Accent Reduction

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Everyone has an Accent

There is no such thing as unaccented English, or any language.
Accent Reduction is a type of speech therapy wherein a speaker’s accent, whether the result of their regional dialect, or the result of their first language, is altered to aid in communication. It should be noted that accent reduction is NOT accent elimination. Accent reduction seeks to reduce the noticeability of an accent, in many cases to aid the ease of communication for the speaker. Accent elimination, in contrast, seeks to eliminate the original accent of the speaker. In many cases, the motivation of the student is different depending on if they are going through accent reduction or accent elimination therapy. Accent elimination is usually used to aid in the professional success or life success of a speaker, while accent reduction is generally used to increase the communicative abilities of the speaker.
The two elements that help to distinguish different language varietals, which are manifested in accents are as follows: **prosodic features** and **segmental features**. Prosodic features are things like tempo, intonation, and pitch contours (‘Please give me so MORE of that turkey’ or ‘baNAna’ for example). Segmental features are the different sounds of a language, namely, vowels and consonants. In English, for instance, some speakers distinguish between ‘cot’ and ‘caught’, while others do not, and this can be an indication of a regional dialect and will be perceived through their accent. According to Lippi-Green (1997), accents are a combination of the first two elements, and as she describes, “Accents are loose bundles of prosodic and segmental features distributed over geographic and/or social space” (p. 42).
(The following information is from *Breaking the Accent Barrier*, Stern, (2001)). While there are many different programs and methods available to go about the process of accent reduction, these three categories are typically addressed by most. Prosodic features (the acoustic properties of speech), muscularity (the actual physical movement of lips, mouth, jaw, and tongue), and pronunciation (the sounds of specific letters, and words) are usually used in some sort of combination within the different accent reduction programs.
The prosodic or acoustic properties of speech include the rhythm, stress, and pitch. These are important in communicating the feelings, emotions, and intentions of what is being said. When the prosodic features of a sentence are altered, the meaning can be changed even if the words are exactly the same. Stern, (2001).
The melody and rhythm of sentence can play a key role to a listener’s ability to understand what is trying to be conveyed. Some languages glide up as the sentence progresses which creates the feeling of a question. So looking at the example above, if I say it while gliding up (I’m very happy to meet you), it seems as though I am not exactly sure whether or not I am happy to meet you. Other languages glide up or down between words or within words, some follow a rapid monotone staccato, while others are slow and monotone but they place equal stress on all syllables. However, the standard form for American English is referred to as the “jump up and step down formation.” It’s kind of like the person discovers what is at the top, and then makes their way back down (I’m very happy to meet you). One may ask, where are you supposed to jump up, on which word? Well, the jump usually occurs at a context word (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) and in this case it is at the adverb “very.” Function words rarely receive the jump, and these include (pronouns, determiners, auxiliary verbs, prepositions, and conjunctions). This formation may seem a bit silly and mechanical at first, but over time it becomes more natural and native sounding. Stern, (2001).
While there is no correct or incorrect word to emphasize in a sentence, the words in the sentence that are emphasized can alter the message being conveyed. For example... 1) *I* didn’t say he stole the money... meaning it wasn’t me that said that 2) *I didn’t* say he stole the money... I am denying that it was even said 3) *I didn’t* say he stole the money... meaning it was never spoken but I thought it 4) *I didn’t* say *he* stole the money... I said that it was someone else who stole it not him 5) *I didn’t* say he *stole* the money... meaning he didn’t take the money, maybe he earned it or it was given to him 6) *I didn’t* say he stole *the* money... he didn’t steal that particular money that is missing 7) *I didn’t* say he stole the *money*... he actually took something else, not the money.
Another one of the things that is important in conveying what you are actually intending to is choosing the correct word order. English is an analytic language so the word order can change the meaning of what is being conveyed. Versus a synthetic language in which the suffixes and prefixes are used to signify the meaning.
The muscularity really depends on where the sound is focused. Some languages push the mouth forward and focus the sound at the teeth and the lips. Others push in the front and pull in the back and focus the sound in the throat and nose. However, the American sounds are created by keeping the tongue low and focusing the sound low down in the middle of the tongue. The tongue actually creates a circular motion. When we think about this it seems awkward, but if we look in the mirror we can actually see this pattern. Now it is very difficult, to train the muscles to adapt to this new method of movement. However, with enough repetition, one should be able to capture the feeling which is really key in order to apply it to everyday life. To go about retraining the muscles, one should first start by relaxing the muscles in the front of the face and the lips, then open the mouth wider in the back, and make a big circle shape movement with the middle of the tongue… you all got it…great 😊.

The fact is, is that as an ESL teacher your students are a diverse group of people with different first languages as well as different pronunciation and writing systems. A sort of short cut to overcome this obstacle is to introduce the international phonetic alphabet or simply the IPA. In some languages all of the words are said exactly how they are spelled. However, in English, we don’t have this luxury so we must make accommodations. For example, think of the word *knife*. If an ESL learner was to run across this word for the first time, they would more than likely try to pronounce the k. However, if the student knows IPA, then as the teacher you can write it out phonetically and their odds of correct pronunciation increase.
One of the biggest misconceptions about accents or regional dialects that do not adhere to the abstract concept of Standard English is the idea that if we try hard enough, and work enough, we can lose the accent that is holding us back in our careers, schools, or in life opportunities. A linguistic will tell you that it is simply untrue to believe that hard work will “cure” an accent. It is simply not possible to completely replace one phonology with another. The media attempts to portray the possibility of accent reduction, in movies particularly. It is often cited that many actors and actresses lose their accent or their accent while playing a role. Linguists are quick to counter this misconception by citing the fact that it is possible to replace one phonology with another on a SHORT-TERM basis, but it is not possible long-term, and the fact that actors and actresses have unlimited takes in which to perfect their accent.
Many ELL students quickly learn that an accent will hold them back at work or within their career and professional lives or in their social lives. There are many examples of this type of discrimination, cases in which people are not promoted because of their accent. Lippi-Green (1997) describes accents as one of the last ways in which we are able to discriminate. Since it is no longer politically correct to discriminate based on race, ethnicity, gender, or even economic status, we chose to discriminate against L2 speakers, and even L1 speakers to a certain degree using their accent as a guide to do so.

Those who have accents are often seen as being uneducated, or unintelligent. There is an implied promise within accent reduction therapy, and particularly in accent elimination therapy that if you work hard enough and lose the accent success will be yours. Lippi-Green (1997) challenges this for two reasons: 1) the claim of the ability to lose an accent is unfounded, 2) this promise oversimplifies the complex racial, social, and class hierarchies that exist in society. The idea is that by eliminating an accent, so too will you eliminate any and all barriers to success. However, in many cases, the drive to reduce an accent is in order to increase the ability of the speaker to communicate effectively, and accent reduction can aid in reaching this goal.
In some cases, an accent can be so strong, that communication becomes extremely difficult. But there is more to comprehensibility. When listeners are first confronted with an accent, says Lippi-Green (1997) they have a choice of accepting or rejecting the “act of communication” (p. 70). In many studies, it has been shown that when someone speaks with a native accent to another person with the same native accent, both people will assume equal shares of the responsibility of communication. However, when a person with a non-native accent speaks to a person with a native accent, the person with the native accent is far less willing to assume any share of the responsibility of communication. It is true that particularly in the beginning stages of language acquisition when the non-native accent of the speaker can be particularly heavy, that even those willing and eager to try and communicate with them will often be unable to understand the speaker. However, beyond that point, the ‘breakdown’ of communication is not due to an unintelligible heavy accent, but to unwillingness on the part of the listener to assume the burden of communication.
One of the misconceptions about language is that having the same language background will aid in the listener in deciphering what the speaker is saying. For instance, a L1 Japanese speaker who is an L2 English speaker in theory will be able to more easily understand an L1 Japanese speaker who is an L2 English speaker. Recent studies on the intelligibility of speakers with accents have been conducted in an attempt to shed some light on this theory, acquire data on this hypothesis.
How difficult is it to understand an L2 speaker due to accent? L2, at least in the minds of Derwing and Munro (2006), must be defined in terms of different dimensions. “Intelligibility… the extent to which a speaker’s utterance is actually understood” (p. 90), while at the same time emphasizing the importance of recognizing the difference between intelligibility and comprehensibility, “the listener’s estimation of difficulty in understanding an utterance” and also distinguishing from those two “accentedness, the degree to which the pronunciation of an utterance sounds different from an expected production pattern” (p. 90).
As you can see, Derwing and Munro (2006) found that there is no significant advantage for L2 speakers who share a language background with L2 listeners. If you have two Spanish speakers speaking English, they no more likely to understand each other than a Japanese or Russian English speaking classmate. Derwing and Munro (2006) had to conclude that this it was not the background of the listener but the “acoustic-phonetic” qualities of the speech that ultimately determined the intelligibility for a speaker (p 125). This study ultimately suggested that it was the properties of the speech itself that were “potent determiners” of the listener’s responses (p. 125).
As you have probably gathered, Derwing and Munro (1995) have done extensive research pertaining to accent reduction. This study emphasizes once again the importance of prosody in effective L2 communication.

- Derwing and Munro (1995) found, “that even heavily accented speech is sometimes perfectly intelligible and that prosodic errors appear to be a more potent force in the loss of intelligibility than phonetic errors” (p. 73)
- Segmental errors then, are less important than prosodic errors to the comprehensibility of speech
The purpose here is to reiterate and confirm that ESL instruction is focused more on the relation between articulation, pronunciation and comprehensibility and less on "accent" per se.
That being said, there are accent modification/reduction techniques available for those wanting to reduce/modify their accent for either personal or social reasons, or as is most often the case, for career/employment reasons. The models here, the Compton P-ESL and the Reverse Accent Mimicry, and others like them, are derived from the field of Speech-Language Pathology. In regard to ESL instruction and accent modification, I received first hand knowledge from Trish Skillman, TESOL Director, who stated her experience as being that if a student's accent is in fact obstructing or hindering his or hers comprehensibility, she may then make a discretionary decision to send the student to Western's own Speech-Language-Hearing Clinic for help with their accent.
The Compton P-ESL: Pronouncing English as a Second Language is but one of many similar accent modification programs. I chose to introduce this model because it is widely utilized by many different professionals wanting or needing to modify their accents. This particular program has analyzed the accents of over 3000 people from different countries and compiled a data base of common errors made by these speakers which they then use to assess the individual needs of each respective person. This program and others like it, focus on the subject’s problem sounds and monitor and correct their accents through audio and video recording, repetition and imitation, and by focusing on the tone and volume of speech, and nonverbal skills such as body language, eye contact etc. and also proper mouth positioning, like Mollie discussed The main idea here, is that lots and lots of practice is needed. The objective is to eliminate as much thinking as possible and to make it as natural as possible. Terry Sacks, the director of Western’s Speech –Language-Hearing Clinic, confirmed this, reiterating that it takes immense time and effort to consciously change speech mannerisms. She explained her point by asking me to think about just how difficult it would be were I to try suddenly start trying to change any given element of my current speech- that not only would I have to make a constant, conscious effort to remember that I was indeed trying to change something but also to actually produce the change. Point being that it takes a lot of practice to modify an accent or one’s speech.
The examples here are to illustrate what types of issues an ESL learner might need extra help with. Common errors like these hearken to the subtle interrelatedness of accent and pronunciation in that mispronunciation may just as likely be a cause for incomprehensibility as an accent. It also exemplifies the utility of the tactics previously mentioned, in regard to the challenging aspect of a person even being aware that an error is occurring and why, as well as then being able to practice correcting it.

Examples of Pronunciation Errors

- The English letters ‘L’ and ‘R’ are often confused by L2 Asian Speakers
- The English sound ‘th’ often gets pronounced with an ‘S’ and ‘Z’ for many different speakers
- Phonetic vowel sounds
I though this a compelling tactic of accent modification and it is actually quite comprehensive and straightforward. For instance, we have all at one time or another adopted an accent for fun, being able to adequately mimic a British or Australian speaker. And in fact this is how Larry Hilton (2005), the speech-language pathologist, first founded this technique, by entertaining his friends with French accent mimicry.
The first step is to choose someone to emulate— it could be anyone, as long as there is a strong, positive association with this person’s speech.
The second step is described as initiating the L1 speaker's innate mimicry mechanisms at a holistic level; the strategy being for the learner to utilize their native language first to facilitate direct and spontaneous mimicry since it is produced effortlessly. Hilton likens this as ‘getting into character’, similar to assuming a ‘voice’ when reading aloud to children for instance. Whole phrases and sentences best evoke the spontaneous mimicry effect.
The third step is transitioning to reverse accent mimicry which means practicing the same animated, holistically triggered accent characteristics produced using the native language while using the L2 language. The student is instructed to first begin mimicking the model speaker in their native language, then while continuing to speak, to code-shift into the L2 while maintaining their accent.
Hilton (2005) stresses the importance of one-on-one interaction for repeated practice and guided use, and as with the other models of accent modification, repetition is key. Also important, is the use of personally relevant, conversational style scripts to be used for practice because they allow for the ease of exact, continued repetition over the course of many days and they can be monitored by the clinician for interpretation, feedback, and revision etc.. Hilton (2005) explains that scripts are especially helpful for emerging L2 abilities since spontaneous discourse is challenging, and which is the main goal. As with the other accent modification models, repetition, practice, and monitored feedback are paramount to successfully overcoming ingrained speech patterns.
Everyone has an accent! 😊

Accents are personal reflections of who we are—our culture, our background, and our individual expression and communication.

Accent Reduction techniques are often used to increase the effectiveness of communication, but also often utilized by people to overcome discrimination that arises as a result of the negative connotations associated with a heavy accent.
"Ever since he and his owners came back from holiday, he's been barking in a fake American accent."
References

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