

PUTTING ACCENT IN ITS PLACE: RETHINKING OBSTACLES TO COMMUNICATION

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I. Dimensions of Accent: Salience, Intelligibility, Comprehensibility

- Listeners are highly sensitive to speech patterns that are different from those typically used in the community. The following studies and discussions have highlighted listener sensitivity to L2 accent:

Brennan, E. M., Ryan, E. B., & Dawson, W. E. (1975). Scaling of apparent accentedness by magnitude estimation and sensory modality matching. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 4, 27-36.

Flege, J. E. (1984). The detection of French accent by American listeners. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 76, 692-707.

Flege, J. E., & Fletcher, K.L. (1992). Talker and listener effects on degree of perceived foreign accent. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 91, 370-389.

Flege, J.E., Munro, M. J., & MacKay, I. R. A. (1995). Factors affecting strength of perceived foreign accent in a second language. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 97, 3125-3134.

Major, R. C. (1987). Phonological similarity, markedness, and rate of L2 acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 9, 63-82.

Major, R. C. (2007). Identifying a foreign accent in an unfamiliar language. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 29, 539-556.

Scovel, T. (1988). *A time to speak: A psycholinguistic investigation into the critical period for human speech*. New York: Harper and Row.

Thompson, I. (1991). Foreign accents revisited: The English pronunciation of Russian immigrants. *Language Learning*, 41, 177-204.

Van Els, T., & De Bot, K. (1987). The role of intonation in foreign accent. *Modern Language Journal*, 71, 147-155.

- Listeners can detect a foreign accent even in languages they do not speak and in backwards speech. Perhaps in the latter case *voice quality* is the feature listeners attend to.

Esling, J. H., & Wong, R. F. (1983). Voice quality settings and the teaching of pronunciation. *TESOL Quarterly*, 17, 89-94.

Major, R. C. (2007). Identifying a foreign accent in an unfamiliar language. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 29, 539-556.

Munro, M. J., Derwing, T. M., & Burgess, C. S. (forthcoming). The bases of foreign accent detection.

Munro, M. J., Derwing, T. M., & Burgess, C. S. (2003). The detection of foreign accent in backwards speech. In M. J. Solé, D. Recasens, & J. Romero (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 15th International Congress of Phonetic Sciences*. Barcelona: Futurgraphic.

- In our research we have observed that L2 speech can be evaluated on a number of partially independent dimensions.

Derwing, T. M., & Munro, M. J. (1997). Accent, intelligibility, and comprehensibility: Evidence from four L1s. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 19, 1-16.

Derwing, T. M., Munro, M. J., & Thomson, R. I. (In press). A longitudinal study of ESL learners' fluency and comprehensibility development. *Applied Linguistics*. [Available via advanced access on the *Applied Linguistics* website.]

Derwing, T. M., Munro, J. J., & Wiebe, G. (1997). Pronunciation instruction for "fossilized" learners: Can it help? *Applied Language Learning*, 8, 217-235.

Derwing, T. M., Munro, M. J., & Wiebe, G. (1998). Evidence in favor of a broad framework for pronunciation instruction. *Language Learning*, 48, 393-410.

- Derwing, T. M., Thomson, R. I., & Munro, M. J. (2006). English pronunciation and fluency development in Mandarin and Slavic speakers. *System*, 34, 183-193.
- Munro, M. J., & Derwing, T. M. (1995). Foreign accent, comprehensibility, and intelligibility in the speech of second language learners. *Language Learning*, 45, 73-97.
- Munro, M., & Derwing, T. M. (1995). Processing time, accent, and comprehensibility in the perception of foreign-accented speech. *Language and Speech*, 38, 289-306.
- Munro, M. J., & Derwing, T. M. (2001). Modelling perceptions of the comprehensibility and accentedness of L2 speech: The role of speaking rate. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 23, 451-468.
- Munro, M. J., Derwing, T. M., & Morton, S. L. (2006). The mutual intelligibility of foreign accents. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 28, 111-131.

Dimension	Means of assessment	Focus
Accentedness <i>degree of difference from local variety</i>	9-point Likert scale (not accented to very heavily accented)	Difference
Comprehensibility <i>perceived ease of comprehension</i>	9-point Likert scale (very easy to very difficult to understand)	Listener effort
Intelligibility <i>degree of actual comprehension</i>	Many possible approaches: dictées, T/F verifications, comprehension questions, summaries	Outcome

- One very robust finding in our work is that accent and intelligibility are not the same thing. A speaker can have a very strong accent, yet be perfectly understood. For a comprehensive overview see

Munro, M. J. (2008). Foreign accent and speech intelligibility. In Hansen Edwards, J. G. & Zampini, M. L. (Eds.). *Phonology and Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 193-218). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

- Comprehensibility is also somewhat different from the other two dimensions.
- L2 speech patterns are not static; they can change as a result of language experience.
- Studies showing change without pronunciation instruction:

Global Accent

Flege, J. E., & Fletcher, K.L. (1992). Talker and listener effects on degree of perceived foreign accent. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 91, 370-389.

Riney, T. J., & Flege, J. E. (1998). Changes over time in global foreign accent and liquid identifiability and accuracy. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 20, 213-243.

Consonants

Flege, J. E., Takagi, N., & Mann, V. (1995). Japanese adults can learn to produce English /ɹ / and /l/ accurately. *Language and Speech*, 38, 25-55.

Flege, J. E., & Liu, S. (2001). The effect of experience on adults' acquisition of a second language. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 23, 527-552.

Vowels

Flege, J. E., Bohn, O.-S., & Jang, S. (1997). Effects of experience on non-nativespeakers' production and perception of English vowels. *Journal of Phonetics*, 25, 437-470.

- Baptista, B. O. (2006). Adult phonetic learning of a second language vowel system. In Baptista, B. O. (Ed.), *English with a Latin beat: Studies in Portuguese/Spanish-English interlanguage* (pp. 19-40). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Munro, M. J. & Derwing, T. M. (In press). Segmental acquisition in adult ESL learners: A longitudinal study of vowel production. *Language Learning*.

Prosody

Trofimovich, P., & Baker, W. (2006). Learning second language suprasegmentals: Effect of L2 experience on prosody and fluency characteristics of L2 speech. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 28, 1-30.

II. Pedagogy

- As late as the 1990s, pronunciation instruction was looked upon with some pessimism in SLA, perhaps because the goal was often seen to be native-like production:

Pica, T. (1994). Questions from the language classroom: Research perspectives. *TESOL Quarterly*, 28, 49-79.

- Nonetheless, important work on L2 phonetics and phonology, and on L2 pronunciation was carried out in the 1980s and 90s. Here is an incomplete list of some of the key figures:

Phonology: M. Pennington; F. Eckman; R. Major; A Wennerstrom

Phonetics: J. Flege; W. Strange

Pedagogy: A. Brown; M. Celce-Murcia; D. Brinton; J. Goodwin; J. Esling & R. Wong; J. Gilbert; J. Morley

- One of the early studies of the effectiveness of instruction carried out during this era was

Macdonald, D., Yule, G., & Powers, M. (1994). Attempts to improve English L2 pronunciation: The variable effects of different types of instruction. *Language Learning*, 44, 75-100.

- Further work indicated that pronunciation teaching could indeed be effective in improving various aspects of oral production, including intelligibility and comprehensibility.

Study

Outcome

Perlmutter, M. (1989). Intelligibility rating of L2 speech pre- and postintervention. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 68, 515-521.

↑ Intelligibility

Derwing, T. M., Munro, J. J., & Wiebe, G. (1997). Pronunciation instruction for “fossilized” learners: Can it help? *Applied Language Learning*, 8, 217-235.

↑ Intelligibility & Compreh.

Derwing, T. M., Munro, M. J., & Wiebe, G. (1998). Evidence in favor of a broad framework for pronunciation instructions. *Language Learning*, 48, 393-410.

↑ Comprehensibility

Derwing, T. M., & Rossiter, M. J. (2003). The effects of pronunciation instruction on the accuracy, fluency, and complexity of L2-accented speech. *Applied Language Learning*, 13, 1-18.

↑ Improved production

Couper, G. (2003). The value of an explicit pronunciation syllabus in ESOL teaching. *Prospect*, 18(3), 53-70.

↑ Improved production

Couper, G. (2006) The short and long-term effects of pronunciation instruction. *Prospect*, 21, 46-66.

- While it is valuable to know that pronunciation instruction can be effective, it is even more important to know where to place the focus. Studies support the importance of prosodic factors, including sentence stress and syllable stress, and segments in strong syllables.

Derwing, T. M., Munro, M. J., & Wiebe, G. (1998). Evidence in favor of a broad framework for pronunciation instruction. *Language Learning*, 48, 393-410.

Derwing, T. M., & Rossiter, M. J. (2003). The effects of pronunciation instruction on the accuracy, fluency, and complexity of L2-accented speech. *Applied Language Learning*, 13, 1-18.

Hahn, L. D. (2004). Primary stress and intelligibility: Research to motivate the teaching of suprasegmentals. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38, 201-223.

Levis, J. M. (1999). Intonation in theory and practice revisited. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33, 37-54.

Zielinski, B. W. (2008). The listener: No longer the silent partner in reduced intelligibility. *System*, 36, 69-84.

- Catford and Brown also proposed that *functional load* is an important consideration at the segmental level. That is, some minimal pairs are more important than others.

Brown, A. (1991). Functional load and the teaching of pronunciation. In A. Brown (Ed.), *Teaching English pronunciation: A book of readings* (pp. 211-224). London: Routledge.

Catford, J. C. (1987). Phonetics and the teaching of pronunciation: A systemic description of English phonology. In J. Morley (Ed.), *Current perspectives on pronunciation* (pp. 87-100). Washington, DC, TESOL.

Munro, M. J. & Derwing, T. M. (2006). The functional load principle in ESL pronunciation instruction: An exploratory study. *System*, 34, (520-531).

- A troubling trend is the growth of the “accent reduction industry,” which often uses pseudo-medical jargon and techniques that have no empirical foundation. High fees are sometimes charged for courses that falsely claim to “erase” peoples’ foreign accents.

Derwing, T. M. (2008). Curriculum issues in teaching pronunciation to second language learners. In J. Hansen Edwards & M. Zampini (Eds.), *Phonology and second language acquisition* (pp. 347-369). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

- Surveys have indicated that many L2 teachers have limited or no access to training on pronunciation instruction.

Breitkreutz, J., Derwing, T. M. & Rossiter, M. J. (2002). Pronunciation teaching practices in Canada. *TESL Canada Journal*, 19, 51-61.

Burgess, J., & Spencer, S. (2000). Phonology and pronunciation in integrated language teaching and teacher education. *System*, 28, 191-215.

MacDonald, S. (2002). Pronunciation – views and practices of reluctant teachers. *Prospect*, 17 (3), 3-18.

Murphy, J. M. (1997). Phonology courses offered by MATESOL programs in the US. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31, 741-761.

For an overview of the relevance of research to pronunciation teaching, see the following:

Derwing, T. M., & Munro, M. J. (2005). Second language accent and pronunciation teaching: A research-based approach. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39, 379-397.

III. Social Aspects of Accent

- Some researchers have observed that speaking with an L2 accent can have some benefits.

Varonis, E. M., & Gass, S. (1982). The comprehensibility of non-native speech. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 4, 114-136.

Flege, J. (1988). The production and perception of foreign language speech sounds. In H. Winitz (Ed.), *Human communication and its disorders, a review – 1988*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

- On the other hand, some L2 speakers experience discrimination in reaction to their accents.

Lippi-Green, R. (1997). *English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States*. New York : Routledge

Munro, M. J. (2003). A primer on accent discrimination in the Canadian context. *TESL Canada Journal*, 20 (2), 38-51.

Munro, M. J., Derwing, T. M., & Sato, K. (2006). Salient accents, covert attitudes: Consciousness-raising for preservice second language teachers. *Prospect: An Australian Journal of TESOL*, 21, 65-77.

- A variety of conflicting interpretations of the relationship between accent and identify have been offered.

Derwing, T. M. (2003). What do ESL students say about their accents? *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 59, 547–566.

Gatbonton, E., Trofimovich, P., & Magid, M. (2005). Learners' ethnic group affiliation and L2 pronunciation accuracy: A sociolinguistic investigation. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39, 489-511.

Golombek, P. & Rehn Jordan, S. (2005). Becoming “black lambs” not “parrots”: A poststructuralist orientation to intelligibility and identity. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39, 513-533.

Porter, D. & Garvin, S. (1989). Attitudes to pronunciation in EFL. *Speak Out!*, 5, 8-15.

Timmis, I. (2002). Native-speaker norms and International English: A classroom view. *ELT Journal*, 56, 240-249.

Piller, I. (2002). Passing for a native speaker: Identity and success in second language learning. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 6, 179-206.

- The responsibility for successful communication must be shared across interlocutors. In many contexts (notably the workplace) familiarizing listeners with L2 accents will help to overcome negative expectations.

Derwing, T. M., Rossiter, M. J., & Munro, M. J. (2002). Teaching native speakers to listen to foreign-accented speech. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 23, 245-259

Gass, S., & Varonis, E. (1984). The effect of familiarity on the comprehensibility of nonnative speech. *Language Learning*, 34, 65-89.

Rubin, D. L. (1992). Nonlanguage factors affecting undergraduates' judgments of nonnative English-speaking teaching assistants. *Research in Higher Education*, 33, 511-531.

IV. Future Directions

- We see the necessity for further research in the areas of L2 speech, L2 pedagogy and L2 social aspects of accent.