

My English sounds better than yours: Second-language learners perceive their own accent as better than that of their peers

Holger Mitterer (University of Malta)

Nikola Anna Eger (University of Munich)

Eva Reinisch (Acoustics Research Institute of the Austrian Academy of Sciences)

Email: holger.mitterer@um.edu.mt

Two fairly well-established findings, when juxtaposed, lead to a conundrum. On the one hand, second language (L2) learners are often aware of the foreign accent that other speakers produce, including those that share the same native language. That is, German learners easily notice the German accent of others. On the other hand, research with altered auditory feedback has shown that speakers are in principle able to adjust their own speech when they notice a deviation from the target. The logical conclusion from these two facts would be that L2 speakers should notice their own accent and, given the plasticity and monitoring ability observed in altered auditory feedback experiments, increasingly home in on the target accent, both in terms of segmental and prosodic features. However, as is well documented, this does not happen.

Here, we present an account for this conundrum. We hypothesised that L2 learners may perceive their own accent as closer to the target language than the accent of other learners, due to frequent exposure to their own productions. It already has been shown that learners are better able to comprehend their own L2 accent than the L2 accent from other speakers (Eger & Reinisch, 2019). The authors suggested that this is due to familiarity with the own accent. However, this does not yet show that L2 learners perceive their accent as better as that of others. As an analogy, consider the exaggerated lisp by the cartoon character Duffy Duck. Learning to comprehend this lisp does not imply to accept it as standard. It is therefore necessary to ask learners to rate their accent in comparison to others.

This is, however, raises the issue that rating one's own accent is riddled with potential biases such as overconfidence and modesty (see, e.g, John & Robins, 1994). To bypass these issues, we recorded simple sentences from 24 female German learners of English and then used PSOLA to change the pitch and changes in sampling frequency to lower the overall spectral shape to make them sound male. The same speakers then judged their altered, male sounding voice and three other, similarly manipulated, voices. The results showed that learners rated their own accent as better than that of others, even though post-experiment questioning showed that participants were not aware of rating their own voice. Based on the German grading system, the own voice was on average deemed good (average 2.0), while other voices were intermediate between good and satisfactory (average: 2.5). With this effect size, this bias can be considered a factor that prevents learners from progressing further, because they perceive their own accent as better than it is. This finding hence provides an explanation why we hear an accent on others but not really on ourselves. It also suggests that objective feedback may be crucial in fostering L2 acquisition and reduce fossilization of erroneous patterns.

Eger, N. A., & Reinisch, E. (2019). The impact of one's own voice and production skills on word recognition in a second language. *Journal of Experimental Psychology. Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 45, 552–571. <https://doi.org/10.1037/xlm0000599>

John, O. P., & Robins, R. W. (1994). Accuracy and bias in self-perception: Individual differences in self-enhancement and the role of narcissism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 66(1), 206–219. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.66.1.206>