

Everyone Has an Accent Except Me

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I dont have an accent! wails the friend indignantly. And we are all amused because the pronunciation of the utterance itself demonstrates to our ears that the claim is false. The speaker who voices this common refrain believes absolutely that his or her speech is devoid of any distinguishing characteristics that set it apart from the speech of those around them. We listeners who hear it are for our part equally convinced that the speakers accent differs in some significant respect from our own. The key to understanding this difference of opinion is not so much in the differences in speech sounds that the speakers use but in the nature of own-ness—what does it mean to be one of us and to sound like it? It all comes down to a question of belonging. Accent defines and communicates who we are. Accent is the map which listeners perceive through their ears rather than through their eyes to read where the speaker was born and raised, what gender they are, how old they are, where they might have moved during their life, where they went to school, what occupation they have taken up, and even how short or tall they are, how much they might weigh, or whether they are feeling well or ill at the moment.

The fact is that everyone has an accent. It tells other people who we are because it reflects the places we have been and the things we have done. But the construct of accent, like so many other things, is relative. We may only realize that others think we have an accent when we leave the place we came from and find ourselves among people who share a different background from our own, or when a newcomer to our local area stands out as having a distinctly different pronunciation from most of those in our group—that is, relative to us. The closer we are to our native place and the more people that are there who grew up like us, the more likely we are to sound like those people when we talk. In other words, we share their local accent.

Some countries have one accent which is accepted as standard and which enjoys higher social prestige than any other. This is true of RP (Received Pronunciation) in the UK, of standard French in France and of many countries that have evolved a broadcast standard for radio and television. We may feel that this national standard is accentless and that non-standard speakers, by contrast, have accents. Nevertheless, it has to be recognized that standards that have evolved in the broadcast industry have their roots in language varieties that already exist in distinct social groups and their institutions. To use one particular groups accent in broadcasting is to give that accent a wider reach than perhaps it had before, but the accent itself is no less of an accent than any other, although it may represent groups and institutions with more political and economic power than groups whose members use another accent.

Our perceptions and production of speech also change with time. If we were to leave our native place for an extended period, our perception that the new accents around us were strange would only be temporary. Gradually, depending on our age, what job we are doing and how many different sorts of folks with different types of accents surround us, we will lose the sense that others have an accent and we will begin to fit in—to accommodate our speech patterns to the new norm. Not all people do this to the same degree. Some remain intensely proud of their original accent and dialect words, phrases and gestures, while others accommodate rapidly to a new environment by changing, among other things, their speech habits, so that they no longer stand out in the crowd. Whether they do this consciously or not is open to debate and may differ from individual to individual, but like most processes that have to do with language, the change probably happens before we are aware of it and probably couldnt happen if we were.

So when we say, I dont have an accent, we really mean, You wouldnt think I had an accent if you knew who I was and knew where Id been. It has more to do with acceptance—agreeing to stop listening to the other as other—than with absolute differences in the vowels, consonants or intonation patterns that a speaker uses. At the most basic level, we acknowledge that every individual will always have some speech characteristics that distinguish him or her from everyone else, even in our local community. This is the essence of recognition—we can learn to pick a friends voice out of the crowd even though we consider everyone in our local crowd to have the same accent compared to outsiders. So what we call accent is relative not only to experience but also to the number of speech features we wish to distinguish at a time.

Human perception is categorical. When it comes to placing an accent, we listen and categorize according to accents we have heard before. We have a hard time placing an accent that we have never heard before, at least until we find out what to associate that accent with. Our experience of perceiving the sounds of human speech is very much a question of agreeing with others to construct certain categories and then to place the sounds that we hear into them. In contemporary constructivist psychology, this process is called the co-construction of reality, in which differences can be said not to exist until we construct them. One result of these principles is that we can become quite attuned to stereotypical accents that we have heard only occasionally and don't know very well, while we become insensitive to the common accents we hear all around us every day. The speech of our colleagues seems normal to our ears, while the speech of a stranger stands out as different from that norm. So we feel that we don't have an accent because of the weight of experience that tells us that we are the best possible example of the norm.

Details of pronunciation conjure up stereotypes. A few consonants and vowels or the briefest of intonation melodies cause us to search our memories for a pattern that matches what we have just heard. This is how we place speakers according to dialect or language group. It is also how we predict what the rest of their consonants and vowels and intonational phrasing will be like. Sometimes we are wrong, but usually we make good guesses based on limited evidence, especially if we've heard the accent before. Because we are used to the word order and common expressions of our language, a stranger's exotic pronunciation of a word which we recognize and understand can be catalogued as foreign, and we may ascribe it to one familiar stereotype or another and predict what the speaker's pronunciations of other words will be like. In this way, we see others as having an accent—because we take ourselves as the norm or reference to compare and measure others' speech.

It is interesting for the student of phonetics to observe the various ways in which one person's accent can differ from another's. There are three strands of accent which Professor David Abercrombie of the Department of Linguistics of the University of Edinburgh for many years taught his students to distinguish: the very short consonant and vowel sounds which alternate in rapid succession; the longer waves of rhythmic and melodic groupings, which we call rhythm and intonation; and the longest-term, persistent features that change very little in a given individual's voice, which we call voice quality.

Consonants and vowels are the building blocks of linguistic meaning, and slight changes in their quality inherently carry large differences in meaning, which we detect immediately. Bought, bat, bet, bait is a four-way distinction for an English speaker, but may only be a two-way distinction for a Spanish or Japanese speaker. Differences in vowels can make dialects of English incomprehensible even to each other at first. An American pronunciation of John can sound like Jan to a Scot; and a Scots pronunciation of John can sound like Joan to an American. Consonants are also critical in deciding the meaning of a word. The American who asked if she could clear away some bottles was understood by the pub owner in Scotland to have said barrels, not only because of the vowel but also because the d-like pronunciation of the t-sound is almost exactly like the d-like pronunciation of the rolled r in Scots. Again, it is the speaker generating the utterance who thinks primarily in terms of meaning and not in terms of the sounds being used to transmit that meaning. It is the hearer who must translate the incoming speech sounds into new, meaningful units (which we usually call words) and who cannot help but notice that the signals coming in are patterned differently from the hearer's own system of speech sounds. Confusion over the meaning of a word can only highlight these differences, making the translation of meaning more difficult and making each participant in the conversation feel that the other has an accent. The impression is therefore mutual.

Another meaningful component of accent is intonation or the melody of speech. Differences in the rises and falls of intonation patterns, and the rhythmic beat that accompanies them, can be as significant as differences in the melodies of tunes that we recognize or in the beat of a waltz compared to a jig. One of the characteristics of the American comedian Richard Priors' ability to switch from white talk to black talk is the control of the height and of the rising and falling of the pitch of the voice. Even more rapid timing of these rises and falls is an indication of languages such as Swedish and languages such as Chinese which have different tones, that is, pitches that distinguish word meanings from each other. Pitch can have the greatest effect on our impression of an accent or on our ability to recognize a voice. Our mood—whether we are excited or angry or sad—can change the sound of our voice, as the tempo of our speech also speeds up or slows down, so that we may sound like a different person.

Voice quality is the ensemble of more or less permanent elements that appear to remain constant in a persons speech. This is how we recognize a friends voice on the telephone even if they only utter a syllable. Some voices are nasal; others low and resonant; others breathy, and still others higher pitched and squeaky. Presumably, the better we know a person, the less we feel they have a noticeable accent. Naturally, however, if they didnt have a distinguishable ensemble of accent features, we couldnt tell their voice apart from other peoples. Travelers to a foreign country often experience an inability to tell individual speakers of a foreign language apart. As it once did in our native language, this ability comes with practice, that is, with exposure. The reason is that we need time to distinguish, first, to which strand of accent each particular speech gesture belongs and, second, which speech details are common to most speakers of that language and which belong only to the individual. Unless the individuals speech stands out in some remarkable way, we are likely to perceive the collection of common, group traits first.

Much of our perception of accent could actually be visual. Hand and facial gestures which accompany speech could cue a listener that the speaker comes from a different place, so that we expect the person to sound different from our norm. If we expect to hear an accent, we probably will. Sooner or later, wherever they live, most people encounter someone from another place. A stranger from out of town, a foreigner, even a person who had moved away and returned. But even in the same community, people from different social groups or of different ages can be distinguished on the basis of their speech. One of the intriguing linguistic aspects of police work is to locate and identify suspects on the basis of their accent. Often, this technique comes down to the skill of being able to notice details of speech that other observers overlook. Sometimes, an academic approach such as broadcasting a voice to a large number of judges over the radio or on television is necessitated. In this case, an anonymous suspect can often be narrowed down as coming from a particular area or even identified outright. Computer programs are also having moderate success at verifying individual speakers on the basis of their accent. These techniques are sometimes called voiceprints, implying that each individual is unique, but as with human listeners, success may depend on how much speech from the individual can be heard and in how many contexts.

One of the most popular characterizations of the notion of accent modification has been George Bernard Shaws *Pygmalion*, revived on stage and screen as *My Fair Lady*. The phonetician, Professor Higgins, is renowned for tracing the course of peoples lives from their accents, and Eliza Doolittle, at the opposite extreme, while probably aware of different accents and able to identify them to some degree, appears at first quite unable to produce speech in anything other than her local-dialect accent. The transformation of Eliza, explained in sociolinguistic terms, is the apparent result of her accommodation to a new social milieu and her acceptance of a new role for herself. In terms of constructivist psychology, she co-constructed a new reality—a new story—for her life and left the old story behind. The transformation had its physical effect (she was no longer recognized in her former neighborhood) as well as its linguistic realization (her accent changed to suit her new surroundings). We all leave parts of the speaking style of our early years behind, while we adopt new patterns more suited to our later years. Whether we change a lot or a little depends on individual choices within a web of social circumstance.

Sources and further reading

The play, *Pygmalion* (New York: Penguin Books, 1951), by George Bernard Shaw is well worth reading and rereading. Failing that, a viewing of the video of *My Fair Lady* provides a tongue-in-cheek (perhaps literally) spoof of both undersensitivity and oversensitivity to accent. The *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1994) contains a wealth of information on accent, pronunciation and the components of speech that make up accent. The entry on Accent by J. M. Y. Simpson is particularly useful. For more details on one of the most famous of all local accents, see Dennis Prestons chapter on American Speech.