In this presentation we are going to tell you about a recent trend sweeping not only the world of foreign language speakers, but one affecting native English speakers as well. This trend is called accent reduction therapy and it focuses on reducing or eliminating a speaker’s accent. Millions of people worldwide are going through this painstaking process with varying goals in mind.

Today we’ll tell you about what an accent is, the different kinds of accents, the possible reasons people would want to undergo accent reduction therapy and the process of how it’s carried out.
“I have traveled more than anyone else, and I have noticed that even the angels speak English with an accent.”
- Mark Twain
Before we explain what accent reduction is to you, it would be helpful to know what an accent is exactly.

“An accent is the unique way that speech is pronounced by a group of people speaking the same language.”

This is a really good quote, I think, but you’re probably first inclined to think this definition means something closer to dialect. Dialects are actually a form of accents, but they are not the only kind of accent. We’ll cover the different kinds of accents in a moment.

For now, let’s look at the Miriam-Webster definition of accent: “An individual's distinctive or characteristic inflection, tone, or choice of words.” By this definition, it does not mean that there is a “correct” accent, but only that there are variations in the way of speaking languages. In reality, the “correct” accent for any language is completely subjective. However, despite this, many people are very conscious of their accent when thrown into a group of people who speak differently.
There are two kinds of accents, regional and foreign. Regional accents include the different variations amongst a language in one’s home country. They’re also referred to as dialects. In America, we have several for the different regions of America, and they’ve all developed because of different histories in diversity amongst areas. For example, in New Orleans, their dialect is a distinct blend of the French, Spanish, and African American cultures that formed there.

The second kind of accent is a foreign accent. These come to us from foreign countries, and there are as many foreign accents as there are countries in the world. When you consider that each foreign accent also has a multitude of dialects within its own country, that’s a lot of different ways to be speaking. Thus, there are so many different ways English could be pronounced by native speakers.
Now we’re going to play for you a few different dialects of America. On your paper we’d like you to write down a.) which area you think the speaker comes from and b.) what sort of impression you would get from this person if you heard them speaking.

This paragraph they’re going to read was developed by a research team in George Mason University’s linguistics department and includes virtually all of the sounds of the English language. It has been used in many linguistic studies. Please listen carefully.

- Brooklyn
- Arkansas
- Boston
- Chicago
Now that you know what kinds of accents there are, what sort of people do you think would want to change their accent? Only foreign speakers and ESL learners? Not necessarily. People with a strong dialect also often want to change their accents because of the negative stigma associated with regional dialects. Often people with strong southern accents are perceived to be “slow” and people with heavy New York accents are seen as pushy.

Native English speakers are joining foreign students in accent therapy classes now because of this. They share a common goal – wanting to improve their chances in the professional field. Clear communication skills are a must in today’s competitive market and if accents hold people back, they seem eager to change them as quickly as possible. In another job field, actors often also need to adopt foreign accents for movies. Consider Mel Gibson’s need for an accent in *Braveheart*. There is much motivation for people to want to reduce or eliminate inhibiting accents.
“Everyone seemed to be doing well except me and my career. And my accent was not helping me any.”

- Desi Arnaz
With such a diverse group of people and a diverse group of accents, why would anyone want to change? Wouldn’t keeping the differences make the language more interesting? The final straw comes down to one thing: Intelligibility.

Accents reflect the unique characteristics and background of a person. Many people take great pride in their accents. However, some people may encounter difficulties communicating because of their accent. Some people find their accents to be inhibiting their speech, which in turn causes them frustration at not being understood by native speakers or other foreign speakers using the same language. This could affect the self-esteem of the speaker and cause a variety of other problems.

Accents are a natural part of spoken languages. It is important to realize that no accent is better than another. It should also be stressed that accents are NOT a speech or language disorder. However, many times in the professional field people are denied advancement opportunities because of an accent, being told they need to improve communication skills. It's when an accent affects intelligibility that many people turn to accent reduction therapy.
Paying for accent reduction is not an easy task; it’s in fact a very pricey process. Each lesson can easily go over $100, and many times the classes last for six months or more. Employers say it’s worth it to shell out $5,000 or more on employee training. They believe the financial gains from the employee will outweigh the costs of lessons.

There are many speech pathologists in the industry; according to the American Speech-Hearing-Language Association, there are 1,578 nationwide specializing in accent reduction with approximately 25 in Oregon, and 37 in Washington.

The need for this procedure is growing rapidly; for example in Oregon in 2001, 12.1% of households were reported to have a language other than English as their first language. This is a big jump from 6.7% in the 1990 census.

What sort of people are those who want to take accent reduction therapy? Many different minorities are flooding certain job fields, and their employers are wanting them to reduce foreign accents. Such groups include Chinese people in the science and pharmaceutical fields, Asians in law firms, and in Los Angeles many Hispanics can be found in the manufacturing field.
What are some other major reasons people want to undergo accent reduction therapy? To put it simply – Money. Right now America is outsourcing a lot of jobs, in the technology field especially, to places such as India.

India is the most sought-after destination for companies in the US and Europe for outsourcing their call handling, customer support, telemarketing and web-based services. The availability of cheap manpower and a large number of highly skilled and educated people, who are fluent in English, are the main reasons why employers, especially those in the US, are looking towards India for setting up their Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) ventures.

How many of you have ever called a support helpline and gotten someone with a very thick foreign accent? Big businesses find it to be a lot cheaper to find white-collar workers in foreign countries to do their work for them, and the better the English skills those people have, the more likely they are to get hired for customer service positions and the more money they are likely to make. A heavy accent does not make them desirable to companies because customers get irate with a person whose accent they cannot easily understand, and so many people in countries America is outsourcing to desperately seek accent reduction. For them, it’s a way to improve their lives.

In his book entitled "The World is Flat," Thomas L. Friedman, he says, "... before you disparage it, you have to taste just how hungry these kids are to escape the lower end of the middle class and move up. If a little accent modification is the price they have to pay to jump a rung of the ladder, then so be it - they say."
“I have to persuade people that my accent won't be a problem, but an asset.”
- Salma Hayek
When a patient goes to the speech pathologist, the first thing they’ll be asked to do is record their speech pattern. They may be asked to read words, sentences, and/or paragraphs. The pathologist will play the tape back and analyze things such as pronunciation, stress, rhythm, and intonation, and then compare it to the dialect the student wishes to speak.

Once the problem areas are identified, the doctor sets up a schedule of appointments, either individual or group, for the patient and sets a list of exercises for the student to practice with. They’re expected to practice outside of class time as well, of course. The more they practice outside of class, experts say, the faster they will improve.
English pronunciation is considered by many to be a very evil thing indeed. There don’t seem to be any rules for sounds, and if there are, there are so many exceptions that it’s nearly impossible to memorize everything.

According to noted speech pathologist Dr. David Alan Stern, there are two major areas that cause unintelligibility in accents: Intonation and muscular movements.

For intonation, he has a simple pattern for English sentences to use called the “Jump Up/Step Down Pattern.” There can be more than one of these patterns in a single sentence; they occur from idea to idea. This involves jumping up in pitch on the stressed words, then slowly bringing the pitch back down in each syllable until the lowest final syllable.

Common mistakes students make include making the pitch louder instead of higher, gliding or sliding to the next step instead of jumping, and coming down only word by word instead of syllable by syllable. This seems natural for them since it is the rhythm and intonation pattern for their own native language, but causes problems in English.

Good places to “jump up” and stress include adverbs, adjectives, nouns, and verbs, and you don’t want to jump or stress very small words in English or pronouns. This just creates a strange sound.
The second most important thing, according to Dr. Stern, is mouth movement. Different languages use the mouth and tongue muscles differently, so it’s often difficult for language learners to produce the correct sounds when their muscles simply aren’t used to making that sound.

His tips for reconditioning your muscles include a few simple exercises:

First, relax the muscles around the mouth by massaging and patting until they’re almost to the point of numbness. Then, place your tongue in the “starting position.” This includes it being very low in the bottom of the mouth and slightly concave to where the sides are curled up just the tiniest bit. Then, mouth the different sounds you would like to make in their correct form. (He suggests using a tongue position chart for this.) Using a mirror is very helpful in this procedure to help the student see if they are in fact putting their tongue into the correct position.

This exercise should not be used while speaking to someone and should be practiced at least once per day if the student wishes to improve fairly quickly.
In Dr. Stern’s Jump Up/Step Down Pattern, we briefly mentioned stressed words. These words include nouns, most principle verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. The “small words,” he said, are not stressed. These include such things as determiners, auxiliary verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and pronouns.

Take the two example sentences. If you say them aloud, you notice that the first sentence actually takes about the same time to speak well! Even though the second sentence is approximately 30% longer than the first, the sentences take the same time to speak. This is because there are 5 stressed words in each sentence. The more stressed words in a sentence, the longer it takes to say. If stressed words are glossed over in speech, they sound rushed and unintelligible, and if non-stressed words are drawn-out too long, it seems very slow and boring. Each kind of word must be stressed for the correct length of time to have correct pronunciation.
What do students strive for when they undergo accent reduction therapy? Many of them have similar goals in mind.

These include such things as:

• Changing regional accents to increase personal and professional opportunities
• Engaging in extensive conversations, presentations, and telephone calls
• Be more confident and effective, both socially and professionally
• Improved professional image of your company
• Greater understanding from listeners

One woman actually tripled her salary when she underwent accent reduction therapy after constantly being passed over for promotions. The rewards of going through the process seem to effectively improve many people's professional opportunities.
Tips for Reducing Accents

- Watch the mouth movements of native speakers!
- Slow down!
- Use your dictionary!
- Ask someone!
- Listen to books on tape!
- Pay attention to word endings!
- Read aloud!
- Listen to yourself!
- Be patient!

Tips on Reducing Accent

Watch the mouth movements of native speakers! Observe the mouth movements of native American speakers. Repeat what they are saying, imitating the intonation and rhythm of their speech.

Slow down! Until you learn the correct intonation and rhythm of English, slow down your speech. If you speak too quickly with the wrong intonation and rhythm, native speakers will have a hard time understanding you.

Use your dictionary! Become familiar with the phonetic symbols of your dictionary and look up the correct pronunciation of words that are hard for you to say.

Ask someone! Make a list of frequently used words that are difficult for you to pronounce and ask a native speaker to pronounce them for you. Record these words, listen to them, and practice saying them.

Listen to books on tape! Listen and read at the same time. Record yourself reading some sections of the book. Compare the sound of your English with that of the speaker.

Pay attention to word endings! Pronounce the ending of each word. Pay special attention to “s” and “ed” endings.

Read aloud! Read aloud in English, such as a novel or the newspaper, for fifteen to twenty minutes each day. This will help you strengthen the mouth muscles that you use when you speak English. Research has shown that it takes about three months of daily practice to develop strong mouth muscles for speaking a new language.

Listen to yourself! Record your own voice and listen for pronunciation mistakes. This is an excellent exercise because it will help you become conscious of the mistakes that you are making.

Be patient! You can change the way you speak but it won’t happen overnight. People often expect instant results and give up too soon. You can change the way you sound if you are willing to put some effort into it.
"They can’t ask you to change the color of your skin, but they can ask you to change your accent, which is as deeply ingrained in your identity."

- Rosina Lippi, sociolinguistics scholar
There is a heavy debate going on in many communities about whether or not accent reduction therapy is necessary, and whether or not it is good for the speaker.

People on the pro side argue that it is entirely voluntary for the participants and the process focuses on reduction not elimination of accents. The students can “code switch” if they like – that is, choose to use their native accent or not depending on the situation. It’s also argued that since English is becoming such a worldwide lingua franca, mutual intelligibility is essential for survival.

On the opposite side, people first begin with the argument of why English should even be the international standard language. Then comes the problem of deciding which dialect of English is even the correct one to imitate. The opposition feels social pressures push people into accent therapy even if they do not want to go, and once a person undergoes accent reduction therapy their cultural and personal identities are killed along with their accent.

The debate rages strong, and it doesn’t seem likely to be solved any time soon. So, for now, millions of native and non-native English speakers will make the trip to the speech pathologist to begin the long, intensive process of muscle training and tongue-twisting drills.
References