

Pronunciationforteachers.com/ Key Concepts

What Do We Know About Accent(s)?

When we talk to someone new, we immediately notice whether their speech is similar to ours. If their pronunciation is noticeably different, we are likely to say that they have an accent. Some people also know they have an accent, especially if they pronounce differently from what they consider “good” pronunciation. Accents are very noticeable, and listeners easily can easily hear differences between two native speakers. They can even identify nonnative accents when the speech is artificially masked so no words can be heard at all (Munro, Derwing & Burgess, 2010).

Accents refer to patterns of pronunciation, not to grammar or to vocabulary. Two people can speak with similar accents even if one uses double negatives and the other does not. Dialects are about differences in vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation within the same language. Accents are about the sounds and melody of the voice.

Accents are a good thing and provide social anchors in the world. Everyone has a native accent. If the accent is like others in a speech community, members of that community will not notice the accent, and may think or even say that they don’t have an accent. This is not true. Accents are our verbal signatures. Matsuda (1991, p. 1329) said that “Your accent carries the story of who you are – who first held you and talked to you...where you have lived...the language you know, your ethnicity...your class position: traces of your life and identity are woven into your pronunciation” (p. 1329).

What do we know about native accents?

1. Everyone has an accent.
2. Accents vary according to geographic regions.
3. Accents may also vary according to social groups within a region (e.g., by social class).
4. Linguistically speaking, no accent is better or clearer than another. You cannot have errors in your accent.
5. Socially, some accents are considered better and clearer than others. That is, people may think you have errors in your accent because it’s different from theirs.
6. Two accents may have a few or many differences in pronunciation, depending on how similar or different they are (e.g., Californian vs. Midwest English, and Australian vs. Midwest English).

What do we know about nonnative (foreign) accents?

1. Accents are not terribly important if they do not cause misunderstanding.
2. A foreign accent may be judged as close to what speakers of that language expect (“Oh, you have really good pronunciation!”) or not (“He has a really heavy/thick accent!”).
3. Adults learning a foreign language almost always will have a noticeable foreign accent. The pronunciation errors they make will be strongly influenced by patterns of their native language.
4. Some people who learn to speak a foreign language as adults may not have a noticeable accent. This may be because
 - a. They have strong connections to the social groups using the language (Lybeck, 2002)
 - b. They sound native in short-term social “performances” (going to a store) but not in longer-term speaking (Piller, 2002).
 - c. They may be exceptionally good foreign pronunciation learners (Bongaerts et al, 1997; Moyer, 2014)
 - d. They may have had more experience in using the language (Piske et al., 2001)
5. Children learning a foreign language around many native speakers are more likely to end up sounding like native speakers than adults. But this is never guaranteed. (Flege, et al., 1995)

Why are foreign accents important?

1. Listeners notice them. They also often comment on them. This can be annoying to the speakers.
2. Accents may make learners feel different and may cause social isolation, stigma (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010) and feelings of not being heard (Miller, 2003)
3. Some aspects of pronunciation in a foreign language may make people misunderstand what you intended.
4. Many differences do not cause misunderstanding. They are simply part of having a foreign accent and are not very important.

I’ve heard people talk about “accent reduction” – Is this important?

1. “Accent reduction” refers to the promised outcome of instruction that helps someone change normal pronunciation so that they sound like a speaker with a different pronunciation (for example, a speaker of New York English trying to sound Midwestern). “Accent reduction” or “Accent elimination” is therefore probably the wrong way to describe changes in accent. In reality, speakers hope to take on a new accent, “Accent addition”, by changing how people perceive them when they speak.

2. When talking about accent reduction, it's also important to distinguish between accent and intelligibility (understanding). It is possible and valuable to change pronunciation to improve intelligibility. But these important changes may still not change your overall accent. It doesn't take many differences for people to notice an accent, but only certain types of pronunciation differences cause problems for understanding.
3. Speakers can be highly intelligible and still speak with a very noticeable accent. (Munro & Derwing, 1995).
4. Reducing an accent is a false promise. Everyone has an accent, and we listen to many people with different accents all the time. We mostly understand each other despite differences.

Who should teach pronunciation in a foreign language?

1. Someone who has relevant professional training, such as someone carefully trained in pronunciation teaching for a foreign language or English as a second/foreign language (Derwing, 2013)
2. Such a teacher can be a native or nonnative speaker of the language. Most native speakers naturally have facility in pronouncing and may provide an excellent model. Nonnative speakers have learned to pronounce the foreign language and also can effectively teach pronunciation. Teachers, regardless of their status, native speaker or nonnative speaker, should have training in strategies to a) identify errors that interfere with understanding, and b) strategies for helping learners to make the necessary changes.

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