

Mini lecture

I have an accent (why) does it matter?

Dr Zsuzsanna Bárkányi, Kati, male voice:

Dr Zsuzsanna: Have you ever thought about why people have accents and what impact it might have on their lives? Let's listen to my friend's Kati's story – not her real name.

Kati's voice: When I moved to London in 2017, I was quite confident that I could find a good job as I had worked for a big multinational company for many years by then in several Central European countries. I quickly found something that seemed to be a perfect fit. I thought the interview went very well, but I wasn't chosen and the only feedback I got was that my presentation skills were not up to the position. It was quite surprising since English was the working language in my previous roles, and I never had any communication problems. Of course, it was non-native speakers with non-native speakers.

Dr Zsuzsanna: Commenting on lack of presentation skills was a way to conceal discrimination about her accent. You might think that this type of discrimination when someone is deemed to lack presentation skills because of their accent can only happen to people with foreign accents, but this is not the case. You might remember that sports presenter Alex Scott was accused of spoiling Olympics coverage with her accent. Alex is proud of her East London accent and working-class background, but Lord Digby Jones at the time tweeted:

Male voice: "Enough! I can't stand it any more! Alex Scott spoils a good presentational job on the BBC Olympics Team with her very noticeable inability to pronounce her 'g's at the end of a word."

Dr Zsuzsanna: We know that women are judged more because of their accent, the way they pronounce, their language use, and women of colour even more. Discriminatory or unjust treatment based on a person's accent or language use is called accentism. This is a fairly new concept and there is a growing interest and awareness in the society around accentism. Nowadays, people are a bit more willing to come forward with their stories of bullying, unfair treatment and being stereotyped because of the way they speak. However, while race, religion, gender identity or sexual orientation are protected characteristics in the UK, accent is not.

But what is a foreign accent, and can we do anything about it?

The short answer to the latter is yes and no at the same time. Foreign accent is generally defined as **“a deviation from ‘target-like’ speech”**. Although it is not easy to say what exactly target-like speech is. Or some would say **“oral outputs that most native speakers deem ‘unnatural’”**. But can we do anything about it? To some extent. We might be aware of our accent, so it is not completely unnoticed and unconscious, but we might not be aware of all the features that make up our accent. For example, it is difficult if not impossible for us to hear sounds or contrasts between sounds that don't exist in our native language or the languages, we learned early in life. My mother tongue, for instance, does not distinguish between the English /e/ as in the word **bet** and the English /æ/ sound as in **bat**; only one vowel sound /E/. (Excuse my pronunciation.) If I hear a new word that I don't know I cannot distinguish the two. This inability to hear or clearly distinguish contrastive sounds is called **phonological deafness**. And if I can't hear a sound, I won't be able to pronounce it correctly and it might cause confusion in a communication situation, or it can even make my speech unintelligible. Just imagine a non-native speaker whose p's -as in **pet**- sound to the English ear as a b -as in **bet**- and they want to “pitch an idea”. So, if you are a language learner, getting feedback on your pronunciation can really help you speak more fluidly. Nonetheless, for most of us to completely get rid of our accent is not possible. And, honestly, consciously or unconsciously, we often don't want to do it either.

Pronunciation is the language subskill that is most linked to identity. Of course, as a language learner you need to develop a “second self” in your target language, but for most of us, this second self still must have links to our native-language speaking self. This means that if you completely changed your pronunciation and the way you speak, you might feel that you are pretending to be someone else. Speakers of regional accents might have this same feeling. Even if they are aware that speaking with a BBC English pronunciation can give them advantages in life or on the job market because it is the prestige dialect in the UK, and thus they might come across as smarter – of course, it doesn't actually make someone smarter.

However, not using their native accents, might make them feel that they are betraying their family and childhood friends.

Something we can start doing as listeners is to embrace that people have different accents, and that this can be an important part of their identity; we can remind ourselves that **accentism is a form of discrimination**; and we can develop tolerance towards a certain amount of ambiguity or lack of understanding in others' speech.