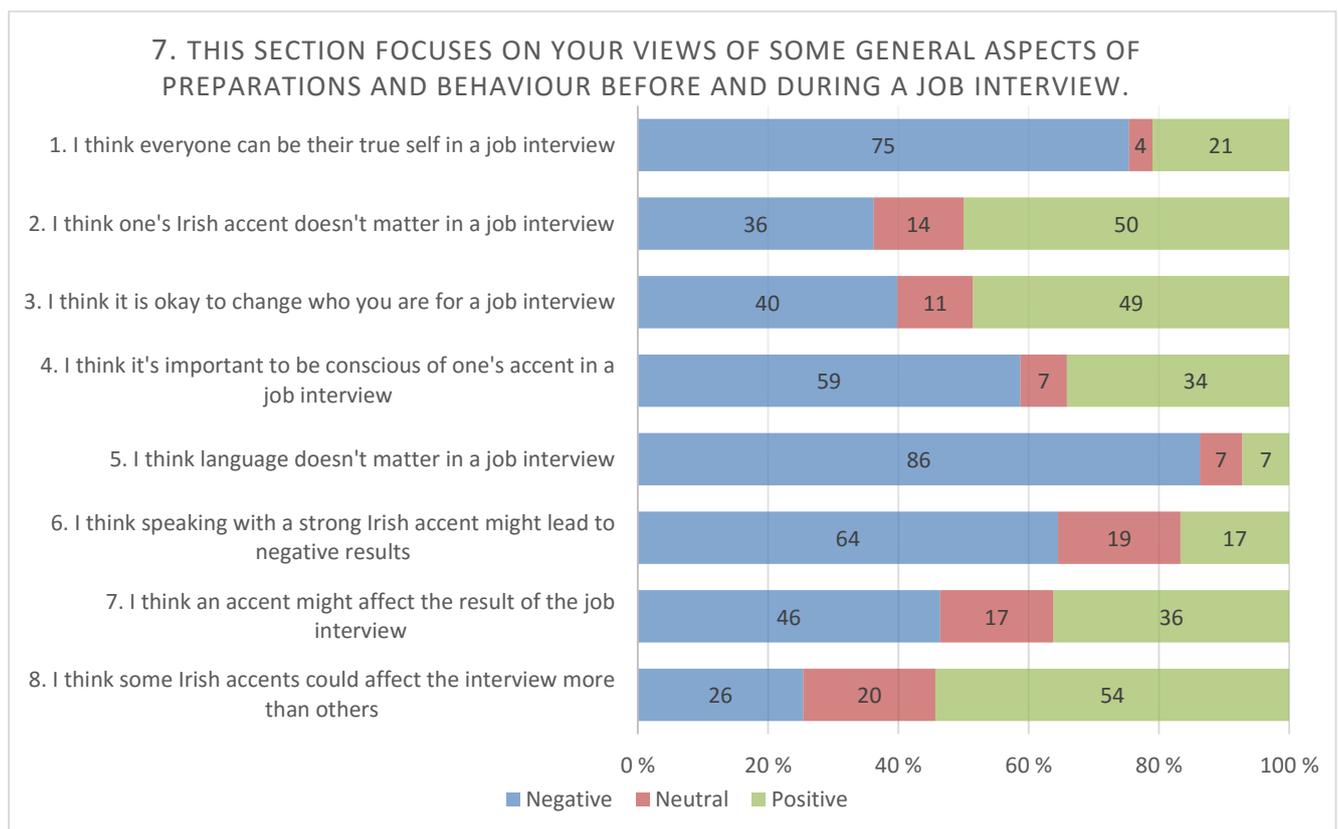
Do Irish university students perceive a link between a strong Irish accent used in a job interview in Ireland and the outcome of that interview? Is the effect of an accent perceived as negative, positive, or neutral?

I found answers to these questions from several different sections of the questionnaire, though not all parts of a section were necessarily utilised to gain the answers; in some cases, such as the Likert scale statements, only some of the statements were analysed. The statements for the analysis were chosen based on their relevance to the research questions. The findings are presented below in the numerical order of the sections in the questionnaire.

#### 4.1.1 The general role of language in a job interview

This section was the first of three Likert scale sections of the questionnaire, and it consisted of 19 short statements of which eight were analysed. The analysed replies are presented in Table 1 below. The statements are numbered according to their current order for the facilitation of the written analysis, the original order can be found in the questionnaire in Appendix 2. This will be repeated in later parts of the analysis as well. The sub-heading of the question was “Please select the response you think matches your thoughts on the statements. The accent mentioned in the statements refers to any Irish accent spoken in the Republic of Ireland.”

Table 1. First Likert scale section results of preparations for and behaviour in an interview



The numbers in each row are the percentages of the attitudes towards each statement. The blue, “negative” columns represent the combination of “Disagree” and “Disagree a little”, the red columns represent the “I don’t know” alternative, and lastly, the green columns represent the

alternatives “Agree” and “Agree a little” combined. The focus of the analysis will mainly be on the ‘charged’ polar opposites.

The results in this section indicated consistent division of attitudes towards the roles of language and accents in a job interview. The vast majority of the students agreed that language matters in an interview, yet only slightly more than a third of the respondents seemed to consider the role of an accent important, as visible from statements 2, 4, and 7. Therefore, at this point, it seems linguistic discrimination based on an accent is not a concern shared by all of the respondents. However, more than half of the respondents reported some Irish accents to have more of an effect on an interview than others. This leads me to assume that while the students might not think an Irish accent is an issue in itself, inequality certainly exists between different accents in Ireland. The role of an accent will be further examined below.

#### *4.1.2 The role of a strong accent in a job interview*

Next I will examine the results of a pair of questions numbered 13 and 14. Section 13 was a multiple-choice question to find out what the role of a strong Irish accent in a job interview would be from the point of view of the students. The next section was designed to further reflect on one’s reply to the previous question.

Table 2. Attitudes towards the role of a strong accent in an interview.

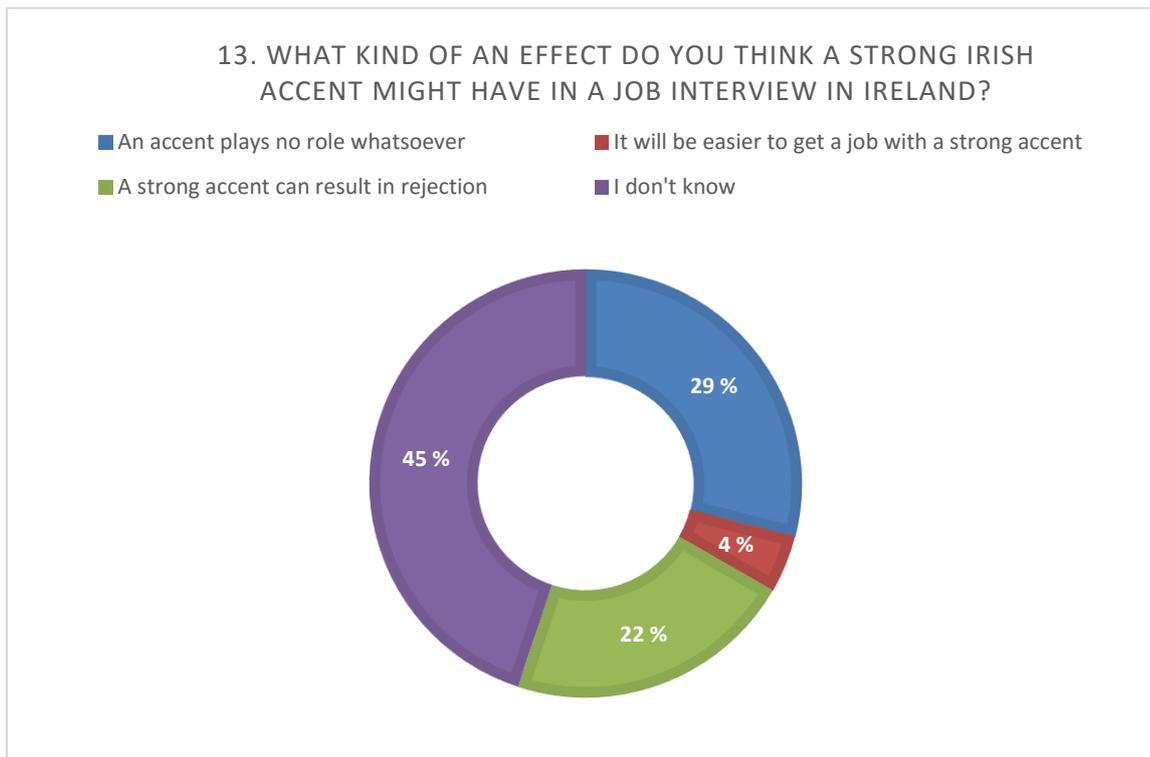


Table 2 is a graph of the division of replies to question 13. Less than a third of the students thought an accent does not have a role in the interview, and similarly less than a third thought a strong accent could result in rejection. To a surprise, most respondents chose the alternative “I don’t know”. Only a few students replied a strong accent to help in an interview. My presumption, based on the written replies to the open questions, is that this might be in relation to employment in the tourism sector, or possible outside of Ireland, in work promoting “Irishness”.

I suspect the reason behind the majority answering “I don’t know” here was the limited number of options from which to choose. The alternatives were loaded to an extent, which is why the open question was added to succeed this, in the hopes of receiving opinions about the role of an accent.

As mentioned above, the following section was an opportunity for the respondents to elaborate their choice in the preceding question. Many of the replies were in accordance with two or even all of the categories set for the analysis, therefore instead of a single statement from each respondent, I came up with 153 in total.

The results to this section more or less corresponded with the previous section. An accent was perceived to have no role in an interview by 27 % of the respondents, which is only two percentage

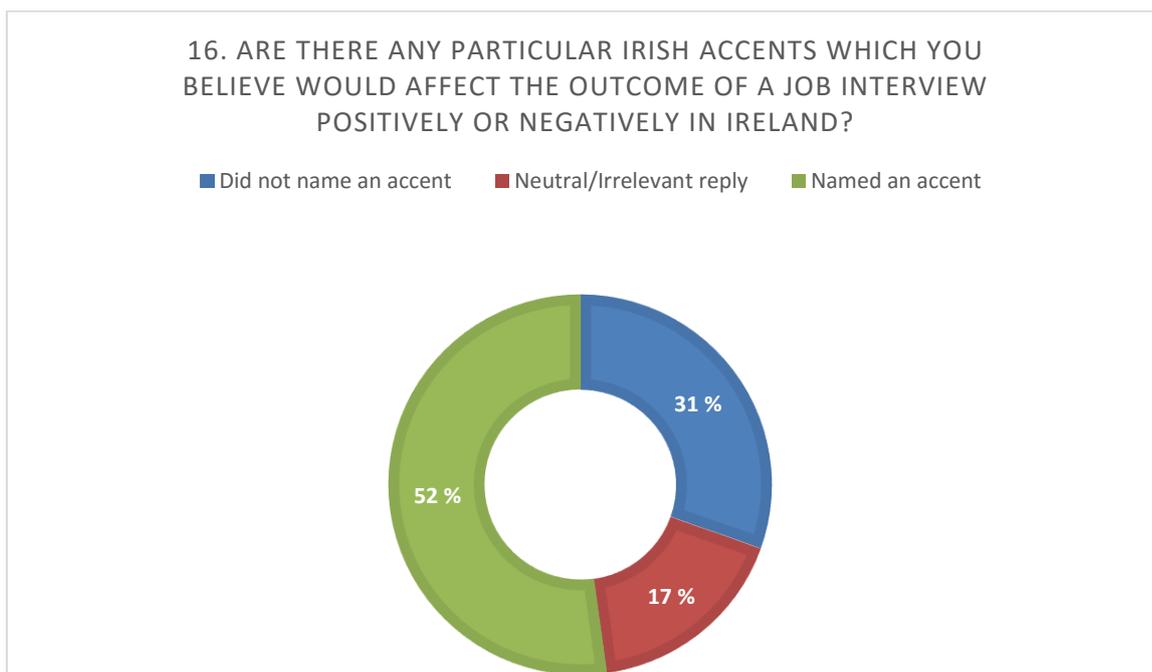
points lower than in question 13. However, 40 % of the respondents stated an accent could affect an interview. The percentage is significantly higher than in the previous question, likely, because the students could choose the wording of the reply themselves, and instead of using “rejection” they simply stated an accent could “affect” and interview. This percentage also mirrors the percentage of students who reported to change their own speech in an interview, as presented below in section 4.2.2.

Altogether 24 % of all respondents mentioned the factor of dependence in their replies to question 14; whether it was related to the interviewer, the location, or the nature of the employment. Most respondents who presented the idea of dependence said it relies much on the prejudices of the interviewer towards different accents. This finding ties the notion of linguistic profiling directly to this study. The students clearly acknowledge the possibility of such profiling by the interviewer; even expect discriminatory action towards some accents, as examined below in section 4.1.3.

#### 4.1.3 The effects of specific accents on a job interview

The final section I have chosen to be analysed is section number 16, which was an open question about the statuses of different accents in Ireland, and whether or not they might somehow affect an interview.

Table 3. Attitudes towards the features of particular accents.



In the last statement of questionnaire section 7 (Table 1 above), 54 % of all the respondents agreed with the statement “I think some Irish accents could affect the interview more than others.”. This percentage corresponds, as shown in Table 3, with the 52 % of respondents, who reported there to be accents which have more of an effect on an interview than others. Thus, it can be concluded already that slightly more than half of the respondents in this study agree some Irish accents to have more of an effect on a job interview in Ireland, than others.

The attitude towards the inequality of different Irish accents remained consistent throughout the questionnaire: in addition to the results mentioned in the paragraph above, in section 7 (Table 1) the disagreeing percentage was 26 % and in section 16 it was 31 %. Moreover, the neutral percentage in section 7 was 20 %, and in section 16 it was 17 %. This consistency could, and perhaps should be studied further to reveal whether it extends to other groups as well.

The accents mentioned by the students do not directly correlate with the research problem; therefore they will not be presented elaborately. However, it is noteworthy that there were 69 mentions of accents with a possible negative impact, and only 13 with a positive. The accents with most negative connotations by frequency of mentions were: Dublin accent (excluding the south), “any rural accent”, “traveller accent”, Cork accent, Northern Irish/northern county accent, Limerick accent, Donegal accent, and finally simply “any strong accent”. The accents described with having a positive effect, in order of frequency of mentions, were: South Dublin/D4, “country accent”, “any mild accent”, “city accent”, “northern accent”, “a posh accent”, “a western accent” (for tourism), and one reply listed accents from Kerry, Cork, and Tipperary. For clarity, the so-called D4 accent is an artificial accent developed during the economic peak in Ireland in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and it was an attempt to create a difference between the two ends of the socio-economic continuum, representing the wealthy side of the scale (Moore 2011).

#### *4.1.4 Conclusions*

In this short concluding segment of section 4.1, the research questions examined in this past section and a brief summary of the results in relation to it will be presented.

The main research question was “Do Irish university students perceive a link between a strong Irish accent used in a job interview in Ireland and the outcome of that interview?” and as it becomes evident from the data, the respondents are not unanimous at all, and there appears to be a lot of indecisiveness among them. The replies earlier in the questionnaire, in section 7, indicated the

majority to deny an Irish accent to have an effect on an interview in Ireland. However, further in the questionnaire, in sections 13 and 14, the replies shifted more towards agreeing there in fact is a chance an accent could affect an interview.

Furthermore, approximately half of the students reported they thought some accents to have more of an effect than others, and listed several accents which could possibly affect the interview; thus I would argue they are more aware of the linguistic inequalities in such a setting, than they express in their other responses. As for the sub-question of the research question, the nature of the effect the accent might have, the majority of accents mentioned in section 16 were explained to have a negative effect and only a few were mentioned with positive effects.

## **4.2 Second research question**

In this section I will examine the replies in relation to the second research question, which was as follows:

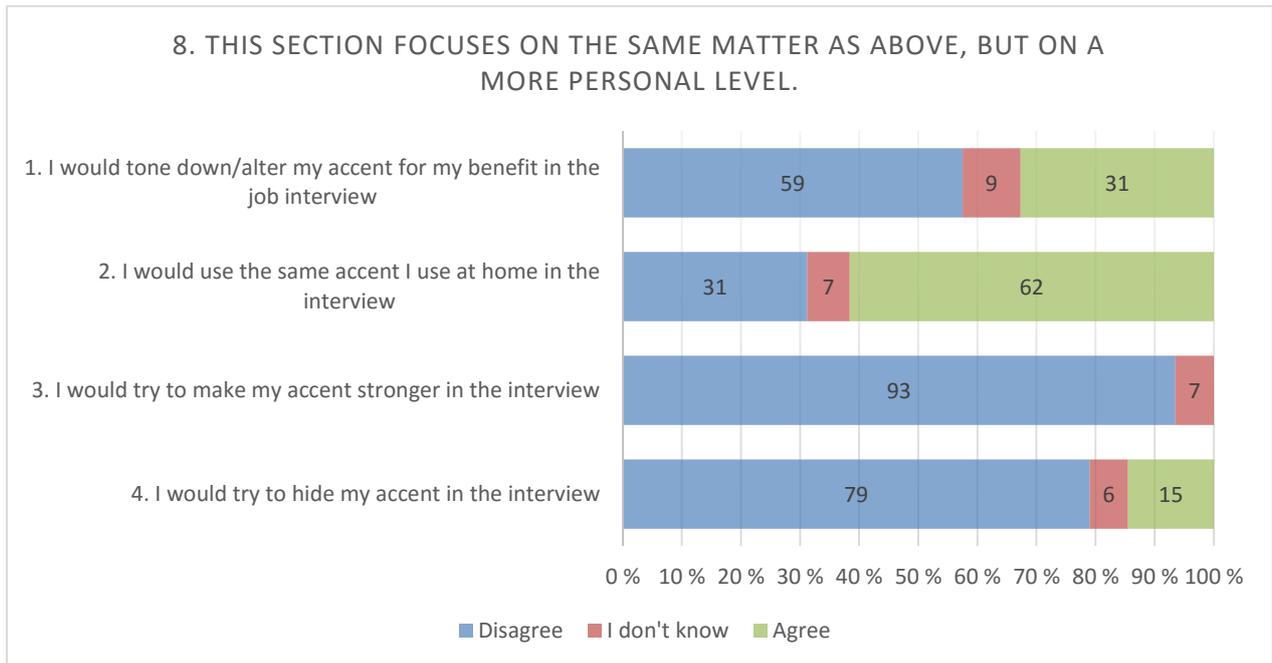
Would the students themselves alter their own accent in an interview?

To find appropriate answers to the next research question, sections 8 and 12 of the questionnaire were chosen to be analysed. The findings will again be examined in the numerical order of the sections, and summarise the analysis briefly below.

### *4.2.1 Language use of the students in an interview*

This section succeeded immediately the previous Likert scale section, almost as a part of it. The sub-heading of this section was “Please select the most accurate option for each statement. It does not matter if you have never been in a job interview in Ireland. Please simply imagine yourself in the situation and reply as you see fit.”. The findings are presented below, in Table 4.

Table 4. The students' own linguistic behaviour before or in an interview.



As visible from Table 4, the attitudes towards the first two statements are quite varied, whereas the stance of the students is clearer in the latter two. Nearly a third of the respondents agreed they would indeed alter their accent for their benefit in an interview, which corresponds with the attitudes expressed in question 12, presented in section 4.2.2 below. However, it must be noted that over half of the students disagreed with this statement. The percentages are relatively similar in the next part, where the exact same percentage of students denied they would use the same accent they use at home in an interview, which clearly correlates with the results to the previous statement. Yet the majority was again on the opposing side.

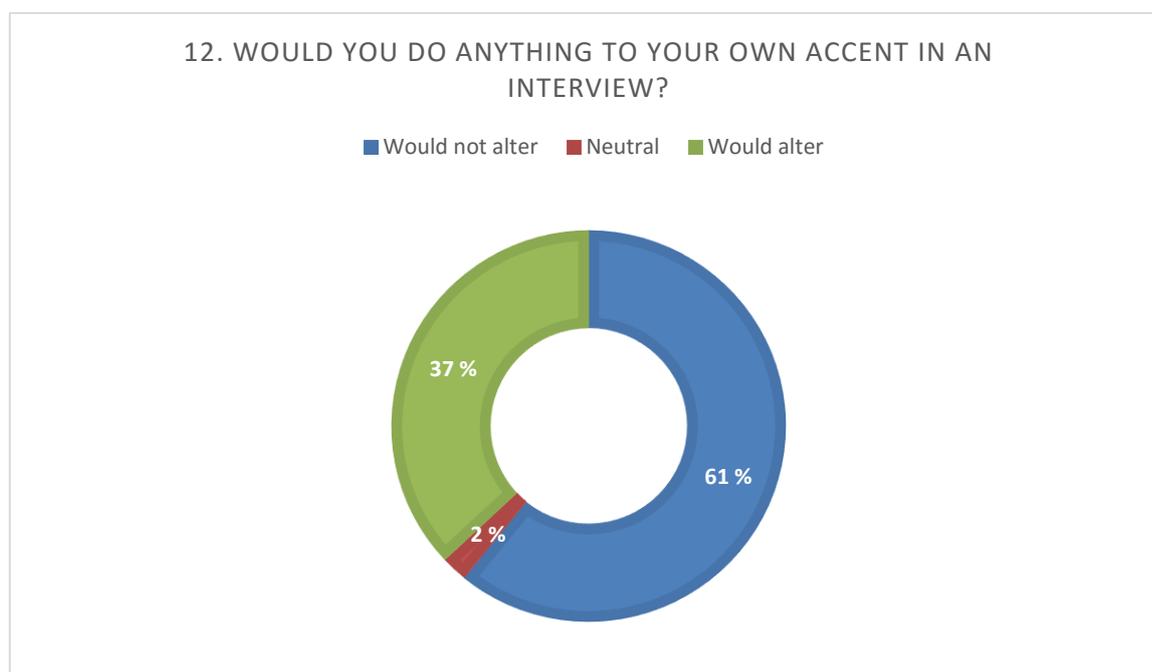
The last two statements are the polar opposites of one another, and evidently the vast majority of the respondents would neither hide their accent, nor make it stronger in an interview. Not a single respondent stated they would make their accent stronger in an interview, while 14 % did admit to attempt to hide theirs.

These results are in accordance with results found earlier in this study. The idea of an accent affecting an interview, as presented in sections 4.1.1 and 4.1.2, was supported by slightly more than a third of the respondents, and here only slightly less than a third of the students reported to not use their 'home accent' in an interview, and to alter their speech in an interview for their benefit.

#### 4.2.2 Changes in language use in an interview by the students

The last section chosen for analysis was an open question as well, though unlike the previous question, the aim was to let the students hypothetically predict and describe what they would do to their accent in an interview, if anything. The findings are presented below in Table 5.

Table 5. Replies to whether the students would change their own accents.



The percentages in the responses to section 12 remain alike to the previous results of the study. Over half of the respondents denied they would make any changes to their speech, yet over a third agreed to exercise this.

The students who claimed they would not alter their speech in an interview often stated “there is no need”, because their “speech is understandable already” or their “accent is mild enough”. This could suggest that in their opinion the aim in an interview is to have a mild accent, and perhaps stronger accents are often viewed as incomprehensible. The desire to acquire a softer accent reflects Moore’s (2011) arguments about the aspirations of the new generation in Ireland.

### 4.2.3 Conclusions

In this section 4.2, all the responses to the chosen sections follow the same trajectory. In nearly all of the sections, approximately a third or more of the sample admitted to alter their speech or accepted the possibility of it, while more than half of them denied this.

As to whether this is a conscious action, I only have a few examples from the responses to the open questions, since this was not a question of its own. Several respondents did state they might alter their accent subconsciously to suit the formal situation, and some stated they would not, at least they are not aware of this. It would seem that if any altering is done, it can be both a conscious, as well as a subconscious action. However as discussed above, many respondents have never thought of their accent affecting a situation such as a job interview, therefore I cannot make affirmative conclusions of whether the altering is a conscious action, as I lack the sufficient data.

The use of style-shifting does seem to be present in the language use of some of the students in an interview setting. As the students themselves reported, their changes in language use mainly consist of toning the accent down to be more understandable. By the results of the present study, it would seem that the extreme style-shifting, bidialectalism, is not a prominent feature in the language use of Irish university students. However, to properly investigate this and draw more definite conclusions, the sample would need to be much larger.

## 4.3 The hypotheses

The hypotheses set for this study were as follows:

I predicted there to be joint attitudes towards a link between a strong Irish accent and a negative outcome of a job interview in Ireland. I also predicted students to alter their own accents in an interview setting, yet possibly not being aware of this phenomenon.

The conclusions to this segment are drawn from the results above.

During the analysis of the responses it became clear that the attitudes toward such a link between a strong accent and negative results of an interview were not as common as I had predicted. However, even though overall more than half of the students denied the existence of such action, quite persistently approximately a third, the percentage varying depending on the question, supported the hypothesis with their responses. A suggestion for further research in this particular matter would involve the inclusion of at least such features as previous experience of the respondents, their socio-

economic status, their geographical background, and possibly age, even gender. All of which, had to be excluded from the present study. This matter, as well as the importance of context, including the location and the interviewer, will be discussed more in section 5.

The second part of the hypothesis received similar results: approximately a third admitted to alter their speech in an interview, while the majority stated the opposite. However, the absence of responses, and questions directly related, to the consciousness of these alterations leave this part yet to be solved.

## **5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

In this final section the thesis process, as well as the results of the study, will be discussed, especially in relation to the key concepts presented in section 2, and the possible future research that could or should be conducted based on these results will be considered.

The data were collected with an online sociolinguistic questionnaire (Appendix 2) sent to different Irish universities to reach the target group. I unfortunately encountered some obstacles in this stage, and only received help from two institutions. As a result, the sample consisted mostly of respondents from county Cork, thus disabling me to draw any conclusions on the geographical differences of the attitudes. I received altogether 138 replies, most of which I analysed by dividing the replies to positive, neutral, and negative categories, and calculating the results into percentages.

The central foci for this thesis were (1) to investigate whether Irish university students presumed a link between a strong Irish accent used in a job interview in Ireland, (1a) a specific outcome of that interview, (1b) and whether the effect of the accent was perceived as positive, neutral, or negative; and (2) whether the students would alter their own speech in a job interview. Additionally, the hypotheses for the study were: I predicted the students to agree on a link between a strong Irish accent used and a negative outcome of an interview, and I presumed they would claim to alter their speech according to their social surroundings, in this case in a job interview.

The analyses revealed the attitudes of the majority to be the opposite of the hypotheses. Generally, more than half of the respondents said they would not alter their own speech in an interview. Yet, approximately a third would consistently agree they would alter their accent in an interview, and agreed an accent can affect the interview. Overall, the attitudes towards the language use of the students were more consistent than the attitudes towards the role of an accent in an interview. As

discussed above, this is likely due to the unawareness or inexperience of the students of this matter. The varied results can also be explained by individual social aspirations of each respondent, as the choices of language use are heavily dependent on such factors (Douglas-Cowie 1978).

The aspect of the new generation in Ireland, and the shifted motivations in language use they may possess, proved to be a central theme in the course of this study. The students were initially chosen as the target group only to facilitate the questionnaire circulation, yet their role as subjects grew significantly more important during the research process. Moore (2011) emphasises the new generation and its role in the changing linguistic landscape of Ireland, and as mentioned above, there seems to be a distinct desire to redirect the language use from that stemming from the Irish language, i.e. the more rural varieties of Irish English, to a milder variation, closer to Standard British English. Furthermore, the accents listed by the students, as presented in section 4.1.3, were all located, as previously defined, in the rural part of Ireland, apart from the Dublin accent (excl. south), which on the one hand embodies the notion of urban in Ireland, but on the other is actually the most negatively rated accent by the results of this study.

The notion of style-shifting was supported by the fairly undeviating third of the respondents, and can thus be concluded to an extent to be an existing phenomenon among Irish university students. Whether style-shifting exists in its extreme form among university students, as bidialectalism, is definitely a noteworthy question and should be more closely examined with a more varied sample from all around Ireland, since it did not appear as a phenomenon in the present results, yet the prospect of phenomenon existing cannot be ignored. The study ought to be conducted with recorded interviews, in similar fashion to Smith and Durham's (2012) study: the interviews conducted by a co-speaker of the same variety and an outsider, to reveal any changes depending on the interviewer. This way the situational variants could also be manipulated, e.g. the location and the formality of the situation. Hazen (2001: 85) stresses the importance of studying bidialectal abilities, to "better understand the production of sociolinguistic variation in the language faculty".

The notion of linguistic profiling proved to be more important an issue than originally expected. A significant number of respondents acknowledged the effect of an accent to be heavily dependent on the actual position applied to, the interviewer, as well as the location of the interview. Therefore, it would be crucial to include employers in future studies, as well as experienced interviewees, who could possibly offer actual experiences of this. The students were also asked about their reactions towards accents in a job interview, in which they were hypothetically the interviewers. This section was excluded from the analysis, but would be an interesting matter to study further later on.

It must be noted, however, that the responses to the general questions may not have always been objective. The study was about the language of the respondents, and the aim to find negative attitudes towards variations of it was implied, therefore forcing the respondents to assess something of their own, possibly in a negative way (Irvine 2002: 24–25).

In conclusion, the analyses of the data provided adequate answers to the research questions; even though the majority challenged the hypotheses, the steady third supporting them proved the need for further studies in areas such as style-shifting, and language attitudes in Ireland, especially outside of Dublin, which has been the centre of many linguistic studies.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **APPENDIX 1**

List of institutions and Students' Unions I contacted with the hopes of spreading the survey to the students of said institutions:

- Dublin City University (DCU)
- National University of Ireland Galway
- The Students' Union of NUIG
- Trinity College Dublin (TCD)
- The Students' Union of University of Limerick
- University College Cork (UCC)
- University College Dublin (UCD)
- The Students' Union of UCD

## APPENDIX 2



### Attitudes towards job interviews in Ireland

Hello and welcome to this questionnaire!

I'm a student from the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, majoring in English in the Department of Languages, and this questionnaire is a vital part of my Bachelor's Thesis, which I am currently working on.

This questionnaire is designed to gather information about Irish university students' attitudes towards job interviews in Ireland. Each and every reply is hugely appreciated.

All the replies are completely anonymous and will stay that way, and the data collected will be used for this BA Thesis and possibly for other course work or a Master's Thesis in the future.

Feel free to contact me, if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you for your help and enjoy the questionnaire!

Kind regards,

Katarina Kinnunen

email: a.katarina.kinnunen@student.jyu.fi

1. Please select your gender \*

Female

Male

12% completed



## Attitudes towards job interviews in Ireland

2. Please select your age group \*

- 18-19
- 20-21
- 22-23
- 24-25
- 26 or older

3. Please select your home county \*

- Carlow
- Cavan
- Clare
- Cork
- Donegal
- Dublin
- Galway
- Kerry
- Kildare
- Kilkenny
- Laois
- Leitrim
- Limerick
- Longford
- Louth
- Mayo
- Meath
- Monaghan
- Offaly
- Roscommon
- Sligo
- Tipperary
- Waterford
- Westmeath
- Wexford
- Wicklow

I was not born in the Republic of Ireland

4. Please select the county you currently live in \*

- Carlow
- Cavan
- Clare
- Cork
- Donegal
- Dublin
- Galway
- Kerry
- Kildare
- Kilkenny
- Laois
- Leitrim
- Limerick
- Longford
- Louth
- Mayo
- Meath
- Monaghan
- Offaly
- Roscommon
- Sligo
- Tipperary
- Waterford
- Westmeath
- Wexford
- Wicklow

All respondents and replies will remain anonymous throughout the entire thesis process.  
It is impossible to identify a respondent based on the answers to this questionnaire.

25% completed



## Attitudes towards job interviews in Ireland

Previous experience of job interviews in Ireland

5. How many job interviews have you had in Ireland? \*

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5-10
- 10 or more

6. How many of these interviews were a success and you were employed? \*

- All of them
- Most of them
- Half of them
- Only a few
- Only one
- One, since there was only one interview
- None
- I haven't been in a job interview in Ireland

All respondents and replies will remain anonymous throughout the entire thesis process. It is impossible to identify a respondent based on the answers to this questionnaire.

37% completed



### Attitudes towards job interviews in Ireland

7. This section focuses on your views of some general aspects of preparations and behaviour before and during a job interview.

\*

Please select the response you think matches your thoughts on the statements. The accent mentioned in the statements refers to any Irish accent spoken in the Republic of Ireland.

	Disagree	Disagree a little	I don't know	Agree a little	Agree
I think everyone can be their true self in a job interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I think it doesn't matter what one wears to a job interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I think one's Irish accent doesn't matter in a job interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I think job interviews are more casual than formal	<input type="radio"/>				
I think one's appearance in the interview plays an important role	<input type="radio"/>				
I think it is okay to change who you are for a job interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I think it is not okay to use slang in a job interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I think it is okay to have visible tattoos in a job interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I think it's important to be conscious of one's accent in a job interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I think it is important to dress well for a job interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I think it is okay to swear in a job interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I think language doesn't matter in a job interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I think speaking with a strong Irish accent might lead to negative results	<input type="radio"/>				
I think one should cover their tattoos for a job interview	<input type="radio"/>				

I think an accent might affect the result of the job interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I think one should be very conscious of their appearance in a job interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I think it is not okay to swear in a job interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I think speaking with slang can be positive in a job interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I think some Irish accents could affect the interview more than others	<input type="radio"/>				

8. This section focuses on the same matters as above, but on a more personal level. \*

Please select the most accurate option for each statement. It does not matter if you have never been in a job interview in Ireland. Please simply imagine yourself in the situation and reply as you see fit.

	Disagree	Disagree a little	I don't know	Agree a little	Agree
I would treat the job interview as a formal situation	<input type="radio"/>				
I would dress casually for the interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I would tone down/alter my accent for my benefit in the job interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I would buy new clothes specifically for the interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I would use the same accent I use at home in the interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I would be careful not to use slang in the interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I would wear clothes that covered my tattoos for the interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I would let all my visible piercings and tattoos show in the interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I would try to make my accent stronger in the interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I would dress formally for the interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I would try to hide my accent in the interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I would use slang words in the interview	<input type="radio"/>				
I would treat it as an informal situation	<input type="radio"/>				

All respondents and replies will remain anonymous throughout the entire thesis process. It is impossible to identify a respondent based on the answers to this questionnaire.

50% completed

### Attitudes towards job interviews in Ireland

9. This section is designed to explore some of your views of the characteristics of the English you speak. \*

Please choose the response you feel is the most accurate for each of the statements.

	Disagree	Disagree a little	I don't know	Agree a little	Agree
I think I have a strong Irish accent	<input type="radio"/>				
I never tone down my accent	<input type="radio"/>				
I sometimes change the way I speak, so others would understand me better	<input type="radio"/>				
My friends think I have a strong Irish accent	<input type="radio"/>				
New people I meet think my accent is strong	<input type="radio"/>				
No one has ever commented on my accent	<input type="radio"/>				
I'm proud of my accent	<input type="radio"/>				
New people I meet understand me easily, regardless of my accent	<input type="radio"/>				
My family thinks I have a strong Irish accent	<input type="radio"/>				
Sometimes even Irish people don't understand me because of my accent	<input type="radio"/>				
I never change or tone down my accent	<input type="radio"/>				
I don't usually take notice of my accent	<input type="radio"/>				
My accent is easy for foreigners to understand	<input type="radio"/>				
I might change the way I speak depending on the situation	<input type="radio"/>				

I sometimes try to hide my accent from other people	<input type="radio"/>				
It is easy for me to change or tone down my accent	<input type="radio"/>				
I can't imagine changing my accent for any situation	<input type="radio"/>				

10. Does your accent ever receive any attention or is it ever talked about?

All respondents and replies will remain anonymous throughout the entire thesis process. It is impossible to identify a respondent based on the answers to this questionnaire.

62% completed



## Attitudes towards job interviews in Ireland

11. Did you think about your own accent before or during a job interview? Did you think about how it might affect the interview?

Reply to this question only if you have experience of a job interview in Ireland. Please reply with a few short sentences.

12. Would you do anything to your own accent in a job interview in Ireland? For example: make it stronger, alter it somehow, tone it down, try to hide it etc. \*

Keep in mind there are no right answers and these are completely matters of opinion. Please reply with a few short sentences.

13. What kind of an effect do you think a strong Irish accent might have in a job interview in Ireland? \*

- An accent plays no role whatsoever
- It will be easier to get the job with a strong accent
- A strong accent can result in rejection
- I don't know

14. Could you elaborate your response to the previous question: What do you think the role of an Irish accent in a job interview is? How does it affect it? Does it affect it at all? \*

Please be as specific as possible with your response. Once again, this is a matter of opinion, there are no right answers.

All respondents and replies will remain anonymous throughout the entire thesis process. It is impossible to identify a respondent based on the answers to this questionnaire.

75% completed



### Attitudes towards job interviews in Ireland

15. Imagine you were employing people for a company. Would an applicant's accent affect your decision-making? \*

Please select the statement that best describes your thoughts.

- An accent wouldn't affect my decision
- I wouldn't be affected by it, but I would take notice of it
- I would take the accent into consideration when making the decision
- I think an accent is a considerable factor in employing people
- An accent would strongly affect my decision
- I don't know

16. Are there any particular Irish accents which you believe would affect the outcome of a job interview positively or negatively in Ireland? \*

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All respondents and replies will remain anonymous throughout the entire thesis process. It is impossible to identify a respondent based on the answers to this questionnaire.

87% completed



Attitudes towards job interviews in Ireland

17. Thank you for taking part in the survey, you have been of great help!  
If you have any additional comments or questions, feel free to write them below:

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100% completed