1. Dialect Discrimination in the Courtroom

Research suggests that using a nonstandard dialect in the courtroom has a detrimental effect on the position represented by the speaker. In this paper I will review the research that explores the effect of using nonstandard dialects in the courtroom. In addition, I will refer to Robert Zimmerman’s trial (the man who killed Trayvon Martin), in which a witness for the prosecution, Rachel Jeantel, was a speaker of a nonstandard dialect of English. Rickford argues that her dialect had a significant effect on her perceived credibility as a witness. In discussing how one’s accent and dialect can affect how a person is treated in the courts (whether the accused or a witness), I will refer to Rickford’s arguments in the Robert Zimmerman trial.

Dixon, J. A., Mahoney, B., & Cocks, R. (2002). Accents of Guilt?: Effects of Regional Accent, Race, and Crime Type on Attributions of Guilt. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 21*(2), 162–168. https://doi.org/[10.1177/02627X02021002004](https://doi-org.libproxy.csun.edu/10.1177/02627X02021002004)

2. The authors aimed to explore the effect that one’s accent has in a legal context. They looked at the effect of a particular regional accent in England, the Birmingham accent. This accent had been the subject of research in past studies, consistently being perceived negatively. The research question was whether this negative evaluation of a nonstandard accent would extend into the courtroom. Additionally, would the nature of the crime (blue collar (e.g., armed robbery) vs. white collar (e.g., check fraud)) and the race of the suspect (Black/White) interact with the accent in the evaluation of guilt? One capable speaker/actor, who was a code-switcher between the regional and standard accent, was recorded reenacting the interview of a real suspect. Details were given to the evaluators regarding the race and crime type of the suspect.These 119 listeners were White college students who were not speakers of the Birmingham accent.The listeners rated the regional accent speaker as more guilty. The combination of Black suspect/regional accent/armed robbery was judged as the most guilty. (171 words)

3. In this paper, I will explore the effect that Rachel Jeantel’s dialect had in the trial of Robert Zimmerman. She was a witness for the prosecution, not a suspect, but still her way of speaking received a lot of attention. The research in the study that I summarized is good background to establish that listeners are affected by the accent/dialect of participants of a trial.

4. Are speakers of nonstandard English considered credible witnesses? Is their testimony given the same weight as testimony given by speakers who use standardized English? Is it possible that jurors may ignore or discount vital information because of conscious or unconscious bias against speakers of a particular accent/dialect? Those questions were raised following the case of the *State of Florida v. George Zimmerman* (who stood accused of the second-degree murder of Trayvon Martin). Rachel Jeantel, a star witness in the case, was a speaker of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), a dialect that has been well-studied, revealing a phonology and grammar to be systematic. However, some of the rules of the dialect are not the same as those in Standardized English.Rickford and King (2016) arguethat her dialect had a significant effect on her perceived credibility as a witness. I will argue that if the dialect of a witness in a trial is seen as nonstandard, then their testimony will be evaluated in a more negative light than if they spoke with a standard accent/dialect.