

## The myth of non-accent

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The poets were not alone in sanctioning myths, for long before the poets the states and the lawmakers had sanctioned them as a useful expedient . . . They needed to control the people by superstitious fears, and these cannot be aroused without myths and marvels.

Strabo (64 BC–AD 26), *Geographia*

### You've got one too

Myth is understood broadly as a story with general cultural significance. In the study of myth, veracity is secondary to the way in which a story symbolizes human experience more generally. What is particularly interesting is the way that myths are used to justify social order, and to encourage or coerce consensual participation in that order.<sup>1</sup>

In general, linguists think of standard language and its corollary, non-accent, as abstractions. And in fact, this is a logical connection, as is borne out by the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition: "[an abstraction is] the idea of something which has no independent existence; a thing which exists only in idea; something visionary." From this follows quite neatly Milroy and Milroy's suggestion that standard language should not be understood as any specific language, but as "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" (1985: 22–23).

For our purposes, it is useful to consider both *standard language* and *non-accent* as myths. It is only by doing so that we can come to understanding how the collective consciousness came to be. Myths are magical and powerful constructs; they can motivate social behavior and actions which would be otherwise contrary to logic or reason.

We have come a good way into this discussion without defining the term *accent*. Perhaps the reason for that is clear by now: in so far as linguists are concerned, the term has no technical or specific meaning. It is widely used by the public, however, in interesting ways.

In a more technical sense, *accent* is used to distinguish stress in words (The accent is on the second syllable in *baNAna*) or intonation in sentences ("That's ANOTHER fine mess you've gotten us into!"); it can be used as a diacritic, but this is most often done in conjunction with the writing of other languages. More generally, accent is a loose reference to a specific "way of speaking." There is no official or technical specification for what this might mean in linguistic terms, but there are two widely recognized elements to what serves to distinguish one variety of a language from another in the minds of speakers:

- 1 Prosodic features. The study of the phonology of a language includes consideration of intonation, or patterns of pitch contours. This includes stress patterns, both at the lexical and at the sentence level, but it also touches upon other factors such as tempo of speaking. For example, speakers of English tend to call languages or varieties of

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### L1 and L2 accents

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language which tend toward an upswing in stress at the end of words *lilting*, or *sing-song*, or some Romance languages rapid-fire. Currently in American English there is one very active point of variation having to do with stress, in a small set of words including *Thanksgiving*, *insurance*, *adult*, *cement*.

- 2 It seems that first syllable stress has been documented for these words in the South, while everywhere else in the country the stress is on the second syllable: *INsurance* (South) or *inSURance* (elsewhere). The first syllable variant has been showing up outside the South quite a lot over at least the past 20 years, which is when I started taking notes on it. The other words that follow this pattern in the South do not seem to be wandering North; my casual research has not uncovered use of *THANKSgiving*, *A-dult*, *CEment* or *UMbrella* on the West Coast, in the Midwest or on the East Coast.<sup>2</sup>
- 3 Segmental features. We acquire, as part of our first language, the sounds of the language which fall into two major categories: vowels and consonants. Each of these sounds exists in relation to one another in a phonological structure. In the discussion above, some speakers of U.S. English distinguish between the words *caught* and *cot*, while for others these are homonyms. This follows quite reasonably from the fact that there are many possible phonological systems for U.S. English.

### Perspective

Linguists have struggled to find an accurate definition of the word *accent*, and for the most part, given it up as a bad job. Generally *accent* can only be understood and defined if there is something to compare it with. You travel to a small town in Kansas, and (unless you are actually from that area), your accent will be seen as the differences between your speech and the local speech. Those differences can be examined and identified, so that a linguist might make a study of how your prosodic features and phonology mark you as someone from someplace else. The "someplace else" can be another state, country, or social group.

Those who work on accent as a phonetic and sociolinguistic phenomenon seem to have come to the conclusion that while this is true, it is also not important. That is, in the serious study of accent, the object is not what comes out of one person's mouth, but what the listeners hear and understand. Derwing and Monroe put it very simply: "From our perspective, listeners' judgments are the only meaningful window into accentedness and comprehensibility" (2009: 478).

And yet, it is important to distinguish between the two major kinds of accents: First Language (L1) and Second Language (L2).

### L1 and L2 accents

What we call L1 accent is really no more than what we have been discussing all along: structured variation in language. Most usually we use geography as the first line of demarcation: a Maine accent, a New Orleans accent, an Appalachian accent, a Utah accent. But there are also socially bound clusters of features which are superimposed on the geographic: Native American accents, Black accents, Jewish accents. Gender, race, ethnicity, income, religion – these and other social identities are often clearly marked by means of choice between linguistic variants.



L1 accent is, then, the native variety of U.S. English spoken: every native speaker of U.S. English has an L1 accent, no matter how unmarked or marked the person's language may seem to be. This includes people like Rachel Maddow, Steven Colbert, Bill Maher, Bill O'Reilly and Ann Coulter, broadcast news and commentary personalities who are generally thought to be speakers of \*SAE.

So where does accent end and dialect begin?<sup>3</sup> To be more specific: Why is Dutch considered a separate language from German, and Swiss German not? Why do people call the variety of English that many African Americans speak Black slang (or a Black accent or African American English) but call Cockney and Gullah dialects? Max Weinreich is widely quoted as pointing out that a language is a dialect with an army and a navy; I would like to add to that observation that a dialect is perhaps nothing more than a language that gets no respect. That is to say that *these questions are really about politics and history*. The features of the languages being discussed are secondary. However, if it is necessary to distinguish between accent and language variety on purely linguistic terms, then a rough division can be made as follows:

- Two varieties of a single language are distinguished by accent when differences are restricted primarily to phonology (prosodic and segmental features).
- If two varieties of a single language also differ in morphological structures, syntax, lexicon, and semantics, then they are different varieties, or dialects, of the same language.
- If two varieties of a common mother language differ in all these ways, and in addition have distinct literary histories, distinct orthographies, and/or geo-political boundaries, then they are generally called different languages.

Style or code shifting is a term reflecting the speaker's ability to switch between languages or language varieties dependent on a large number of factors. It is a complicated process, and one that has been studied intensively. For our purposes, however, it is enough to say that when a speaker is shifting between two varieties of one language which are closely related, it will sometimes be appropriate to speak of "accent" and sometimes of "variety." Thus it is useful to retain the term *accent* to talk about phonology, but it is important to remember that this is a fluid category.

L2 accent is very different. When a native speaker of a language other than English learns English, accent is used to refer to the breakthrough of native language phonology into the target language. Thus we might say that an individual has a Welsh accent, or a Tagalog accent, because the phonologies of those languages influence the learner's pronunciation of U.S. English, and any effort to block the L2 accent will be accomplished with differing degrees of success.

Thus far it has been put forward that:

- all spoken human language is necessarily and functionally variable;
- one of the functions of variation is to convey social, stylistic and geographic meaning;
- the majority of the emblematic work of variation is carried out below the level of consciousness.

Given these facts, what is non-accent? And given the fact that *accent* is just shorthand for variable language (which is in some ways a redundant term), what can a 'standard' U.S. English be, but an abstraction?

In spite of all the hard evidence that a homogenous, standardized possibility. This takes us back to the positive ramifications of a well-defined, appealing, so enticing, that we

Before we go on to ask how we must first deal more carefully with the standardized spoken language. Unfortunately, people will continue to

So, can you lose one accent? To answer this question, very simply, a linguist will jump in. What about a person with no accent at all? What about a person with British English without a New York accent? What about a person with her Brooklyn accent when

What does it mean to lose an accent for another, or adding a new pronunciation? Is it saying that a person sounds one way or another? Consider a man who applies for a job he wants to do

James Kahakua, a native of Hawaii, was refused promotion to a higher position in the U.S. Navy. He sued, and the court ruled in his favor. The court found that the Navy's policy of requiring a "standard" pronunciation of long and short vowels (and the judge) found that Mr. Kahakua shouldn't have to tolerate. (At <http://goo.gl/k12Bp>.)

Accent reduction specialists are not objective parties. Such a person who claims to be an accent reduction specialist is not an accent reduction specialist if the accent was wrong and inappropriate.

Answers for all of these questions are available. We begin with some generalizations.

- There is a finite set of potentials for human language which can be produced by the human vocal tract available to all human beings.
- Each language uses some, but not all, of these potentials.
- Sounds are organized into a system of other elements (phonemes) and a number of possible systems of possible sounds, but they are all around them.
- Children exposed to more than one language may acquire more than one

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In spite of all the hard evidence that all languages change, people steadfastly believe that a homogenous, standardized, one-size-fits-all language is not only desirable, it is truly a possibility. This takes us back to our opening science fiction scenario, in which the positive ramifications of a world in which we are all the same size and weight is so appealing, so enticing, that we overlook biological realities and the laws of physics.

Before we go on to ask how we are able to fool ourselves so thoroughly about language, we must first deal more carefully with the question of the mythical homogenous standardized spoken language. Until the impossibility of such a thing is established uncontroversially, people will continue to pine after it, and, worse, to pursue it.

So, can you lose one accent and replace it with another? A linguist's first impulse is to answer this question, very simply, no. It is not possible for an adult to substitute his native phonology (one accent) for another, consistently and in a permanent way.<sup>4</sup> But! The non-linguist will jump in. What about my Aunt Magda, who came here from the Ukraine and has no accent at all? What about Gwyneth Paltrow, who can switch from American English to British English without a moment's hesitation? And there's Joe's wife, who just gave up her Brooklyn accent when it caused her problems in medical school.

What does it mean to lose an accent? Are we talking about replacing one way of speaking for another, or adding a new phonology to a person's existing inventory? Are we demanding that a person sound one way for a brief period of time, or that he always sound that way? Consider a man who applies for a promotion and is told that his accent is too low-class for the job he wants to do.

James Kahakua, a native of Hawai'i, wanted to read prepared weather forecasts on the radio. He was refused promotion because his English marks him as a speaker of Hawai'ian Creole. When he sued, the radio station called an accent reduction specialist to testify on their behalf. The accent reduction specialist didn't mince words: Kahakua's English was deficient, wrong, unacceptable. Even given the demands of the job in question – rapid pronunciation of long and complex Native Hawai'ian language place names, the specialist (and the judge) found that Mr. Kahakua's bilingualism was a disadvantage the employer shouldn't have to tolerate. (A televised report on the Kahakua Title VII case can be seen at <http://goo.gl/k12Bp>.)

Accent reduction specialists like the one who testified in the Kahakua case are not objective parties. Such persons have a vested interest in the idea of *accent* and *standard*. If an accent reduction specialist could not convince the court that Mr. Kahakua's Hawai'ian accent was wrong and inappropriate, what would that mean for her career?

Answers for all of these questions require a closer understanding of language acquisition. We begin with some generalizations which are more linguistic facts of life:

- There is a finite set of potentially meaning-bearing sounds (vowels, consonants, tones) which can be produced by human vocal apparatus. The set in its entirety is universal, available to all human beings without physical handicap.
- Each language uses some, but not all, sounds available.
- Sounds are organized into systems, in which each element stands in relationship to the other elements (phonology). The same inventory of sounds can be organized into a number of possible systems. Children are born with the ability to produce the entire set of possible sounds, but eventually restrict themselves to the ones they hear used around them.
- Children exposed to more than one language during the language acquisition process may acquire more than one language, if the social conditioning factors are favorable.

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- At some time in adolescence, the ability to acquire language with the same ease as young children atrophies.<sup>5</sup>
- There are as yet poorly understood elements of cognition and perception which have to do with the degree of success with which an adult will manage to acquire a new phonology, or accent. In summary, the phenomenon that we call a foreign accent is a complex aspect of language that affects speakers and listeners in both perception and production and, consequently, in social interaction (Derwing and Munro 2005: 379).

These are very dry facts. Let's approach this in another way.

### The Sound House

First, think of all the sounds which can be produced by the human vocal apparatus as a set of building materials. The basic materials, vowels and consonants, are bricks. Other building materials (wood, mortar, plaster, stone) stand in for things like tone, vowel harmony, and length, which are part of the articulation of vowels and consonants, but provide another layer of meaning-bearing sound in many languages. Thus far, we are talking about phonetics: the production and perception of the full set of possible sounds.

Children are born with two things: a set of language blueprints wired into the brain, which gives them some intuitive understanding of very basic rules of language. They also have a set of tools which goes along with these blueprints.

Now think of the language acquisition process as a newborn who begins to build a Sound House. The Sound House is the "home" of the language, or what we have been calling accent – the phonology – of the child's native tongue. At birth the child is in the Sound House warehouse, where a full inventory of all possible materials is available to her. She looks at the Sound Houses built by her parents, her brothers and sisters, by other people around her, and she starts to pick out those materials, those bricks she sees they have used to build their Sound Houses. She may experiment with other bricks, with a bit of wood, but in the end she settles down to duplicating the Sound Houses she sees around her. She sets up her inventory of sounds in relationship to each other; she puts up walls, plans the space: she is constructing her phonology.

The blueprints tell her that she must have certain supporting structures; she does this. She wanders around in her parents' Sound Houses and sees how they do things. She makes mistakes; fixes them. In the process, she makes small innovations.

Maybe this child has parents who speak English and Gaelic, or who are natives of Cincinnati and speak what they think of as standard American English, as well as African American English Vernacular. The parents each have two Sound Houses, or perhaps one Sound House with two wings. She has two houses to build at once. Sometimes she mixes materials up, but then sorts them out. Maybe she builds a bridge between the two structures. Maybe a connecting courtyard.

The child starts to socialize with other children. Her best friend has a slightly different layout, although he has built his Sound House with the exact same inventory of building materials. Another friend has a Sound House which is missing the back staircase. She wants to be like her friends, and so she makes renovations to her Sound House. It begins to look somewhat different from her parents' Sound Houses; it is more her own. Maybe the Gaelic half of her Sound House is neglected, has a hole in the roof, a collapsing floor. Maybe she is at odds, because she loves her AAVE Sound House, but others criticize it as ugly and

not worthy to be called a house. She looks at the Sound House and pretends it never existed.

When the child turns 20, she meets other speakers, which she admires. She just like it. She looks for her best friend who stands on the street and looks at them? Look at that balcony. He

With her bare hands, she sees bricks she doesn't have. She sees a warehouse? She'll have to improve it. She examines the Sound House. She sees obvious things she sees right off. She looks at the doors, for example, slip doors. Did you build that chimney, slip doors? Of Spanish. I was a kid at the time.

If she's lucky, she has a guide. The difference between the extension and the guide will say. You're missing a kind of wall, ultramarine for terrace one.

"Oh," says the woman. The building will begin to differentiate materials which are distinctive in the language.

She works very, very hard. The balcony will not shape up; it is not. She notices it and grins.

In absolute amazement, she has with no effort at all, and it is perfect. She has her blueprints and tools, building the same extension. A Spanish Sound House looks like this.

"Oh no," her guide tells her. That the windows are slightly too small. She gives it away.

She digs in her heels and abandons her original English. She is getting this right. She rarely gives up. The Sound House is condemned. The first goes through the door into the Sound House is here, and it's still standing.

When people come to visit, they find out that it's not her first construction. They may notice very small details, but they tell her, he's been working on it. She gets it right.

This is not a perfect analogy for morphology, or the use or production of language. It is a useful analogy nonetheless.

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not worthy to be called a house at all. She might eventually abandon the AAVE Sound House and pretend it never existed. Now imagine this.

When the child turns 20, she notices another kind of Sound House, built by Spanish speakers, which she admires. She would like to build an extension to her own Sound House just like it. She looks for her blueprints and her tools, but they have disappeared. Puzzled, she stands on the street and looks at these Spanish Sound Houses. What is different about them? Look at that balcony. How do you build that? Why do the staircases look like that?

With her bare hands, she sets out to build an extension to her original Sound House. She sees bricks she doesn't have in her own inventory, but how to get back to the warehouse? She'll have to improvise. She's a smart woman, she can make a brick, cut down a tree. She examines the Sound Houses built by Spanish speakers, asks questions. The obvious things she sees right off: wow, they have fireplaces. The less obvious things: width of the doors, for example, slip right by her at first. She starts in on the long process. How did you build that chimney, she asks. I don't know, says her informant, a native speaker of Spanish. I was a kid at the time, and I've lost my blueprints.

If she's lucky, she has a guide – an informed language teacher – who can point out the difference between the extension she is trying to build and her own Sound House. Look, this guide will say. You're mixing up blue and ultramarine bricks! We use blue for this kind of wall, ultramarine for that. And you certainly can't put a pale pink brick next to a cerise one.

"Oh," says the woman building the new Sound House. "I hadn't noticed." And thus she will begin to differentiate more carefully, for example, between two very similar vowels which are distinctive in the language she is learning.

She works very, very hard on this extension. But no matter how hard she works, the balcony will not shape up; it is always rickety. There's a gap in the floor boards; people notice it and grin.

In absolute amazement, she watches her little sister build the exact same Sound House with no effort at all, and it is perfect. She points this out to her guide. "But your sister still has her blueprints and tools," says her guide. Then she sees a stranger, an older man, building the same extension and he is also taking less time, just galloping through. His Spanish Sound House looks like an original to her.

"Oh no," her guide tells her. "It's very good, no doubt, but look there – don't you see that the windows are slightly too close together? It would fool almost everybody, but those windows give it away."

She digs in her heels and moves into the extension, although the roof still leaks. She abandons her original English Sound House for months, for years, she is so dedicated to getting this right. She rarely goes back to the first Sound House anymore, and the Gaelic Sound House is condemned. When she does go back to the English Sound House, and first goes through the door it seems strange to her. But the structural heart of her Sound House is here, and it's still standing, if a little dusty. Very quickly she feels at home again.

When people come to visit her in her Spanish Sound House, they are amazed to find out that it's not her first construction. They examine everything closely. Some of them may notice very small details, but they don't say anything. There's the guy down the block, they tell her, he's been working on the same extension for longer than you and he'll never get it right.

This is not a perfect analogy; it has no way to account for the acquisition of syntax and morphology, or the use or production of language. A house cannot produce anything. But it is a useful analogy nonetheless, in as much as this limitation is recognized.

Adult language learners all have the same handicap in learning a second language: the blueprints have faded to near illegibility, and the tools are rusted. We must all build new Sound Houses with our bare hands. When the judge claimed that there was no physiological reason that James Kahakua could not speak the broadcast English the radio station demanded, he was simply wrong.<sup>6</sup>

It is crucial to point out that the structural integrity of the targeted second Sound House – which here stands in for accent – is distinct from the language learner's skill in actually using the target language. Accent has little to do with what is generally called communicative competence, or the ability to use and interpret language in a wide variety of contexts effectively.<sup>7</sup>

There is a long list of prominent persons who speak English as a second language and who never lost their accents. They never managed to build an English Sound House which would fool anybody into thinking that they are native speakers, but their ability to use English is clear. This group includes people like Isabel Allende, Derek Wolcott, Adriana Huffington, Arnold Schwarzenegger, the irritable John Simon, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, who represent the political and socio-cultural mainstream, but who do it in an accented English. Do people like these choose to speak English with an accent? Have they not worked hard enough, long enough to sound American? Are they not smart enough?

The same questions are relevant to native speakers of English with marked or stigmatized regional or social accents. When you think of Jimmy Carter, Jessie Jackson or Rosie O'Donnell, do we think of people who cannot express themselves? Whether you like or dislike them as individuals, they are all excellent communicators. Do they willfully refuse to give up Georgia, African American, or New York varieties of English for something less socially marked, or are they incapable of doing so?

Because two phonologies are similar, we think it must be easier to build a second Sound House. Why can't Mr. Kahakua – who after all has an English Sound House to begin with – just make a few adjustments that will transform it into what passes as a generic English Sound House? Stephen Moyer – a Brit born and raised – makes a very convincing Louisiana vampire on *True Blood*. Surely Mr. Kahakua could pull off sounding less Hawai'ian.

The answer is, actors can't automatically adopt a foreign accent, no matter how easy they make it look. In the filming process the camera rolls for short periods of time, and in a limited context. The actor has had coaching, most likely, from someone who is standing on the sidelines ready to pitch in if the actor's accent begins to disintegrate. If the actor gets it wrong, they stop and try again. Under these favorable circumstances, many people could imitate another variety of English quite admirably – but for others, not even this is possible.

There are many examples of actors criticized roundly for not pulling off an accent, in spite of expensive tutoring, and the possibility of many takes of each utterance. In either case, whether we have a very English Hugh Laurie who truly sounds – up on the screen – as if were a cranky doctor born and raised in the States (*Fox's House*), or Dominic West – born in Yorkshire – who tries but fails to convince us that he is a tough Baltimore homicide detective (HBO's *The Wire*), we are not talking about a permanent Sound House. These accents are fake store fronts that won't stand up to a strong and persistent breeze. And it takes an exceptional talent (a subject to be raised shortly) to achieve even this limited amount.

At a sociolinguistics conference some years ago, a colleague who studies the Northern Cities Chain Shift came to my presentation. Afterwards she said to me "You know, it was really fascinating to listen to you, – oh, and your talk was good too." The whole time I

had been presenting my work, notes to herself. When I was not much stayed put, but when I lost vowels started to move: the chance I participate in the shift; they move away from my background involved in my subject, when I forth: I am a native of Chicago pointed out to me by many not to anybody else) for a minute at

All this happens in spite of the way I use subtle choices available particularly want to announce in the Sound House I first created social being I am.

It is true, however, that some and fourth Sound Houses in addition differential ability to do this is substantial evidence indicates it has with how hard you work to learn have something to do with cog with an ear for language.

There are many published studies age (and hence, the critical language accented second language (Mar et al. 2001). The importance of L2), gender, formal instruction draw any firm conclusions. Per studied in controlled circumstances of possible links between music studies "have identified mimic accent" (Piske et al. 2001: 202).

Focused training – the procedure elements in the production of some effect. It is possible to adjust Sound House, with guidance. But for the original. Accent reduction trained in phonology and phon the languages, may help people pronunciation.

The true ability to build second stage is undocumented. It may who as adults acquire another person who is capable of this work with their second language, require emotion brought to the table. S phonetic analysis of her language speakers, who are incredibly serious





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had been presenting my work, she had been listening closely to my vowels, and making notes to herself. When I was reading from prepared text, she told me, my vowels pretty much stayed put, but when I looked up from my papers and spoke extemporaneously, my vowels started to move: the chain shift in action. The more attention I pay to speech, the less I participate in the shift; this is an indication that some part of me feels compelled to move away from my background when I am speaking as an academic. But when I am involved in my subject, when I forget to monitor my speech carefully, my origins come forth: I am a native of Chicago, and I cannot pretend to be anything else. This has been pointed out to me by many non-linguists; people are proud to be able to listen to me (or to anybody else) for a minute and then put me on the map.

All this happens in spite of the fact that my professional training has made me aware of the way I use subtle choices available to me, and in spite of the fact that sometimes I don't particularly want to announce to the world where I am from. I have no choice but to live in the Sound House I first created as a child, which bears the structural hallmarks of the social being I am.

It is true, however, that some people are better at putting together second or even third and fourth Sound Houses in adulthood. Not perfect ones, but very good imitations. The differential ability to do this is something not very well understood, but strong circumstantial evidence indicates it has nothing to do with intelligence and not very much to do with how hard you work to learn the target language. On the other hand, it certainly does have something to do with cognition, and – for lack of a better or more precise term – with an ear for language.

There are many published studies which underscore the relevance and importance of age (and hence, the critical language period) to the successful learning of a natively-accented second language (Marx 2002; Munro *et al.* 2008; Munro and Mann 2005; Piske *et al.* 2001). The importance of other factors – length of residency (that is, exposure to L2), gender, formal instruction, and motivation – have not been sufficiently studied to draw any firm conclusions. Perhaps the most interesting factor is one that can hardly be studied in controlled circumstances, and that is what might be called talent. Early studies of possible links between musical ability have not established a connection, while other studies "have identified mimicry ability as a significant predictor of degree of L2 foreign accent" (Piske *et al.* 2001: 202).

Focused training – the process of drawing the adult language learner's attention to elements in the production of speech sounds she would not otherwise notice – can have some effect. It is possible to adjust an accent, to some degree. We can work on that second Sound House, with guidance. But it is not possible to substitute the second Sound House for the original. Accent reduction courses, if they are well done by persons thoroughly trained in phonology and phonetics, who understand the structural differences between the languages, may help people learning English as a second language toward a better pronunciation.

The true ability to build second and third Sound Houses past the language acquisition stage is undocumented. It may exist; there are certainly rumors enough of such persons, who as adults acquire another language with absolute and complete native fluency. A person who is capable of this would never let the phonology of their first language interfere with their second language, regardless of the topic being discussed, or the amount of emotion brought to the table. Such a person would have to be able to stand up to close phonetic analysis of her language – and not just by phoneticians, but also by native speakers, who are incredibly sensitive to the subtle variation in language. Perhaps most



important, such a person would have to have complete control of the structured variation active in the target language.

To understand the importance of this, imagine yourself in another country, speaking a language you have studied in school for a number of years. Not only do you have to keep the subjunctive straight, for example, but you should be able to interpret tone of voice and lexical choice. If you can't interpret such language signals, you have no way of knowing if you are being taken seriously, or for a ride.

If there are adults who are capable of learning to absolutely and cleanly substitute one accent for another, they are as rare as individuals who can do long division instantaneously in their heads, or have photographic memories. If they do exist, it would be interesting and important to study them, because it would seem that these are adults whose language acquisition function – the hard wiring in the brain – failed to stop functioning at the usual time.

If a person is very dedicated, works hard, and has good guidance, it may be possible to fool some of the people some of the time. But there's a crucial question that hasn't been asked yet:

Who do we ask to jump through these hoops, and why? If \*SAE is something logically and reasonably required of broadcast news reporters, why was it required of James Kahakua, and not of Peter Jennings (Canada) or Dan Rathers (Texas)?

And, a more difficult question: what is right or wrong about asking Mr. Kahakua to pretend? If he is capable of faking an accent, why shouldn't his employer ask him to do this, for those few minutes he is reading the weather on the radio?

A close and cynical reader of my arguments – of which there will be many – will point out that I have made two statements which seem to contradict each other. I have gone to some length to establish that all spoken language is variable, and that all languages change. Thus, the Sound Houses we build change over our lifetimes. At the same time, it seems that I am arguing that Sound Houses cannot be changed. I have been critical of speech therapists who claim this is possible.

A Sound House is a living, evolving product of our minds, a mirror of our changing social beings. We redecorate constantly, with a keen eye for what the neighbors are doing. Little by little, we may move a wall, rearrange the bricks, add windows. One person builds a patio, and maybe that catches on, in the same way that somewhere, one day (in a way sociolinguists have never been able to observe) hundreds of other changes caught on and began to gain linguistic and social currency.

We are all subject to the aging process; no one is exempt from those changes over time. Thus our Sound Houses do change over time but in ways which are outside direct control.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

- What does the idea of style shifting do to the Sound House analogy? Many people are bilingual or multilingual, and for each language they also have multiple styles. Is there a way to adapt the metaphor to account for this, or does it simply break down?
- How many prominent people (politicians, actors, policy-makers, educators, media personalities, etc.) can you think of who speak English with an L2 accent? What impact does a foreign accent seem to have on the individual's life?

- Interview some friends or family members about how they feel about different accents. What do they agree? What do they disagree? What other one finds it "unsophisticated" or lack of differences?
- What accents do you hear in your daily life? How did you react to this way of speaking? Do you have any insight into why you reacted that way?
- Think about this statement: "The way we speak is a reflection of the way we think." Do you agree? Relate to the topic at hand.
- Do an internet search for "accent" and "advertisements" and see what you find. Do you see any patterns?

### Notes

- 1 The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "fictitious narratives which are based on fact" (The Legend of Hercules, the story of the Trojan War, etc.)
- 2 For a longer, very interesting discussion of the concept of "dialect" see <http://goo.gl/sYOju>.
- 3 Dialect is a term which linguists use to refer to a variety of language which is subordinate to a "real" language. It is, however, a word which is used in a way which is subordinate to a "real" language and for that reason I avoid the term *variety*.
- 4 For a very accessible overview of the critical phase hypothesis, see Pinker (2000).
- 5 There is controversy about the critical period hypothesis and others have proposed "Heaven," Pinker summarizes.

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- Interview some friends or family – a group of three or four people – and try to elicit how they feel about different varieties of English and different L2 accents. Take notes. On what do they agree? Where do they differ? (One might find accent x "friendly" while the other one finds it "unsophisticated," for example.) Can you account for the differences, or lack of differences? What surprised you?
- What accents do you personally dislike or find irritating? Describe a situation in which you reacted this way to a variety of English other than your own. After reading this far, do you have any insight into your own reactions?
- Think about this statement: Discrimination does not justify discrimination. How might this relate to the topic at hand?
- Do an internet search for "accent reduction" and "lose your accent." What kind of articles and advertisements come up? What credentials do the people offering these courses have? Do you see any patterns?

## Notes

- 1 The *Oxford English Dictionary* divides the use of myth into three domains: (1) purely fictitious narratives which serve to illustrate and explain natural or social phenomena (The Legend of Hercules; Noah and the Ark); (2) fictional or imaginary persons, objects or places (Big Foot, Santa Claus, Shangri-La); and (3) untruths, or rumors.
- 2 For a longer, very interesting discussion about *THANKSgiving*, see Language Log at <http://goo.gl/sYOju>.
- 3 Dialect is a term which linguists use primarily to talk about language differences over geographic space. It is, however, a fairly prickly term. Laypersons often associate the word dialect as something less developed, capable, or worthy, and hence always subordinate to a "real" language. This is an unfortunate and miscast use of the term and for that reason I avoid dialect more generally and use, as many linguists do, the term *variety*.
- 4 For a very accessible overview of the research on second language acquisition, the critical phase hypothesis, and the issue of accent, see Hyldenstam and Abrahamson (2000).
- 5 There is controversy among linguists about what has been called the critical period or the critical period hypothesis (CPH). Some linguists dismiss the concept entirely, and others have proposed amendments. In his chapter "Baby Born Talking – Describes Heaven," Pinker summarizes the view of the majority of linguists:

In sum, acquisition of a normal language is guaranteed for children up to the age of six, is steadily compromised from then until shortly after puberty, and is rare thereafter. Maturational changes in the brain, such as the decline in metabolic rate and number of neurons during the early school-age years, and the bottoming out of the number of synapses and metabolic rate around puberty, are plausible causes. We do know that the language-learning circuitry of the brain is more plastic in childhood; children learn or recover language when the left hemisphere of the brain is damaged or even surgically removed (though not quite at normal levels), but comparable damage in an adult usually leads to permanent aphasia.

(2007: 293)