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## ACCENT WITHOUT ATTITUDE

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**“Governor Clinton, you attended Oxford University in England and Yale Law School in the Ivy League, two of the finest institutions of learning in the world. So, how come you still talk like a hillbilly?”**

The then Governor of Arkansas Bill Clinton was asked that question by a news reporter in Chicago during his 1992 presidential campaign. The reporter was referring to the fact that Clinton hails from the South and speaks with a “Southern” accent. Underlying the reporter’s question was the assumption that education—particularly education associated with universities of international repute—should be of help in getting rid of one’s “undesirable” native accent.

## ACCENT THERAPY?

I was reminded of that episode recently when I received a flier from the SJSU Center for Communicative Disorders. The flier said that the Center “is proud to announce” an “Accent Modification Clinic.” It invites “SJSU faculty, Staff and Students who would like to modify their accent or who are having difficulty being understood” to participate in 50-minute therapy sessions conducted twice weekly for approximately three months. Coming, as it does, from the Center for Communicative Disorders, armed with “therapy” sessions, I wondered whether accent is being treated as a communicative disorder. I speak with an Indian, or more precisely Tamil, accent because my mother tongue is Tamil. I never thought of my native accent as a communicative disorder any more than I thought of my skin color as a physical disorder. My accent, like my skin color, is a part of who I am. A part of my identity. Therefore, to seek to modify my accent is to seek to modify my identity!

## WHAT IS AN ACCENT?

An accent simply refers to one’s way of speaking, the way one sounds when speaking, the way one uses phonological features such as stress, rhythm, tone and intonation. Contrary to popular belief, it is not just foreigners or immigrants who speak with an accent. Everybody speaks with an accent. Non-accent is non-existent. For instance, those who speak English as their mother tongue speak it with an accent that can be traced to the geographic region and/or the social class they belong to. Thus, there are people who speak English with an American accent, an Australian accent, or a British accent. In fact, there are variations within these broad categories. That is, there are people who speak American English with a Boston accent, a New York accent, a Southern accent or an African-American accent. Similarly, non-native speakers of English speak it with an accent that can be traced to their first

language. That is how we know people who speak English with an Indian accent, German accent, Hispanic accent, etc.

## NEUROPLASTICITY AND LATERALIZATION

According to psycholinguists, what kind of an accent one acquires is determined by the sound system of the language one is exposed to during one's childhood. They maintain that there is a "critical period" for language acquisition. It corresponds roughly to the first decade of one's life. During this period, the language learning circuitry of the human brain is very flexible. This flexibility of the brain is called "neuroplasticity." Approximately around the age of ten, the brain begins to lose its neuroplasticity. As Pinker (1995:293) observes, "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." The loss of neuroplasticity is confounded by lateralization, a maturational process in which the complex cognitive activity of language development is lateralized to the left hemisphere of the brain. This process too has a serious impact on language acquisition.

The natural biological processes of the loss of neuroplasticity and the onset of lateralization appear to occur almost at the same time—around puberty. Interestingly, it is during this time that the innate ability to acquire language(s) declines considerably. As Scovel (1988:61) points out, "the emergence of foreign accents arises at the same time that lateralization of cognitive, linguistic, and perceptual functions appears to be completed in the human brain, the same time that neuroplasticity appears to terminate." This explains why children are considered biologically predisposed to be better language learners than adults.

One can learn to speak a second language without any trace of first language system if and only if one learns it during one's childhood. Those who learn a second language after that will retain traces of their first language system in their second language use. This is particularly true of phonological acquisition, because, as Scovel (1988:101) asserts, "phonological production is the only aspect of language performance that has a neuromuscular basis." He declares emphatically that "no adult can learn a language after puberty without some trace of a foreign accent" (p. 178). It is, of course, possible for adult learners of a second language to reach a high level of competence in morphological (word forms), lexical (vocabulary) and syntactic (grammar) production but not in phonological production for the simple reason that, unlike other language skills, phonological production involves neuromuscular pitch movement. As Jenkins (2000:108) points out, neuromuscular pitch movement "is the earliest speech feature experienced in all first languages, probably from as early as 26 weeks *in utero*."

## INTELLIGIBILITY AND ACCENT

There is a common tendency to conflate intelligibility and accent. While the two are related, they are not the same. Intelligibility is about being understood by an individual or a group of individuals at a given time in a given communicative context. The context in which a conversation takes place plays an extremely important role in intelligibility. Undoubtedly, we all should learn to speak a language in such a way that we are intelligible to others. But intelligibility is assured with correct pronunciation and clear articulation. Those who pronounce correctly and articulate clearly still speak with an accent. Who can say Bill Clinton's speech is not intelligible

although he talks “like a hillbilly?” Who can say Henry Kissinger’s speech is not intelligible although he speaks with a thick German accent?

## **STANDARD ENGLISH AND STANDARD ACCENT**

Yet another distinction that is normally not maintained in common discourse is the distinction between Standard English and standard accent. As Jenkins (2000:203) observes, “Standard English can be spoken with any regional accent.” She further points out that neither RP (Received Pronunciation which is supposed to be the “Standard” English in Britain) nor GA (General American which is supposed to be the “Standard” in the USA) “represents a monochrome accent” (p. 203). After detailed phonological analyses of different varieties of English, Jenkins concludes that “accent variation is the rule and conformity the exception” (p. 206).

## **ACCENT AND DISCRIMINATION**

In spite of widespread accent variation, discrimination based on accent “can be found everywhere in our daily lives” (Lippi-Green, 1997:73). Lippi-Green has documented how, in the USA, people with foreign accents have even been denied employment. Pointing out that accent acts in part as a marker of race, she maintains that not all foreign accents evoke negative reactions. According to her research, African-American and Asian-American accents are ridiculed while British or French accents are respected. Recognizing, quite rightly, that celebration of diversity does not facilitate a monophonic community in which everybody sounds exactly the way everybody else does, the SJSU Academic Senate passed a policy resolution (S01-13) in the year 2001 recommending that diversity be viewed broadly to include accent as well.

## **ACCENT "REDUCTION" IN 30 DAYS**

Without realizing that accent has biological foundations, individuals and institutions go to a great length to “reduce accent”. There are commercial agencies that put out newspaper ads promising accent reduction in 30 days— just as there are TV ads that tell people how to get rid of their unwanted cellulite! A newspaper recently reported that some anxious parents in South Korea are flocking to plastic surgery clinics to have a surgical procedure called *frenectomy* done to their children’s tongue in order to get it longer and more flexible. They believe that such a procedure will make the tongue easily touch the roof of the mouth so that their children can speak English “without a Korean accent” (Demick, 2002).

Regardless of sustained effort and systematic training (or even surgical procedures), it is not easy to change one’s accent picked up during one’s childhood. People with extraordinary histrionic talent can learn to change their accent temporarily, as movie stars and stand-up comedians do, but even they can fool only some of the people some of the time. While there are several ways in which one should try to make oneself understood, reducing one’s native accent is certainly not one of them. Besides, as Daniels (1995, cited in Jenkins, 2000) suggests, in retaining “the sounds, the rhythms and the intonation of our mother tongue,” we avoid cutting “the umbilical cord which ties us to our mother.”

Source materials:

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