

You are what you speak.

An empirical investigation into perception of accents and social class.

1. Introduction

An empirical investigation into perceptions of accents and social class.

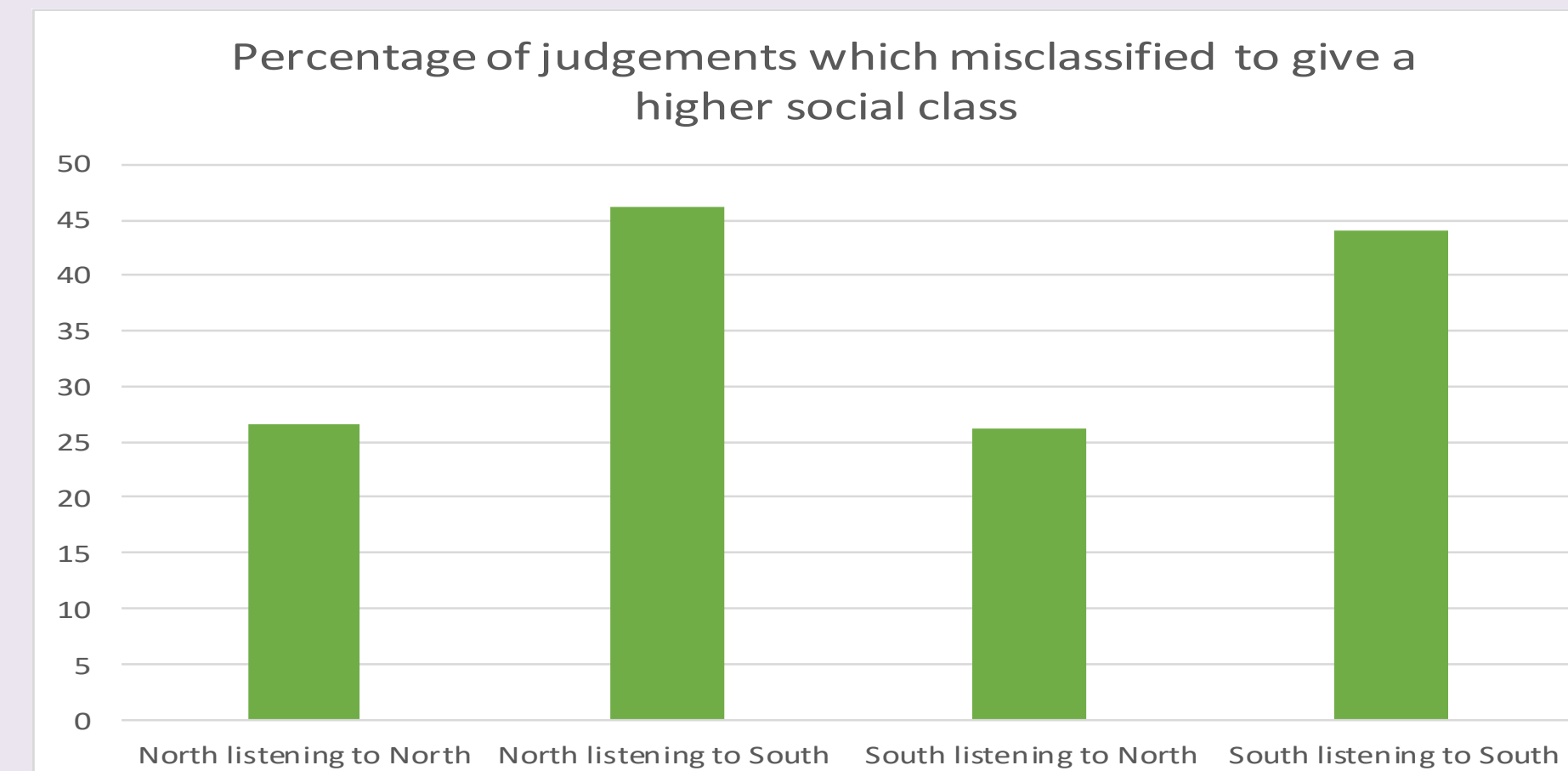
- **Observation:** People from the northern parts of England describe all southern accents as sounding “posh” whatever their social class
- **Hypothesis:** Northern speakers of English are more likely to incorrectly classify a speaker as upper class if the accent is Southern. The North/South border was drawn based on accent features according to Upton & Widdowson (2006).

2. Methodology

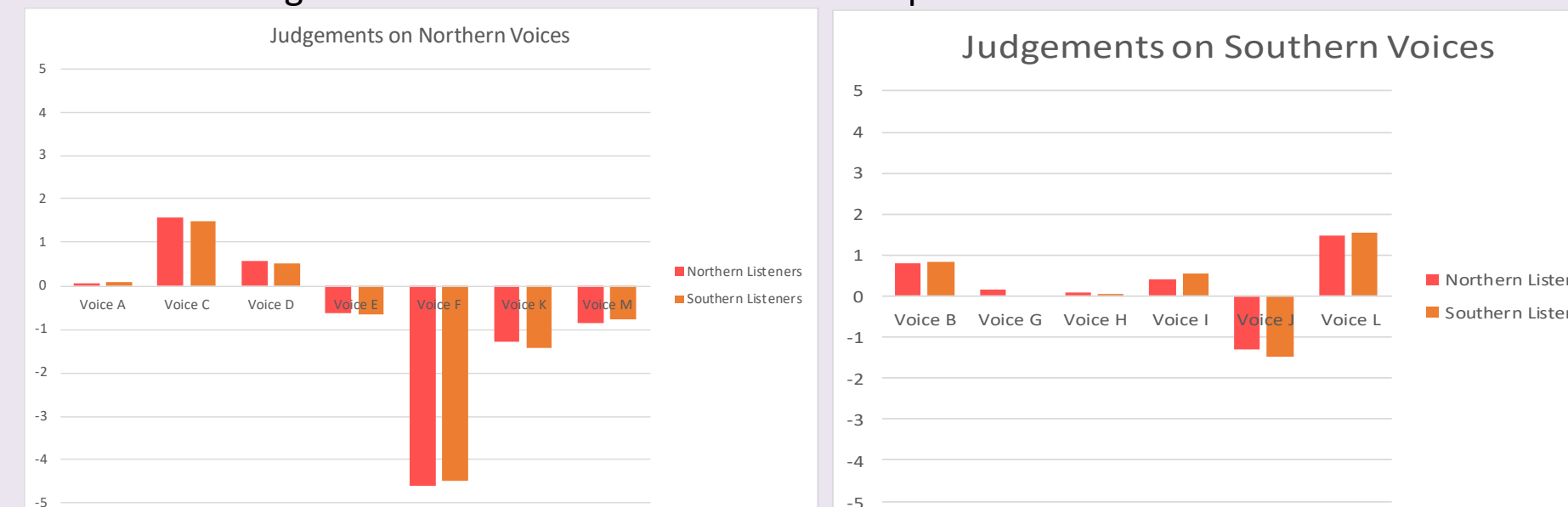
- Online survey which plays recordings of 13 female speakers under 30 years old.
- Asks for judgements about the speakers on a 1-5 scale, from lowest to highest social class, plus other factors including level of education, level of intelligence to blind the participants to the aim.
- Speakers read the same text, ‘The North Wind and the Sun’ from the Handbook of the International Phonetic Association. This text contains most of the sounds in English, including those that vary by area.

3. Results and Conclusions

- On average Northerners classified 26.5% of the northern voices they listened to as of a higher social class.
- Northerners misclassified 46.3% of southern voices they listened to.



Charts of average amount the listener added to the speakers actual social class:



According to this analysis of the data the hypothesis is supported, a northern speaker is more likely to incorrectly classify a speaker as a higher class if the accent is southern.

- Southerners presented similar rates of misclassification to a higher social class.
- 26.1% of northern speakers
- 44% of southern speakers

Therefore, the data shows that overall southern speakers are more likely to be evaluated as a higher social class, wherever the listener is from.

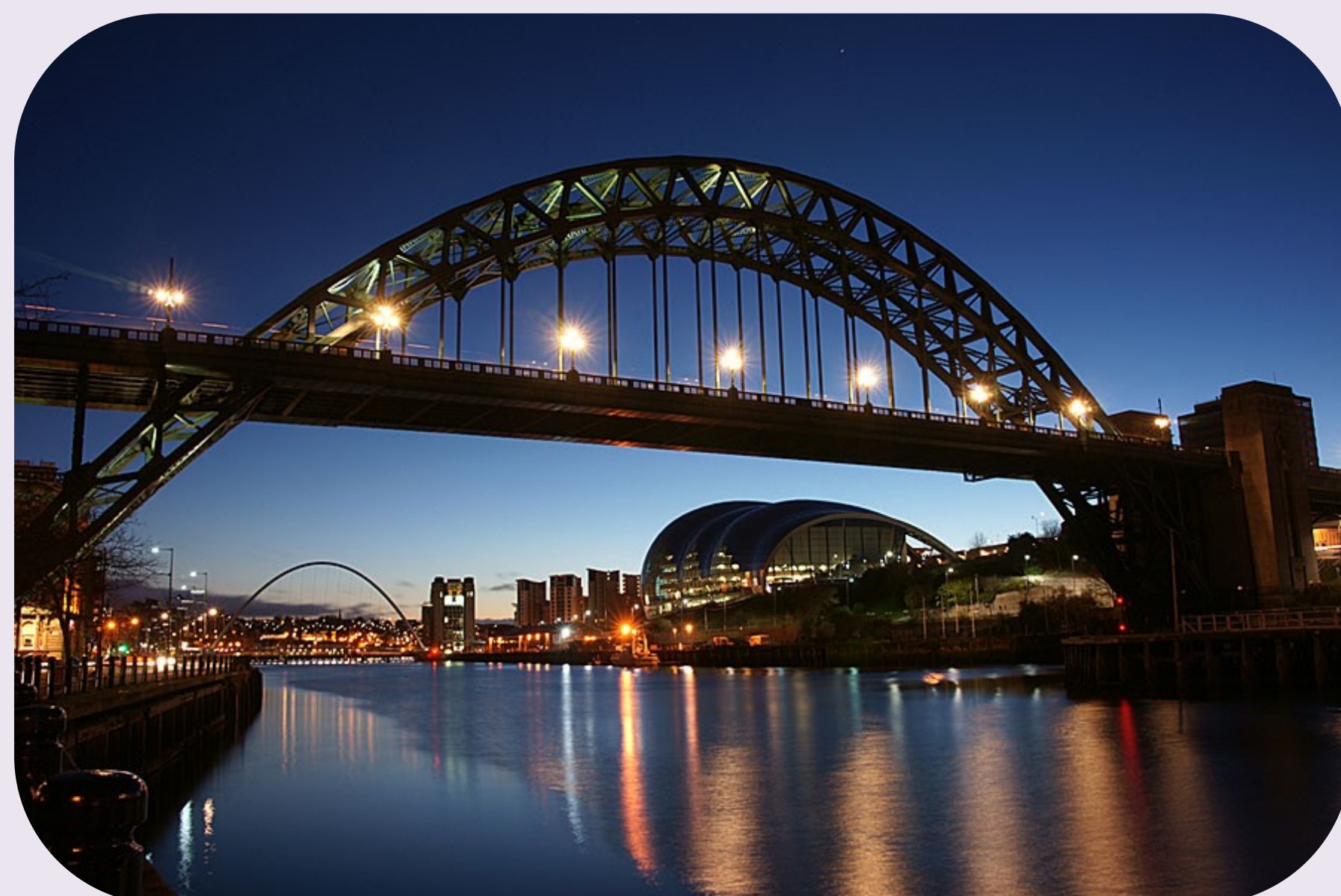
- Further proved by correlation coefficient calculations.
- The regionality of the survey taker (North/South) correlated with whether they raised the speaker’s social class = 0.03
- Regionality of survey takers correlated with amount by which they raised the speaker’s social class = 0.04.

Neither of these values show a strong correlation in either direction. Therefore, this test did not prove or disprove a difference between northern and southern speakers when making social class judgements on accents.

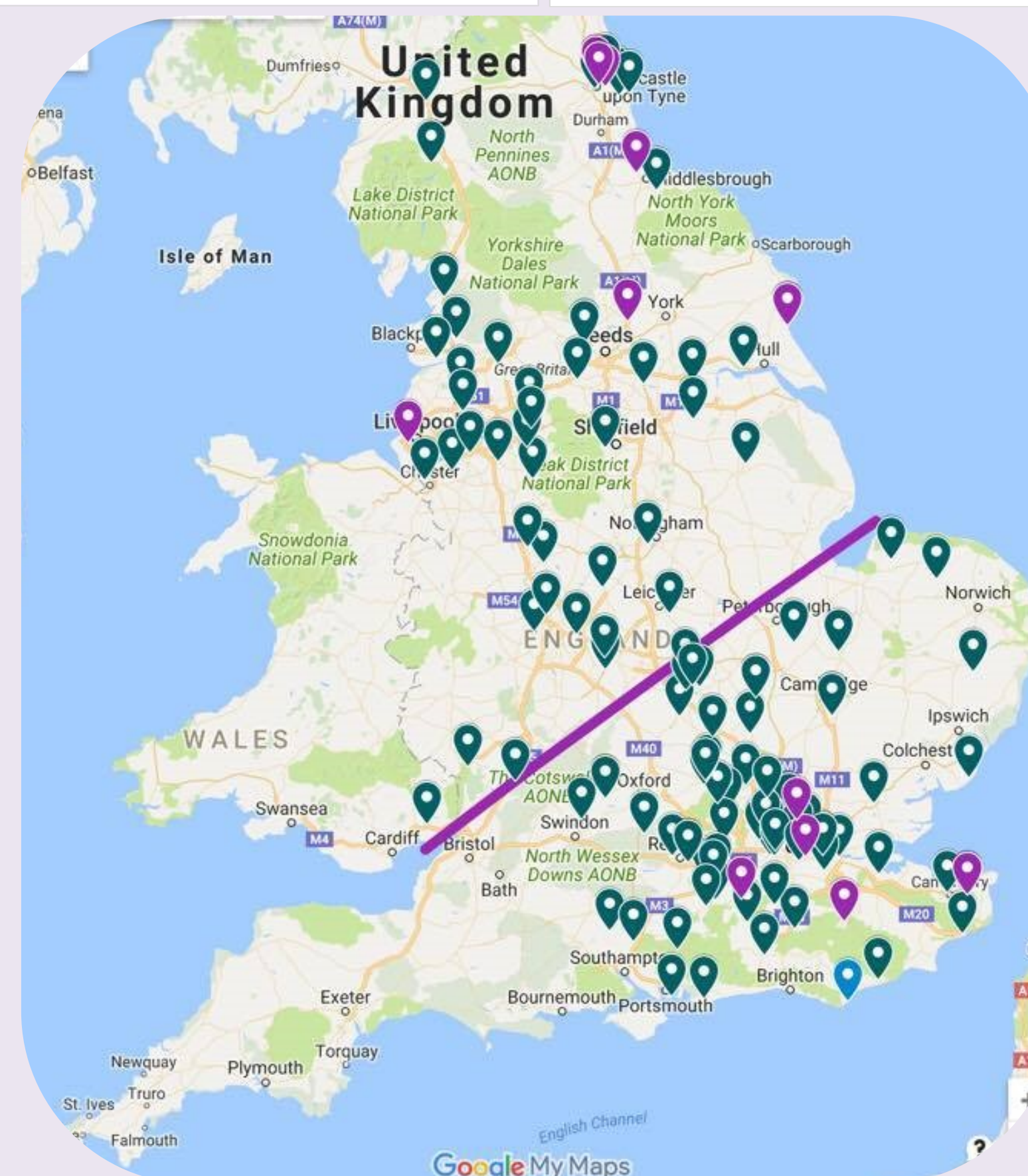
4. Evaluation

- Results showed a support for the hypothesis but no clear correlation based on regionality of the listener.
- Interesting and unexpected result – not only Northerners value southern accents of a higher social class, but also Southerners.

The fact is southern accents are judged as of higher social class is important when considering the North/South divide in the UK. Despite huge strides in the areas of accent discrimination and balance of political and economic power, Southerners are clearly still viewed as of a higher social class than Northerners which shows that stereotypes and presumptions about both areas still exist.



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Map shows speakers in purple and survey participants in blue.



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