The myth of non-accent

The poets were not alone in sanctioning myths, for long before the poets the states and the lawmakers had sanctioned them as a useful expedient... They needed to control the people by superstitious fears, and these cannot be aroused without myths and marvels.

Strabo (64 BC–AD 26), Geographia

You've got one too

Myth is understood broadly as a story with general cultural significance. In the study of myth, veracity is secondary to the way in which a story symbolizes human experience more generally. What is particularly interesting is the way that myths are used to justify social order, and to encourage or coerce consensus participation in that order.

In general, linguists think of standard language and its corollary, non-accent, as abstractions. And in fact, this is a logical connection, as is borne out by the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition: “[an abstraction is] the idea of something which has no independent existence; a thing which exists only in idea; something visionary.” From this follows quite neatly Milroy and Milroy’s suggestion that standard language should not be understood as any specific language, but as “an idea in the mind rather than a reality—a set of abstract norms to which actual usage may conform to a greater or lesser extent” (1985: 22-23).

For our purposes, it is useful to consider both standard language and non-accent as myths. It is only by doing so that we can come to understanding how the collective consciousness came to be. Myths are magical and powerful constructs; they can motivate social behavior and actions which would be otherwise contrary to logic or reason.

We have come a good way into this discussion without defining the term accent. Perhaps the reason for that is clear by now: in so far as linguists are concerned, the term has no technical or specific meaning. It is widely used by the public, however, in interesting ways. Perhaps the second syllable in ‘balaNana’ or intonation in sentences (“That’s ANOTHER fine mess you’ve gotten us into!”), it can be used as a diacritic, but this is most often done in conjunction with the writing of other languages. More generally, accent is a loose reference to a specific “way of speaking.” There is no official or technical specification for what this might mean in linguistic terms, but there are two widely recognized elements to what serves to distinguish one variety of language from another in the minds of speakers.

Prosodic features. The study of the phonology of a language includes consideration of intonation, or patterns of pitch contours. This includes stress patterns, both at the lexical and at the sentence level, but it also touches upon other factors such as tempo of speaking. For example, speakers of English tend to call languages or varieties of language which tend toward an upswing in stress at the end of words lifting, or sing-song, or some Romance languages rapid-fire. Currently in American English there is one very active point of variation having to do with stress, in a small set of words including Thanksgiving, insurance, adult, cement.

It seems that first syllable stress has been documented for these words in the South, while everywhere else in the country the stress is on the second syllable: Insurance (South) or insURance (elsewhere). The first syllable variant has been showing up outside the South quite a lot over at least the past 20 years, which is when I started taking notes on it. The other words that follow this pattern in the South do not seem to be wandering North; my casual research has not uncovered use of THANKSgiving, A-dult, CEment or UMbrella on the West Coast, in the Midwest or on the East Coast. 2

Segmental features. We acquire, as part of our first language, the sounds of the language which fall into two major categories: vowels and consonants. Each of these sounds exists in relation to one another in a phonological structure. In the discussion above, some speakers of U.S. English distinguish between the words caught and cot, while for others these are homonyms. This follows quite reasonably from the fact that there are many possible phonological systems for U.S. English.

Perspective

Linguists have struggled to find an accurate definition of the word accent, and for the most part, given it up as a bad job. Generally accent can only be understood and defined if there is something to compare it with. You travel to a small town in Kansas, and (unless you are actually from that area), your accent will be seen as the differences between your speech and the local speech. Those differences can be examined and identified, so that a linguist might make a study of how your prosodic features and phonology mark you as someone from somewhere else. The “someplace else” can be another state, country, or social group.

Those who work on accent as a phonetic and sociolinguistic phenomenon seem to have come to the conclusion that while this is true, it is also not important. That is, in the serious study of accent, the object is not what comes out of one person’s mouth, but what the listeners hear and understand. Derwing and Monro put it very simply: “From our perspective, listeners’ judgments are the only meaningful window into accentiveness and comprehensibility” (2009: 478).

And yet, it is important to distinguish between the two major kinds of accents: First Language (L1) and Second Language (L2).

L1 and L2 accents

What we call L1 accent is really no more than what we have been discussing all along: structured variation in language. Most usually we use geography as the first line of demarcation: a Maine accent, a New Orleans accent, an Appalachian accent, a Utah accent. But there are also socially bound clusters of features which are superimposed on the geographic Native American accents, Black accents, Jewish accents. Gender, race, ethnicity, income, religion—these and other social identities are often clearly marked by means of choice between linguistic variants.
L1 accent is, then, the native variety of U.S. English spoken: every native speaker of U.S. English has an L1 accent, no matter how unmarked or marked the person’s language. The variety includes people like Rachel Maddow, Steven Colbert, Bill Maher, may seem to be. This includes people like Rachel Maddow, Steven Colbert, Bill Maher, often seem to be. This includes people like Rachel Maddow, Steven Colbert, Bill Maher, who are generally thought to be speakers of *SAE.* So where does accent end and dialect begin? To be more specific: Why is Dutch or German considered a separate language from English, and Swiss German not? Why do people generally not think that they are speaking different languages, even though they are? The fact is that these languages are distinguished by purely linguistic terms, then a rough division can be made as follows:

- Two varieties of a single language are distinguished by accent when differences are restricted primarily to phonology (prosodic and segmental features).
- If two varieties of a single language also differ in morphological structures, syntax, and semantics, then they are different varieties, or dialects, of the same language.
- If two varieties of a common mother language differ in all these ways, and in addition have distinct literary histories, distinct orthographies, and/or geo-political boundaries, then they are generally called different languages.

Style or code shifting is a term reflecting the speaker’s ability to switch between languages or language varieties dependent on a large number of factors. It is a complicated process, one that has been studied intensively. For our purposes, however, it is enough to say that when a speaker is shifting between two varieties of one language which are closely related, it will sometimes be appropriate to speak of “accent” and sometimes of “style.” Thus it is useful to retain the term accent to talk about phonology, but it is important to remember that this is a fluid category.

L2 accent is very different. When a native speaker of a language other than English learns English, accent is used to refer to the breakecho or native language phonology that is imposed on the target language. Thus we might say that an individual has a Welsh accent, or a Tagalog accent, because the phonologies of those languages influence the learner’s pronunciation of U.S. English, and any effort to block the L2 accent will be accomplished with differing degrees of success.

Thus far it has been put forward that:

- all spoken human language is necessarily and functionally variable;
- one of the functions of variation is to convey social, stylistic and geographic meanings;
- the majority of the emblematic work of variation is carried out below the level of consciousness.

Given these facts, what is non-accent? And given the fact that accent is just shorthand for variable language (which is in some ways a redundant term), what can a ‘standard’ U.S. English be, but an abstraction?

In spite of all the hard evidence that all languages change, people steadfastly believe that a homogenous, standardized, one-size-fits-all language is not only desirable, it is truly a possibility. This takes us back to our opening science fiction scenario, in which the positive ramifications of a world in which we are all the same size and weight is so appealing, so enticing, that we overlook biological realities and the laws of physics.

Before we go on to ask how we are able to fool ourselves so thoroughly about language, we must first deal more carefully with the question of the mythical homogenous standardized spoken language. Until the impossibility of such a thing is established uncontroversially, people will continue to pine after it, and, worse, to pursue it.

So, can you lose one accent and replace it with another? A linguist’s first impulse is to answer this question, very simply, no. It is not possible for an adult to substitute his native phonology (one accent) for another, consistently and in a permanent way.* But! The non-)linguist will jump in. What about my Aunt Magda, who came here from the Ukraine and has no accent at all? What about Gwyneth Paltrow, who can switch from American English to British English without a moment’s hesitation? And there’s Joe’s wife, who just gave up her Brooklyn accent when it caused her problems in medical school.

What does it mean to lose an accent? Are we talking about replacing one way of speaking for another, or adding a new phonology to a person’s existing inventory? Are we demanding that a person sound one way for a brief period of time, or that he always sound that way? Consider a man who applies for a promotion and is told that his accent is too low-class for the job he wants to do.

James Kahakua, a native of Hawai‘i, wanted to read prepared weather forecasts on the radio. He was refused promotion because his English marks him as a speaker of Hawaiian Creole. When he sued, the radio station called an accent reduction specialist to testify on their behalf. The accent reduction specialist didn’t mince words: Kahakua’s English was deficient, wrong, unacceptable. Even given the demands of the job in question – rapid pronunciation of long and complex Hawaiian language place names, the specialist found that Mr. Kahakua’s bilingualism was a disadvantage the employer shouldn’t have to tolerate. (A televised report on the Kahakua Title VII case can be seen at http://goo.gl/k12Bp.)

Accent reduction specialists like the one who testified in the Kahakua case are not objective parties. Such persons have a vested interest in the idea of accent and standard. If an accent reduction specialist could not convince the court that Mr. Kahakua’s Hawaiian accent was wrong and inappropriate, what would that mean for her career? Answers for all of these questions require a closer understanding of language acquisition. We begin with some generalizations which are more linguistic facts of life:

- There is a finite set of potentially meaning-bearing sounds (vowels, consonants, tones) which can be produced by human vocal apparatus. The set in its entirety is universal, available to all human beings without physical handicap.
- Each language uses some, but not all, sounds available.
- Sounds are organized into systems, in which each element stands in relationship to the other elements (phonology). The same inventory of sounds can be organized into a number of possible systems. Children are born with the ability to produce the entire set of possible sounds, but eventually restrict themselves to the ones they hear used around them.
- Children exposed to more than one language during the language acquisition process may acquire more than one language, if the social conditioning factors are favorable.
not worthy to be called a house at all. She might eventually abandon the AAVE Sound House and pretend it never existed. Now imagine this.

When the child turns 20, she notices another kind of Sound House, built by Spanish speakers, which she admires. She would like to build an extension to her own Sound House just like it. She looks for her blueprints and her tools, but they have disappeared. Puzzled, she stands on the street and looks at these Spanish Sound Houses. What is different about them? Look at that balcony. How do you build that? Why do the staircases look like that?

With her bare hands, she sets out to build an extension to her original Sound House. She sees bricks she doesn’t have in her own inventory; how to get back to the warehouse? She’ll have to improve. She’s a smart woman, she can make a brick, cut down a tree. She examines the Sound Houses built by Spanish speakers, asks questions. The obvious things she sees right off: wow, they have fireplaces. The less obvious things: width of the doors, for example, slip right by her at first. She starts in on the long process. How did you build that chimney, she asks. She doesn’t know, says her informant, a native speaker of Spanish. I was a kid at the time, and I’ve lost my blueprints.

If she’s lucky, she has a guide – an informed language teacher – who can point out the difference between the extension she is trying to build and her own Sound House. Look, this guide will say. You’re mixing up blue and ultramarine bricks! We use blue for this kind of wall, ultramarine for that. And you certainly can’t put a pale pink brick next to a cerise one.

“Oh,” says the woman building the new Sound House, “I hadn’t noticed.” And thus she will begin to differentiate more carefully, for example, between two very similar vowels which are distinctive in the language she is learning.

She works very, very hard on this extension. But no matter how hard she works, the balcony will not shape up; it is always rickety. There’s a gap in the floor boards; people notice it and grin.

In absolute amazement, she watches her little sister build the exact same Sound House with no effort at all, and it is perfect. She points this out to her guide. “But your sister still has her blueprints and tools,” says her guide. Then she sees a stranger, an older man, building the same extension and he is also taking less time, just galloping through. His Spanish Sound House looks like an original to her.

“Oh no,” her guide tells her. “It’s very good, no doubt there – don’t you see that the windows are slightly too close together? It would fool almost everybody, but those windows give it away.”

She digs in her heels and moves into the extension, although the roof still leaks. She abandons her original English Sound House for months, for years, she is so dedicated to getting this right. She rarely goes back to the first Sound House anymore, and the Gaelic Sound House is condemned. When she does go back to the English Sound House, and first goes through the door it seems strange to her. But the structural heart of her Sound House is here, and it’s still standing, if a little dusty. Very quickly she feels at home again.

When people come to visit her in her Spanish Sound House, they are amazed to find out that it’s not her first construction. They examine everything closely. Some of them may notice very small details, but they don’t say anything. There’s the guy down the block, they tell her, he’s been working on the same extension for longer than you and he’ll never get it right.

This is not a perfect analogy; it has no way to account for the acquisition of syntax and morphology, or the use or production of language. A house cannot produce anything. But it is a useful analogy nonetheless, in as much as this limitation is recognized.
Adult language learners all have the same handicap in learning a second language: the blueprints have faded near illegibility, and the tools are rusted. We must all build new Sound Houses with our bare hands. When the judge claimed that there was no physiological reason that James Kahukua could not speak the broadcast English the radio station demanded, he was simply wrong. It is crucial to point out that the structural integrity of the targeted second Sound House - which here stands in for accent - is distinct from the language learner's skill in actually using the target language. Accent has little to do with what is generally called communicative competence, or the ability to use and interpret language in a wide variety of contexts effectively.

There is a long list of prominent persons who speak English as a second language and who never lost their accents. They never managed to build an English Sound House which would fool anybody into thinking that they are native speakers, but their ability to use English is clear. This group includes people like Isabel Allende, Derek Wolcott, Adriana Huffington, Arnold Schwarzenegger, the irritable John Simon, and Zbigniew Brzezinski. Whether you or Rosie O'Donnell, do we think of people who cannot express themselves? Whether you or Rosie O'Donnell, do we think of people who cannot express themselves? Whether you like or dislike them as individuals, they are all excellent communicators. Do they willfully like or dislike them as individuals, they are all excellent communicators. Do they willfully

Because two phonologies are similar, we think it must be easier to build a second Sound House. Why can't Mr. Kahukua - who after all has an English Sound House to begin with. Why can't Mr. Kahukua - who after all has an English Sound House to begin with. Why can't Mr. Kahukua - who after all has an English Sound House to begin with.

The answer is, actors can't automatically adopt a foreign accent, no matter how easy they make it look. In the filming process the camera rolls for short periods of time, and they make it look. In the filming process the camera rolls for short periods of time, and they make it look. In the filming process the camera rolls for short periods of time, and they make it look. In the filming process the camera rolls for short periods of time, and they make it look. In the filming process the camera rolls for short periods of time, and they make it look. In the filming process the camera rolls for short periods of time, and they make it look. In the filming process the camera rolls for short periods of time, and they make it look. In the filming process the camera rolls for short periods of time, and they make it look. In the filming process the camera rolls for short periods of time, and they make it look.
important, such a person would have to have complete control of the structured variation active in the target language.

To understand the importance of this, imagine yourself in another country, speaking a language you have studied in school for a number of years. Not only do you have to keep the subjunctive straight, for example, but you should be able to interpret tone of voice and lexical choice. If you can’t interpret such language signals, you have no way of knowing if you are being taken seriously, or for a ride.

If there are adults who are capable of learning to absolutely and cleanly substitute one accent for another, they are as rare as individuals who can do long division instantaneously in their heads, or have photographic memories. If they do exist, it would be interesting and important to study them, because it would seem that there are adults whose language acquisition function – the hard wiring in the brain – failed to stop functioning at the usual time.

If a person is very dedicated, works hard, and has good guidance, it may be possible to fool some of the people some of the time. But there’s a crucial question that hasn’t been asked yet:

Who do we ask to jump through these hoops, and why? If SAE is something logically and reasonably required of broadcast news reporters, why wasn’t it required of James Kahkha, and not of Peter Jennings (Canada) or Dan Rather (Texas)?

And, a more difficult question: what is right or wrong about asking Mr. Kahkha to pretend? If he is capable of faking an accent, why shouldn’t his employer ask him to do this, for those few minutes he is reading the weather on the radio?

A close and cynical reader of my arguments – of which there will be many – will point out that I have made two statements which seem to contradict each other. I have gone to some length to establish that all spoken language is variable, and that all languages change. Thus, the Sound Houses we build change over our lifetimes. At the same time, it seems that I am arguing that Sound Houses cannot be changed. I have been critical of speech therapists who claim this is possible.

A Sound House is a living, evolving product of our minds, a mirror of our changing social beings. We restructure constantly, with a keen eye for what the neighbors are doing:

We redecorate constantly, with a keen eye for what the neighbors are doing: we rearrange the bricks, add windows. One person builds a patio, and maybe that catches on, in the same way that somewhere, one day (in a way sociolinguists have never been able to observe) hundreds of other changes caught on and began to gain linguistic and social currency.

We are all subject to the aging process; no one is exempt from those changes over time. Thus our Sound Houses do change over time but in ways that are outside direct control.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

- What does the idea of style shifting do to the Sound House analogy? Many people are bilingual or multilingual, and for each language they also have multiple styles. Is there a way to adapt the metaphor to account for this, or does it simply break down?

- How many prominent people (politicians, actors, policy-makers, educators, media personalities, etc.) can you think of who speak English with an L2 accent? What impact does a foreign accent seem to have on the individual’s life?

Notes

1. The Oxford English Dictionary divides the use of myth into three domains: (1) purely fictional narratives which serve to illustrate and explain natural or social phenomena (The Legend of Hercules; Noah and the Ark); (2) fictional or imaginary persons, objects or places (Big Foot, Santa Claus, Shangri-La); and (3) untruths, or rumors.

2. For a longer, very interesting discussion about THANKSGIVING, see Language Log at http://goo.gl/sY0jU.

3. Dialect is a term which linguists use primarily to talk about language differences over geographic space. It is, however, a fairly prickly term. Laypersons often associate the word dialect as something less developed, capable, or worthy, and hence always subordinate to a “real” language. This is an unfortunate and misconstrued use of the term and for that reason I avoid dialect more generally and use, as many linguists do, the term variety.

4. For a very accessible overview of the research on second language acquisition, the critical phase hypothesis, and the issue of accent, see Hyltenstam and Abrahamson (2000).

5. There is controversy among linguists about what has been called the critical period or the critical period hypothesis (CPH). Some linguists dismiss the concept entirely, and others have proposed amendments. In his chapter “Baby Born Talking – Describes Heaven,” Pinker summarizes the view of the majority of linguists:

   In sum, 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.

   We do know that the language-learning circuitry of the brain is more plastic in childhood; children learn or recover language when the left hemisphere of the brain is damaged or even surgically removed (though not quite at normal levels), but comparable damage in an adult usually leads to permanent aphasia.

(2007: 291)