

University of Berne, Department of English

Accent Awareness In The USA

The Need To Categorize And Be Categorized

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1. Introduction

The study of accents is by no means a field of interest that is solely claimed or dealt with by linguists in academia. The aim of this paper is to discuss the general awareness of accents in the United States of America, which becomes particularly obvious when browsing the Internet. I discuss three different ways in which this argument can be substantiated. 1) An online accent test is an indicator of an overall interest in accent categorization. 2) Public video posts on the Internet requesting feedback on personal accents. 3) Accent categorization in the film industry is based on generally accepted stereotypes.

It goes without saying that it is necessary to go beyond academic textbooks in order to find out how the general US population deals with accent classification. Therefore, the study of popular Internet sites is mandatory for this task.

2. The Need To Be Classified

2.1 An Introduction To The Online Test “What American Accent Do You Have?”

It is highly probable that North American English speakers are aware of the accent diversity in their own country. However, they might not be able to point out what it is that makes their accent distinct from others. The popular online website www.GoToQuiz.com¹ offers a test which is supposed to reveal the accent of English speakers from the United States of America. It is called “What American Accent Do You Have?”², and was created by Xavier Kun³. It is worthy of note that this quiz was rated first place of the “Top 40 Quizzes”⁴ on this site. Therefore, it is currently the most favored online quiz amongst all others. The fact that a non-academic website is awarded such remarkably high ratings for a quiz whose subject is within the field of linguistics, leads to the following deduction: The participants, whether they were speakers of the American

¹ Accessed January 29, 2009/11.04 AM.

² http://www.gotoquiz.com/what_american_accent_do_you_have. Accessed January 29, 2009/10. 16 AM.

³ “[GoToQuiz.com](http://www.GoToQuiz.com) is a site that allows visitors to create online quizzes.” (http://www.gotoquiz.com/results/what_american_accent_do_you_have. Accessed January 29, 2009/10.38 PM.

⁴ <http://www.gotoquiz.com/top-quizzes.html>. Accessed January 29, 2009/ 10.24 AM.

English language, or speakers of another English dialect⁵, must have been interested in their personal linguistic classification. In the following paragraph I will give a short introduction to the test and mention one example for the sake of coherence. I will not go into much detail of analyzing the test in question and whether it meets the standard linguistic procedures, as this would change the topic of this paper. The deductions I make of this test shall substantiate my position that subjects feel the urge to be classified in their accents.

The “What American Accent Do You Have?” quiz is divided into thirteen questions with multiple-choice sub-questions. The first two questions are to determine the age and gender of the participants. In the remaining eleven, the participants are asked to click on the answers that apply closest to their speaking habits. As shown in the following example -it is a screenshot of the actual test- the questions concern the different pronunciations for vowel sounds. According to the answers the participants tick, they are allotted to that area where the distinct way of pronouncing occurs.

10. Now for "pen" and "pin." Don't worry about what others say is correct, just tell us how they come out in an ordinary conversation.

- Same
- Different
- Close. Pen sounds almost, but not quite, like pin.

(http://www.gotoquiz.com/what_american_accent_do_you_have. Accessed January 30, 2009/ 5. 47 PM).

As one can deduce from the three possible answers, answers one and three are linked closer together than answer two, which means that they have a linguistic connection and thus can be allotted to areas where the pronunciation in question takes place. In the case of the above *pen/pin* example, the reader might be aware that a speaker of the American English language, who pronounces *pen* like *pin*, might come from a Southern State. In his essay, “Sounding Southern: a look at the phonology of English in the South” Dorrill uses precisely Bailey’s *pen/pin* example to discuss the vowel mergers, which are a typical characteristic of Southern American English (SAE) phonology. (Bailey 1996, as quoted in Dorrill

⁵ Note: Some non-American English speakers also took the test. I will not include these members in this paper.

2003: 123). Tottie also gives the same example in his book, *An Introduction to American English*, when he explains the characteristic vowel features of Southerners; namely, the raising of [e] to [ɪ] before nasals. (Tottie 2004: 211).

In conclusion, if subjects choose answers that fall in the category of SAE, i.e. by clicking on “Same”, or, “Close. Pen sounds almost, but not quite, like pin”, they are allotted to having a Southern accent. As the reader might guess, there are questions that are linked to the most prominent phonetic features observed in the United States. In section 2.2 and 2.3 I will offer two possible explanations as to why subjects are taking this specific accent test.

2.2 Deduction Nr.1: Accents Secure One's Identity

The initial concern in this chapter is to determine what motivations or reasons people have to take the quiz in the first place. If the result allots the subject to the rightful geographical area, then is it not just an act of testing the accuracy of the quiz? This might be so. Yet, due to the popularity of the quiz, I suggest that it goes beyond that point. In *World Englishes*, Kirkpatrick explains the three major functions of language. I argue that his second point “Identity” (Kirkpatrick 2007: 10) is the reason why “What American Accent Do You Have?” has become so popular. I concur with Kirkpatrick, who states that “people use language to signal to other people who they are and what group(s) they belong to.” (Kirkpatrick 2007: 10).

To sum up, Americans who are allotted to a particular linguistic area should not only identify themselves as speakers of that area, they may also link a certain patriotic pride with the linguistic group which they have been assigned to. Therefore, what the participants seek by taking the accent test is to feel that they indeed belong to a group and that their identity within this group or linguistic community is secured.

2.3 Deduction No. 2: The Uncertainty About One's Accent Due To A New Linguistic Environment

It is not uncommon that US-Americans move, for various reasons, to another State and come in contact with other linguistic features they may or may not incorporate into their speech. It seems plausible that a subject might incorporate accent features according to the area in which they reside, causing a weakening

of their original accent. To be more precise, the motivation for Americans to take the test might lie in the uncertainty of no longer having a distinct accent, and wanting to make sure they are still classifiable. To resort to Kirkpatrick's identity paradigm, namely that people use *language* as a signaling device of who they are and what group they belong to (Kirkpatrick 2007: 10), I suggest that one could find it acceptable to say that people use *accents* as a signaling device of who they are and what group they belong to. As I have mentioned earlier, the questions in the test "What American Accent Do You Have?" concern vowels, which have a remarkable effect on the way accents are perceived, as demonstrated in the *pen/pin* example. Assuming that SAE-speakers moved to the East Coast and gave up or lose their accents, they would no longer pronounce *pen* the same way they pronounced *pin*. This change of feature would, obviously, show in the test. Therefore, subjects who have given up their original accent might find a simple explanation in the test as to how their accents have changed.

Based on the example of the online quiz, "What American Accent Do You Have?", I deduced that American speakers are intrigued about the linguistic features that make them distinct from others. The next chapter discusses a video post, which shows an individual's concern about her accent.

3. Seeking Answers On YouTube

A source that appears to be more accurate for substantiating my position that individuals want to be categorized into accent types, is YouTube (© 2008 YouTube, LLC.) YouTube is an online website that enables people to broadcast themselves and to post their comments with other users. It is surprising, how many videos concerning the subject of accents are being posted. It is especially interesting to see how many members are eager to get feedback from viewers about their accents. Below I give an example of a video post made by an American English speaker who is asking her viewers to comment on her accent.

A young Caucasian female from the United States posted "What's My Accent?" on November 27, 2008. Her pseudonym is DarthLynsea1. In the video, she expresses her fascination with accents and is asking her audience to guess which part of the country she is from. A transcription follows, that entails her interest in the subject and the reason for her creating the video.

But I just wanted to know, do I have an accent to you? [...] Do I have a very weird accent? [...] Because I'm fascinated how people can (sigh) how do I explain this (pause) think other people have, they talk funny, but even though they live in the same place. [...] I just wanted to know what you think mine is [...] I wanna know how distinct mine is, I've always been curious about it. [...]. I just wanna get your opinion of where do you think I'm from. [...]. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsbPmlI3gUE>. Accessed February 2, 2009/ 5.21 PM).

In this excerpt it is clear what DarthLynsea1 is trying to convey. In the first sentence she addresses the viewers and wants to know if they think she has an accent. She explains her fascination with different accents spoken in “the same place”. However, it is not clear what is meant when she says “the same place”, for this could refer to the United States, but also to the state, town, or village. On the other hand, the sentence “talk funny” is quite obvious, because one can presume that she uses the word “funny” as a synonym for *different* or *unusual*. To sum up, her interest in accents is linked to a personal concern, namely the wish that viewers with different accent features allot her to a specific area. By this, she is given an identity.

In the last part of her video post, DarthLynsea1 reveals that she is currently living in Kentucky. The young woman is of Californian origin and is now living in Kentucky, but on the boarder to Ohio. She is asking her viewers if they think she retained her West Coast accent or if she has adopted a Southern accent.

I am currently living in Kentucky I don't know if I have a Kentucky hick Southern accent or not. I don't think I do but (sigh) I might. [...] I actually moved here from Los Angeles, California so maybe I still have that accent I'm not sure [...] But, yeah, send me a video I wanna know where you guys are from and how the accents differ.

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsbPmlI3gUE>. Accessed February 2, 2009/ 3. 23 PM).

It appears that DarthLynsea1 is seeking the audience's validation because she is not aware of her accent and especially if it falls into a distinct category. By posting this video the viewers are given the opportunity to test if they have guessed right.

Apart from this, one can argue that the sentence “I don't know If I have a Kentucky hick Southern accent or not”, was uttered to express the discomfort of having a bad accent. Nevertheless, as generally known, a *hick* is “an unsophisticated provincial person”, (Merriam-Webster 2003: 585) and, knowing this, one can safely assume that DarthLynsea1 is aware that the Southern Accent can be a target of ridicule. As Wolfram and Shilling-Estes

explain in their book, *American English*, listeners who hear a Southern accent might unconsciously assign a set of character attributes to the speaker, with the positive assignment being warmth and hospitality, and the negative connotation being backwardness and ignorance. (Wolfram, Schilling-Estes 2006: 42).

In the following paragraph I quote three different comments made by viewers of DarthLynsea1's video post. The first quote is from a Californian viewer. It seems that this post would be the most valuable to DarthLynsea1, because the viewer is able to detect any differences in the former Californian's speech.

Well right off the bat your [sic] an american lol cuase [sic] im american but i know your not a west coast or pacific person. I htink [sic] your southern but not too twangy although there is a noticable [sic] twang to your voice. Eithier [sic] midwest or southern but not too stong off southern.

Im [sic] form [sic] california btw. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsbPmII3gUE>. Accessed February 2, 2009/ 3. 25 PM).

[M]arinasamedi, who lives in California, noticed a "twang" in DarthLynsea1's accent. It is precisely this feature that makes the Californian viewer "know" that DarthLynsea1 is not a "west coast" or a "pacific person". The detection of a slight "twang" that is "not too twangy" assigns DarthLynsea1 to being from the Midwerstern to Southern part of the US. The following post is by a New Jerseyan, who concurs with marinasamedi.

i'm [sic] from New Jersey and my guess was that you were midwestern. not too strong, but it was obvious the way you said "surfing around on youtube" and "i [sic] don't think they're from Australia or something" & "i [sic] could hear a little funkiness".

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsbPmII3gUE>. Accessed February 2, 2009/3.29 PM).

[T]hunderbeast101 from New Jersey classifies DarthLynsea1 as being from the Midwest. Readers may recall that the woman is living very close to the boarder to Ohio, which is a Midwestern State. Therefore the New Jersey viewer was rather accurate in his assumption. Interestingly, the New Jerseyan and the Californian viewer both do not consider DarthLinsea1 to come from the deep South.

One video response is from GeeMayn, an Australian viewer. To this viewer, Darthlynsea sounds "like a typical American". Although the following response is somewhat puzzling, because GeeMayn does not offer any clear indication as to

what he had guessed, it is noteworthy that he refers to the typical Northern and typical Southern accent being the most detectable ones.

Since I'm from Australia, you sound like a typical American. People from Texas and New York have accents that really stand out and can be easily recognised by people from another country, like me :) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsbPmlI3gUE>. Accessed February 2, 2009/3.31 PM).

GeeMayn appears to have made a generally- accepted statement, namely, that Texas and New York accents are easily detectable. One might assume that since he mentions Texas, he is assigning DarthLynsea1 to that State, which he might perceive to be the stereotype of a Southern accent.

With regard to the three viewer responses to the post "What's My Accent?", I conclude that websites such as YouTube show the popularity of this linguistic field. The general US-speaker appears to take a considerable interest in the way they, and other people, sound. In the next chapter I discuss how the film industry makes use of this general interest, and how it allots accents to film characters.

4. An Example of Accent Classification In The Film Industry

4.1 Why It Is Necessary To Classify Accents

In *Accents of English 1*, Wells points out that the human population is too large and too diverse for individuals to make accurate assumptions about every single person they meet. Naturally, there are people with whom one is at closer levels than others, and that it is plausible for those individuals to have a more accurate and individual perception of, for instance, family and close friends. Yet for all the mere acquaintances it is difficult to hold an "individual picture" (Wells 1982: 28). Therefore, it is normal that one perceives new or casual contacts by assigning that individual to "preconceived stereotypes" (Wells 1982: 28). According to Wells, these stereotypes are rather basic and homogeneous conceptions that are shared with other members of the general population. He substantiates this idea by using the example of the common image of a cowboy. He notes, that if a cowboy were to speak in a U-URP accent, one would find this very odd. What Wells is conveying is that the general population shares the same preconceived notion of the way a cowboy speaks.

Bearing in mind what Wells says about the cowboy accent, it follows that the media is reflecting popularly-established accent classifications of, for

instance, film characters. As Meier points out “Movies and TV often use dialects as a kind of signaling device or short-hand, and exploit cultural prejudices [...].” (Meier 2008: Email correspondence entailed in the appendix) It goes without saying that these “signaling devices” should be understood by the general viewer. People who visit the online website www.tvtropes.org⁶ can view a selection of so-called television tropes. “Tropes are devices and conventions that a writer can reasonably rely on as being present in the audience members' minds and expectations.” (<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/HomePage>. Accessed January 28, 2009/10. 34 AM). I give an example of a well-established accent stereotype, namely that characters, which play members of the Mafia have a Northeastern New Jersey or a Bronx accent.

Joisey/Da Bronx: The accent of thugs and The Mafia. The two areas, Northern New Jersey and The Bronx, have distinctly different accents, but share the common attribute of stuffing the “th” sound into a “d.” (Though if you actually say “Joisey”, it is 100% likely you speak either Affect or Cowboy.) **Stereotype:** Thug or Stooge. (<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/AmericanAccents>. Accessed February 2, 2009/10.33 AM).

At the present time, the critically acclaimed HBO® Mafia series *The Sopranos*⁷ substantiates this common perception of a Mafia accent, for the story is set in northeastern New Jersey (adjacent to New York City), with its large Italian immigrant population, and the main characters fit into the stereotype that is quoted above.

To draw upon Wells’ cowboy example, one can safely assume that the accent categorization in the film industry is somewhat fixed, because the general viewer has a preconceived notion of how distinct characters ought to sound, since the film industry merely “exploits cultural prejudices” (Meier 2008: Email correspondence.) In short, one would find it odd to hear a cowboy speak in a U-URP accent (Wells 1982: 29), but the idea of hearing a Mafia character speak with a GenAm accent would seem just as odd.

⁶ (<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/HomePage>. Accessed January 28, 2009/10.15 AM).

⁷ *The Sopranos* 1999-2007.

5. Conclusion

This paper was set out to discuss the general awareness of accents in the United States of America. The main aim was to show that the study of accents is a concern that goes beyond academic interests. Research on the Internet showed that there currently is a considerable demand for accent studies, especially if they consider personal accent classification. I used the example of the online accent test and a video post to substantiate this position. I deduced that the reason for subjects to take the online test was firstly, that their personal accent is linked to a specific identity and group affiliation, and secondly, that subjects do not always know in what accent category they belong, because their accent may have changed due to a new linguistic environment. The personal video post of the young woman is clear evidence that there is a demand to be allotted to an accent category. Lastly, the focus on accent stereotypes used in the film industry was set out to prove that there must be a general knowledge of how specific characters ought to speak and that the film industry exploits this.

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Marisasamedi (avatar)

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The Sopranos

1999-2007 Television Series. United States of America: HBO.

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6.3 Email Correspondence

Meier, Paul

2008 Re: Stereotypical accents. Aug 12, 2008, at 11:48 PM. Please note that a copy of the email correspondence between Professor Meier and Laureen Zanotti is entailed in the appendix.

7. Declaration

I hereby state that I have read §5 on **plagiarism** in *Help* and I confirm that I have complied with the requirements.

Date: Schliern, February 3, 2009

Signature:

8. Appendix

Meier Paul

2008 RE: Stereotypical accents. Email to Laureen Zanotti. August 12, 2008 11:48:47 PM GMT+02:00. Go to last page.