



February 2009
Volume 47 Number 1
Article Number 1COM1

[Return to Current Issue](#)

Are Accents One of the Last Acceptable Areas for Discrimination?

Patreese D. Ingram

Associate Professor of Agricultural and Extension Education
The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, Pennsylvania
Pdi1@psu.edu

Abstract: The use of language and the ability to speak "Standard English" in America can have serious consequences for people in this country. One's intellectual ability is often judged on the basis of how well one speaks English. Foreign accents and accents related to variation in style and pronunciation of native English speech can be subject to negative evaluation and discrimination. As America becomes an increasingly multicultural nation, it is to be hoped that we will become increasingly skilled in communicating with those who speak English with various accents as well as tolerant in our attitudes toward all accents.

The mission of Cooperative Extension is providing research-based educational programs that serve all Americans and improve lives worldwide. Creating a welcoming and tolerant environment for those with differences is a part of that charge. One of the differences that Extension educators are more likely to encounter today is programming with people who speak English with an accent. Attitudes toward accents can have positive or negative implications for how successful we are in working with diverse audiences.

Standard English

The use of language and the ability to speak "Standard English" in America can have serious consequences for people in the United States. What is Standard English? Milroy and Milroy (1999) suggest that Standard English is "an idea in the mind rather than a reality—a set of abstract norms to which actual usage may conform to a greater or lesser extent" (p. 22-23). Standard means the "accepted manner in which native speakers of a language produce a specific sound or combination of sounds which find some degree of acceptance and favor over space and social distinction" (Langdon, 1999; Lippi-Green, 1997).

Accent is how an individual pronounces a given language. Sometimes we think of people with an accent as those who "talk funny." An accent includes a combination of consonants and vowels and prosodic features, including duration, rhythm, stress, pitch, intonation, and loudness.

Accents

There are two kinds of accent. One is first language accent, or variation in the use of one's native language. Variations may be related to the geographical area or cultural group to which one belongs. Examples include a Maine accent, an Appalachian accent, a Jewish accent, and Black English. Lippi-Green (1997) shares an example, John Kennedy's Boston variety of English. He once noted that Bostonian's "saved all the r's *paaking*

aa caas in Haavaad yaad [parking our cars in Harvard yard] in order to put them on the end of *idear* and *Cuber* [idea and Cuba]." Every native speaker of English speaks with a first language accent.

The second kind of accent is a second language accent that occurs when a native speaker of a different language learns to speak English. Accent is the breakthrough of the native language phonology into the English. We may say that a person has a Dutch accent because the phonologies of Dutch influence the learner's pronunciation of U.S. English.

The degree to which a person can substitute one accent for another is severely dependent upon the age at which the second language is learned (Lenneberg, 1967). While children can often learn a second or third language with ease, the same is not true for many adults. A number of scientists postulate that at some point during adolescence we move past the developmental stage for language acquisition (Johnson & Newport, 1989; Lenneberg, 1967; Long, 1990). A person's distinctive intonation and phonological features (accent) are hard-wired in the brain and are difficult to change. It is unrealistic to expect a person who learned to speak English as an adult to sound just like a native English speaker, regardless as to commitment, intelligence, and motivation.

People such as Henry Kissinger, while speaking English very clearly, never lose their accent. The length of time spent in the community and the type of pronunciation difference or phonological rule involved, also play an important part in determining the extent to which a person can speak a second language without an accent.

Attitudes Toward Accents

Although we are less likely to directly discriminate against others based on race, ethnicity, homeland, or economics, discrimination based on language seems to be "fair game." In this country, one's ability is often judged on the basis of how well one speaks English. Unintelligence is one attribute that is often assigned to those who speak with a heavy accent (Ryan et al., 1984, cited in Cargile, Takai, & Rodriguez, 2006). The courts document a number of cases brought against employers for discrimination based on language (Xieng v. Peoples National Bank of Washington, 1991; Andrews v Cartex Corporation, 1992).

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination in employment on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, and national origin. And in 1987, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission more specifically defined national origin to include linguistic characteristics of a national origin (EEO, 1987). Under this law, however, employers have some latitude. Employers can deny employment if the accent interferes materially with job performance or the safety of the employee or others. This law only protects accents related to national origin. Homegrown accents and dialects do not have legal protection.

Foreign accents are not the only accents that are viewed negatively. Accents related to variation in style and pronunciation of native English speech are also subject to negative evaluation and discrimination. Regional varieties of language, especially across geographical spaces, are sometimes referred to as dialects (Kertzschar, 2000). The Southern "twang" or "drawl" can be scoffed at by some Northerners.

Other accents that are often viewed negatively in this country are the many Asian accents and Spanish accents. In fact, we are so conditioned to expect an accent that we sometimes hear one when none is present. People who look different are expected to sound different, even if they are monolingual native English speakers.

In experimental studies (Rubin, 1992) participants have rated the voice on one audiotape as having a stronger foreign accent than that on the other when in fact the voice on both audiotapes was the same voice of a native

English speaker. The only difference was the picture shown to represent the person speaking on the audiotape. The person in one picture was Caucasian and in the other was Asian. Additionally, participants scored their understanding of the information they heard lower when the picture they viewed was of the Asian person. These findings beg the question of whether the issue is "accent" as "otherness."

It is important to note that the United States is not the only country where language ideologies exist. Within many nations one can find languages considered more "pure" and "official" than other forms of the language. Castilian Spanish, for example, is often considered "pure" Spanish promulgated by the Royal Spanish Academy (Erichsen, 2007).

Not all accents are considered negative. French accents, for example, are considered positive by many. Several popular movie stars are admired for their Australian accents (Lakoff, cited in Gorman, 2007). And the courts do not contain records of native speakers of Dutch or Swedish or Gaelic experiencing job discrimination because of their communication difficulties (Lippi-Green, 1997). Language subordination tends to target those who are perceived to be most different-different in race, ethnicity, homeland, or other social allegiances that vary from the mainstream.

Communication Is a Two-Way Process

Immigrants who are difficult to understand are taking steps to reduce the problem. Recognizing the need to communicate clearly with English speakers, many immigrants are investing time and money to reduce their accents. Enrollment in accent-reduction classes has increased significantly over the past few years (Gorman, 2007).

In some settings, poor English speakers are being held accountable for their ability to speak English. Institutions of higher education are developing policies that require graduate teaching assistants to achieve a certain level of proficiency in spoken English (Thomas & Monoson, 1993). Teaching assistants with poor English speaking skills are required by some institutions to successfully complete courses in English before they can serve as a teaching assistant (Report on Policies, 1999).

The U.S. Census Bureau predicts a steady increase in the number of immigrants to this country, particularly after 2010 (Congressional Budget Office, 2006). As America becomes an increasingly multicultural nation, the notion of an "accent" may change. It is to be hoped that we, as a nation, will become increasingly skilled in our ability to understand English spoken with various accents and tolerant in our attitudes toward all accents.

Communication is a two-way process. Both the speaker and the listener have a responsibility for the act of communication. While different or foreign accents can sometimes interfere with the listener's ability to understand the message, accents can conjure up negative evaluations of the speaker, reducing the listener's willingness to accept their responsibility in the communication process. Sometimes, it becomes easy to say, "I simply can't understand you," placing full responsibility for the communication process on the speaker.

We all have standards and preferences about the spoken language, and certain accents can take more effort to understand. It is to be hoped, though, that we can make an effort to hear the *content* of the message and look beyond the stereotypes associated with the *way* the message is being spoken. Friedman (2004) suggests several steps when working with someone who is difficult to understand.

- First, don't pretend to understand. Ask the person to slow down a bit because you are having difficulty understanding them.

- Second, don't rush. Slow down yourself.
- Third, resist the temptation to shout. The speaker is not hard of hearing.
- Fourth, avoid being rude. Ask for help from others if you need it.

As Extension educators interact with newcomers to our communities, with businesspersons from around the globe, and with individuals and families who are at various stages in the process of developing Standard English speaking skills, respect for diversity can be extended to language and speech. Modeling supportive behavior ourselves is an important step. Further, as Extension educators, we can encourage others to confront the stereotypes and prejudices that are often associated with specific speech patterns.

References

- Andrews v. Cartex Corporation, U. S. Dist. LEXIS 11468. (U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, 1992).
- Cargile, A. C., Takai, J., & Rodríguez, J. I. (2006). Attitudes toward African-American vernacular English: A US export to Japan? *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 27(6), 443-455.
- Congress of the United States Congressional Budget Office. (June 2006). *Projections of net migration to the United States* (A CBO Paper Publication No. 2774). Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.
- Erichsen, G. (2007). Why is Spanish sometimes called Castilian? Retrieved November 3, 2007, from: <http://spanish.about.com/od/historyofspanish/a/castilian.htm>
- Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. (1987). *EEOC Enforcement Guidelines on National Origin Discrimination. Commerce Clearing House Employment Practices Guides*. Washington, D.C.: Commerce Clearing House.
- Friedman, N. (March 2004). How to handle foreign accent. *Networking Today*. Retrieved November 3, 2007, from: <http://www.networkingtoday.ca/articles/foreignaccent.htm>
- Gorman, A. (2007, October 23). Accenting the 'American' in their speech. Los Angeles Times, Retrieved October 25, 2007, from: <http://mobile.latimes.com/detail.jsp?key=57283&rc=null&p=1>
- Johnson, J. S., & Newport, E. L. (1989). Critical period effects in second language learning: The influence of maturational state on the acquisition of ESL. *Cognitive Psychology*, 21 (1), 60-99.
- Kertzschar, W. A. (2000). Post modern dialectology. *American Speech*, 75(3), 235-237.
- Langdon, H. W. (1999). Foreign accent: Implications for delivery of speech and language services. *Topics In Language Disorders*, 19 (4), 49-59.
- Lenneberg, E. H. (1967). *Biological foundations of language*. NJ: Wiley.

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

Long, M. H. (1990). Maturation constraints on language development. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 12(3), 251-285.

Milroy, J., & Milroy, L. (1991). *Authority in language: Investigating language prescription and standardization*. NY: Routledge.

Ingram, P. (August, 1999). *Report on policies and practices related to the English proficiency of international teaching assistants*. The Pennsylvania State University.

Rubin, D. L. (1992). Non-language factors affecting undergraduates' judgments of nonnative English-speaking teaching assistants. *Research In Higher Education*, 33 (4), 511-531.

Thomas, C. F., & Monoson, P. K. (1993). Oral English language proficiency of ITA's: Policy, implementation, and contributing factors. *Innovative Higher Education*, 17 (3), 195-209.

Xieng v. Peoples National Bank of Washington 821 P.2d 520 (Court of Appeals of Washington, Division One. 1991).

This article is online at [http://www.joe.org/joe/\(none\)/comm1.shtml](http://www.joe.org/joe/(none)/comm1.shtml).

Copyright © by *Extension Journal, Inc.* ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the *Journal Editorial Office*, joe-ed@joe.org.

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#).