WHAT'S IN AN ACCENT?

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Abstract: People move around more than ever before and every single day a person hears more foreign accents than at any time in human history. It is an irrefutable fact that regardless of where we come from, regardless of how we sound – whether we like it or not – we all have an accent. As soon as a word comes out of our mouth, people start making assumptions about our background, about our education etc. There are people who hang on to their regional and national accents as a source of pride and identity and have no desire to get rid of their accents. Yet, there are people who try to distance themselves from their origins and, in an attempt to avoid discrimination, go to a voice coach in order to learn how to speak without an accent. The question that arises is the following: Is it ok to get rid of your accent? What's left once you get rid of your accent?

Keywords: accent, identity, pronunciation, voice coach, discrimination

"I can do one accent – my own. I can make it louder or quieter. That is the sum total of my vocal range.'
(John Oliver, British comedian, writer, producer)

Paraphrasing Shakespeare's famous words '*What's in a name…*', the idea of this article came to me while watching a short video that was broadcasted on BBC4 on the 24th of September 2017, entitled 'Accents Speak Louder than Words'. It presents the story of Kasha, a Polish woman who moved to the UK 27 years ago, and feels that she is being discriminated because of her accent, especially after moving to a more insular part of the country. In order to sound less like a foreigner and more like a native speaker, she seeks the help of a voice coach or elocution teacher. All in all, it is a story of multicultural Britain, of immigrants' struggle to fit in and be accepted in a country they chose as their home. But it got me thinking about accents and pronunciation, about the importance we attach to how we say things, about identity and the strange need to get rid of what actually defines us as humans and about the prejudices we all have about accents.

It is an irrefutable fact that regardless of where we come from, regardless of how we sound – whether we like it or not – we all have an accent. But what is an accent? Cambridge English dictionary defines accent as '*the way in which people in a particular area, country or social group, pronounce words*[1].' According to Linda James and Olga Smith '*an accent identifies which part of the country or of the world you come from.*'[2]

How we say something is, more often than not, as important as what we say. As soon as a word comes out of our mouth, people start making assumptions about our background, about our education etc. For example, a person with an American accent is thought to be rich, while someone with a French accent will be thought well-educated. In the UK, accents and pronunciation represent the perfect tool for locating people both from a geographical and a social point of view. As Kate Fox puts it '… *one cannot talk at all without immediately revealing one's own social class.* '[3] Apparently the English have long been aware of the

[1] http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/accent - accessed on 19.10.2017
[2] James, Lida and Olga Smith. 2007. *Get Rid of Your Accent*. London: Business and Technical Communication Services, p. 1
[3] Fox, Kate. 2004. *Watching the English*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, p. 73

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importance of accents, since most quotations on the topic are English: Ben Johnson – 'Language most shows a man. Speak that I may see thee.', G.B. Shaw – 'It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate him or despise him.' etc.[4]

But where do these accents come from? As we grow up, we learn to speak by imitating the people around us, therefore the environment has a key role in shaping our accent from early childhood. It is a well-known fact that children up to the age of 10 have the ability to learn any language perfectly, provided they are surrounded by that language, regardless of where they were born or what language their parents speak. After that age, the ability to imitate sounds diminishes, and we all known, as adults, how difficult it is to learn a foreign language and master its pronunciation.

In speaking, we use our speech organs, i.e. the lips, the tongue, the palate, the jaws etc. The position of these speech organs is different for the pronunciation of different sounds. What actually prevents us – after the age of 10 – from picking up the characteristic sounds of a different language is actually our native language. The habits of our native language have become so strong, that it's often quite difficult to break them. In other words, 'our native language shapes the way we categorize the sound space.'[5] Speakers of English as a second language often start learning the language in school, which means that most likely they will not position their speech organs like native speakers of English would, their positioning of the speech organs and consequently their pronunciation of the English sounds being clearly influenced by their first language. What's more, not all English sounds are present in their native language. For instance, Romanians find it difficult to pronounce the sounds /ð/ or /θ/ and have the tendency to replace them with /d/ or /t/ since Romanian has no apico-inter-dental sounds. "Learning a novel language typically requires acquiring a new manner of carving the sound space, independent of our first language—a task that most language learners find difficult. Native language categories often continue to interfere with the to-be-acquired sound patterns, leading to deviations in second language learners' pronunciations of words relative to the native standard.'[6] In a nutshell, speakers transfer the sounds, the peculiarities and the pronunciation rules from their native language to the second language.

There are people who take pride in the region they come from, and have no desire to get rid of their local and personal identity by trying to get rid of their accents. Others, like Kasha from the above-mentioned video, try to distance themselves from their origins and in an attempt to avoid discrimination go to a voice coach in order to learn how to speak without an accent. The question that arises is the following: Is it ok to get rid of your accent? What's left once you get rid of your accent? And what does a person without an accent sound like?

In my opinion, one cannot speak English – or any other language for that matter - without an accent; there are as many different kinds of English as there are speakers of it, because no two people speak alike. Can you imagine someone speaking without an accent? Kasha herself eventually concedes "*I possibly will always speak with an accent*." (9:45)

Kasha speaks English with a Polish accent, but her English is totally intelligible. The most important aspect when speaking English – or any other foreign language - is clarity and intelligibility, regardless of one's accent. The problem, as far as I am concerned – is not her English, but the attitude of people around her. Our own personal prejudices – i.e. unfair and unreasonable opinions arrived at without consideration of evidences - and attitudes to other accents are shaped by the following subjective variables:

[4] *ibidem*
[5] Kuhl, P. K., Conboy, B. T., Coffey-Corina, S., Padden, D., Rivera-Gaxiola, M., & Nelson, T. (2008). *Phonetic learning as a pathway to language: New data and native language magnet theory expanded* (NLM-e). Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences, 363(1493), 979–1000.
[6] *ibidem*

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- the sound of the respective language: whether it is a melodious one, containing lots of vowels and voiced consonants, or a harsh one, full of consonant clusters
- our personal relationship with that language: whether it is from the same language family as our native language, or whether we speak that language etc.
- our personal attitude towards the culture and society where the respective language is spoken

What's more, scientists have discovered that our attitude to or our prejudice against foreign accents may start with the way in which our brain processes foreign accents. To start with, if you are not used to the accent or if it is not intelligible, it is automatically harder to communicate with that person; some sounds may not be pronounced properly, stress may not fall on the right syllable, sentences tend to be longer, many pauses may occur etc. This perceptual difficulty may have a direct effect on the way in which non-native speakers are perceived.

Shiri Levi-Ari is a psycholinguist at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, whose research area covers the way in which social environment influences a person's linguistic skills and language use and vice-versa. In one of her studies[7], she claims that 'We're less likely to believe something, if it's said with a foreign accent', such negative judgements being the result of the additional effort made by our brain to process foreign accent. As a result, people have the tendency to shift the blame for this additional effort on the veracity of the speaker.

In another article[8] she points out another prejudicial judgement we have when it comes to foreign accents. It seems that native speakers remember less accurately what non-native speakers say, because they automatically assume that non-native speakers are not very proficient.

But it would be too easy to put the blame for our attitudes and prejudices against foreign accents on our cognitive behaviour and conclude that the cognitive efforts imposed by accented speech lead to social discrimination. After all, as Lev-Ari points out in the above-mentioned article, the more we are exposed to foreign accents, the more our brains will train in understanding the respective speech.

Prejudices about regional and overseas accents continue to exist and speakers with foreign accents are likely to face discrimination even in countries with a diverse population and a long immigrant history. But these prejudices need to be fought against, both by us as individuals, and as members of a society. It is true that we all carry around a 'bag' of prejudices about accents, but these prejudices are likely to change and should change over time. The English should come to terms with the fact that English is no longer theirs, it is no longer the property of the native speakers; it is a lingua franca, and consequently there is no good or perfect accent for all circumstances. Teachers and voice coaches should encourage non-native speakers to maintain their accent, unless it impedes communication, focusing on intelligibility rather than accent reduction. People should be encouraged to speak in a way that best reflects who they are and should accept people around them for who they are, regardless of their accent.

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