

Everyone Has an Accent but Me

John Esling

Everybody has an accent. Accent is the way we speak, pronounce our words, intone sounds, and inflect voice. From listening to others speak, we make judgments about their background, education, culture, nationality, and social status. In fact, we are far more likely to judge a person by his or her accent than by how they dress or carry themselves, or with whom they socialize. As John Esling explains in the next essay, we all have an accent, even if we think we do not.

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1 “I don’t 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 speaker’s 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.

2 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.

3 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 group’s 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.

4 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 couldn’t happen if we were.

5 So when we say, “I don’t have an accent,” we really mean, “You wouldn’t think I had an accent if you knew who I was and knew where I’d 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 friend’s 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.

6 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

7 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 pronunciation 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.

8 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.

9 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.

10 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 Pryor's 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.

11 Voice quality is the ensemble of more or less permanent elements that appear to remain constant in a person's speech. This is how we recognize a friend's 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 didn't have a distinguishable ensemble of accent features, we couldn't tell their voice apart from other people's. 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 individual's speech stands out in some remarkable way, we are likely to perceive the collection of common, group traits first.

12 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.

13 One of the most popular characterizations of the notion of accent modification has been George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, revived on stage and screen as *My Fair Lady*. The phonetician, Professor Higgins, is renowned for tracing the course of people's 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.

THINKING CRITICALLY

1. What do we mean when we say that someone does not have an accent? Is there a type of English that we seem to recognize as “accentless”? Why, according to the author, is such a determination false?
2. Consider the title of Esling’s essay. How does it connect to his essay’s thesis? Why do so many people feel that they do not have an accent? Explain.
3. Before reading this essay, how would you have described your accent? Would you have said you had one? After responding to this question, ask a friend or classmate from a different part of the country if they would agree with your assessment.
4. What stereotypes are associated with accents? Try to identify as many accents as you can think of and what stereotypes you associate with them.
5. Have you ever made presumptions about a person based on his or her accent? How did the phonetic elements Esling describes, such as intonation, pronunciation of consonants and vowels, and voice quality, influence your judgment? Why do we use these phonetic cues to form opinions about other people?
6. According to the author, what makes it possible for us to distinguish accents? Why can we not distinguish our own?

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. In his opening paragraph, Esling comments that accent serves as a “map” that tells others many things about us, including where we come from, our age, gender, education, and background. Write an essay in which you explore the relationship between accent and how we judge others. Do you judge people by how they speak? Is it automatic? Have you ever been wrong? Why do we tend to judge people by their accents?
2. At the end of his essay, Esling refers to George Bernard Shaw’s play, *Pygmalion*. Read the preface Shaw wrote regarding the subject matter and the social commentary behind his story, in which he notes, “it is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him.” What did Shaw mean by this statement? Does his observation hold any truth for Americans today? Why or why not? Explain.

Good English and Bad

Bill Bryson

More than one billion people in the world speak English, and much of the rest of the world is attempting to. But the English language, with its various historical influences, is deceptively complex. Even language authorities will stumble over its idiosyncrasies. And the reason is simple: In an effort to establish criteria for *good* English for generations to come, 17th-century grammarians wrote rules of English modeled on those of Latin, which, though dead, was considered the most admirable and purest tongue. But as Bill Bryson explains, imposing Latin rules on English is like asking people to play baseball according to the rules of football. They do not go together; likewise, ancient standards of usage do not always describe how the language works today. In this lively and engaging discussion, Bryson explains how the distinction of *good* English from *bad* English is mostly a matter of conditioning and prejudice.

Bill Bryson is an American journalist living in England. He has worked for the *Times* of London and the *Independent* also of London, and has written articles for the *New York Times*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, and other magazines. His books include *A Dictionary of Troublesome Words* (2004), *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (2003), and the highly acclaimed *The Mother Tongue* (1990), from which this essay comes. His most recent book is *Shakespeare: The World as Stage* (2007).

1. Consider the parts of speech. In Latin, the verb has up to 120 inflections. In English it never has more than five (e.g., *see*, *sees*, *saw*, *seeing*, *seen*) and often it gets by with just three (*hit*, *hits*, *hitting*). Instead of using loads of different verb forms, we use just a few forms but employ them in loads of ways. We need just five inflections to deal with the act of propelling a car—*drive*, *drives*, *drove*, *driving*, and *driven*—yet with these we can express quite complex and subtle variations of tense: “I drive to work every day,” “I have been driving since I was sixteen,” “I will have driven 20,000 miles by the end of this year.” This system, for all its ease of use, makes labeling difficult. According to any textbook, the present tense of the verb *drive* is *drive*. Every junior high school pupil knows that. Yet if we say, “I used to drive to work but now I don’t,” we are clearly using the present tense *drive* in a past tense sense. Equally if we say, “I will drive you to work tomorrow,” we are using it in a future sense. And if we say, “I would drive if I could afford to,” we are using it in a conditional sense. In fact, almost the only form of sentence in which we cannot use the present tense form of *drive* is, yes, the present tense. When we need to indicate an action going on right now, we must use the participial form *driving*. We don’t say, “I drive the car now,” but rather “I’m driving the car now.” Not to put too fine a point on it, the labels are largely meaningless.

2. We seldom stop to think about it, but some of the most basic concepts in English are naggingly difficult to define. What, for instance, is a sentence? Most dictionaries define it broadly as a group of words constituting a full thought and containing, at a minimum, a subject (basically a noun) and predicate (basically a verb). Yet if I inform you that I have just crashed your car and you reply, “What!” or “Where?” or “How!” you have clearly expressed a complete thought, uttered a