

Multilingual accents

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Speaking of ‘foreign’ accents in an international language does not make sense. International languages have no ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ users either. I discuss the impact of these observations on the current teaching and learning of monolingual English, and I propose treating multilingual accents as both learning tools and learning goals.

English monolinguals and English multilinguals

We know that the prime generators of variability within a language are its accents. There are, for example, archives dedicated to English accents (IDEA, ongoing) though none, to my knowledge, to English morpho-syntaxes or semantics. We also know that the accents of classroom learners of a language, that is, ‘non-native’ accents, are the prime generators of impaired intelligibility across users of that language. The message seems to be that non-native accents are obstacles to fluent communication in a language, whereas native ones are not. Going by the impressive diversity of English accents on record, native as well as non-native, this message cannot be telling the whole story.

The issue cannot be that the foreign accent is undesirable because it impairs intelligibility. Intelligibility does not operate in a vacuum, because people are (not) intelligible to other people. Impaired intelligibility is also true among monolingual users of a language, and also primarily because of accent. The distinction that must be understood here is not the traditional one between native and non-native users of a language, but between monolingual and multilingual users. In the literature, ‘native speaker’ continues to be used to mean, in fact, ‘monolingual speaker’, and ‘non-native’ to mean multilingual speaker. Native speakers of English, i.e. those who learn the language from birth, who are also native speakers of other languages for the same reason, are less native than other natives, in an Orwellian sense. The literature is rife with paradoxical assumptions of this kind, opposing bilinguals/multilinguals to monolingual ‘native

speakers’ and thus denying linguistic nativeness to users of more than one language.

Nor can the issue be that the accent is there at all, because everyone speaks their language(s) with an accent. Part of being a skilled user of a language, whatever the number of languages in your repertoire, consists in the ability to make sense of accents that are different from yours. Speakers naturally *find the common ground that they know is there*, because they share a language. The issue is rather that the accent that is there is portrayed as unshared ground. If you are told that you have a ‘foreign’ accent, then you are told that your accent does not belong to the language that you are nevertheless attempting to make yours through learning it. In other words, you are told that the language cannot be made yours: it is alien to you because your accent is alien to it.

Accents as liabilities

The ‘foreign’ nature of learner accents is what spawns their portrayal as either lacking (and so in need of ‘addition’) or excessive (in need of ‘reduction’). In both cases, the learners’ own accent is ignored, not in the sense that it is not compared to the target product, which it often is, but in the sense that comparison is all there is. Learner accents are put to use in the learning process, but only as evidence of what is not meant to be part of the final product. Comparing learner accents with textbook-prescribed targets will of course uncover many differences and very few similarities. Despite a rapidly expanding population of learner candidates, and an equally expanding diversity in their linguistic backgrounds, we can anticipate more of the same, as far as accent teaching goals and target accents are concerned. Jenkins (2006) makes this point perfectly clear. Learner accents will continue to be seen as a liability, for two reasons.

First, because learner accents are treated as deficit accents. Accent additions and/or reductions can only be understood against the background of someone else’s accent, one which the learners fail to match. Accents acquired in a classroom are forever doomed to ‘non-nativeness’ (or intriguing constructs like ‘near-nativeness’), because they were not acquired at home. Second, because foreign language teaching (FLT) preoccupations about learners single out the complexity of their linguistic disparity, resulting in statements about the unmanageable quantification thereof.

Choosing to focus on unmanageable disparity is true of concerns voiced about other multilingualisms too. In

bilingual acquisition, for example, each language pair poses “a unique learning problem because languages can be similar or different”, as does “the heterogeneity that can exist among bilingual groups and bilingual individuals” (Werker & Byers-Heinlein 2008: 147). Bhatia & Ritchie (1999: 569) summarily acknowledge defeat, stating that bilingualism is too complex a “phenomenon” and that only when monolingualism is “fully understood” can we begin to address bilingualism. Language background and a myriad other factors that split learners into disparate subsets (age, sex, length of English study, fluency in first language(s), personality, identity, learning styles, motivation, socio-economic status) are analysed in detail to find, predictably, the disparity which was assumed from the outset. That is, to find that learners are individuals. Since what all these individuals have in common is that they are (becoming) multilinguals, the ‘complexity’ of multilingualism itself is then acknowledged as the offender in the language learning process: learners fail to learn because their other language(s) stand in the way. But multilingualism only clashes with the available English programmes because these programmes are monolingual programmes.

There is no denying that language learning is complex and difficult. This is true of learners of any age, background or personality, monolingual as well as multilingual. Yet construing this complexity as resulting from conditions that *learners* cannot help, such as when or where they were born to speakers of which languages, only blames the messenger. We could make a case that the accent problem in FLT lies in multilingual learners being treated like monolingual learners, taught a monolingual version of a new language and expected to behave like monolinguals in that language. This is indeed a challenge, because it is as reasonable to expect multilinguals to behave like monolinguals as to expect the converse. But the problem lies instead in treating the new language as a museum piece, and learners as its curators. Linguistic complexity is not the issue. Monolingual complexity and variability have not deterred prolific investigation into monolingual uses of language. These are the uses covered in virtually all extant research in linguistics, including research which purports to address multilingualism by comparing the use of *single* languages across multilinguals and monolinguals. Such comparisons tell us as much about *multilingualism* as comparisons of the use of a single brand of soap tell us about hygienic behaviour.

The issue is that it is precisely *monolingual* variability which accounts for the ‘English’ accents currently on offer in FLT. Particular monolingual accents will also sound foreign to users of other monolingual accents, but

monolingual unintelligibility is as unwelcome in the FL literature as in the FL classroom. The assumption is, then, that a choice must be made, one which papers over real-life monolingual diversity that is in fact as intractable as multilingual diversity. FL curricula, even where dedicated to pronunciation, do not necessarily contain warnings about which accent will be modelled and/or targeted in class. English pronunciation classes are *English* pronunciation classes, just like learners of English are learners of ‘English’, as the ‘E’ in all related acronyms (TESOL, EFL, ...) makes clear. The practice is one of devotion to the habitual choices of English accents – largely, I presume, because of inertia derived from the mind-boggling amount of existing teaching material dedicated to the same accents of English. The result is pedagogical action aimed at the acquisition of a fictionally uniform new language. What learners are presented with is a tame accent of English that has been decided for them, that they should strive to keep tame and for whose uniformity they risk finding no practical use, whether conducting business meetings, giving directions to taxi drivers or buying vegetables at the market.

Accents as resources

Protecting the learner from monolingual variability serves no pedagogical goal, not least because the learner is made to feel different, in yet another way, from monolingual speakers, who are construed to use a uniform kind of English. More to the point, learners are not made aware that monolingual accents, that is, accents which are hailed as tokens of exemplary English, are similar to theirs.

Teachers’ linguistic backgrounds, whether monolingual or multilingual, also get short-changed in the process: not all (not even a majority) of EFL teachers are users of textbook-prescribed accent(s). A teacher of ‘English’ is assumed to speak ‘without’ an accent, an expression that is popularly understood as meaning ‘speaking competently’. (There are of course cases where learners do realise that their teachers also speak with an accent, often when that accent turns out to thwart expectations of what, to learners, is a desirable or ‘good’ English accent. This article does not concern learners’ wishes to emulate an accent, or teachers’ wishes to enforce one, because training people to copy accents is the job of accent coaches, not language teachers.)

We have then a classroom situation with a variety of individuals who are all expected to work together towards an English accent, and do this in English. We have one or more teachers who have an accent, and several learners

who, assuming a common linguistic background, will have a different accent from the teachers', or be in the process of developing one. Learners from different linguistic backgrounds will add as many different accents to classroom interactions. Stress and conflict, including covert, are bound to arise, because everyone is in fact working towards a goal that does not necessarily come naturally to any of the participants. Learners struggle with an accent which is as foreign to them as theirs is to the teacher. Teachers may struggle to constantly monitor their own accent besides their learners', or feel forced to become diglossic for purposes of doing their job.

The problem lies with the use that has been made of learners' accents. Being 'foreign' accents, they must be remedied. But English is being marketed as a tool of international communication, and international languages have no foreigners to it. Learners are no longer required to make themselves intelligible only to monolingual speakers of English, as was once the goal of EFL, and thus need no longer partake of "the general powerlessness of the language learner in a world of native speakers" (Davies 2003: 1361). I propose to tap the diversity that *is* there, from learners, teachers and English itself, in extant and emerging accents, so as to facilitate accent teaching and accent learning.

Learner accents are accents of English, whether we choose to think of them as such or not, because they are the accents that learners find to get at their new language. But accents are speaker-bound, not language-bound. This means that speakers are not forever grounded, in both senses of the word, in particular accents of particular languages. First-language accents evolve through exposure to other languages, as Sancier & Fowler (1997) and Cruz-Ferreira (1999) found for two varieties of Portuguese, concerning segmentals in a monolingual adult and prosody in native bilingual children, respectively. Acton (1984) showed that there is no reason to expect otherwise of classroom-learned accents, where learners' needs are addressed from the perspective of what they themselves *can* achieve.

We need to take a 'can do' approach to accents, by looking at them as processes which evolve through practice, exposure to others' practice and the assurance that practice makes perfect, especially practice anchored on child acquisitional strategies (Neufeld 1987; Ericsson & al. 1993; Kjellin 1999). To learn a language means to make it yours, because you need it: you plan to use it yourself. But language use necessarily means language change. I propose to make learners' changes as much a

part of the natural variability of a language as monolingual changes. The English pronunciation lesson can then shift its focus to *English*, as its label promises, from the perspective of what the learner needs to know about its accents. That is, teaching practices can shift to raising awareness of what English accents have in common, not of how learners' accents may differ among themselves or deviate from a textbook norm.

Nurturing accent variability in fact reveals the many parallels between monolingual and multilingual uses of the same language. Drawing on data from multilingual users, Jenkins' (2000) findings allowed us to gain insight into shared accents: multilinguals apply strategies to the pronunciation of English TH-sounds, for example, that are similar to monolingual strategies (Wells 1982). Deterding & Kirkpatrick (2006) in turn documented the emergence of a regional accent of English, whose features enhance intelligibility for multilinguals and monolinguals alike. Cruttenden (2008) followed, proposing a monolingual-based Amalgam English which nevertheless contains several features of multilingual English.

Multilingual accents

Finding common ground of this kind will not confuse the learners. It will instead reassure them that different accents are acceptable, including their own. Learning proceeds best from what there is, in the learner. Rather than working against their accent, learners can marshal abilities derived from their multilingual patrimony to work *with* their accent and *from* it. There are, to my knowledge, no studies showing that nurturing the learners' full linguistic repertoire in a pronunciation class enhances academic performance, although this finding is documented for other language learning in Jessner (2006) and Scott & Fuente (2008). Impacting learners' confidence in this way, both in themselves and the academic product, will make it clear that speaking English does not mean keeping to one variety of it and that multilingual varieties are also varieties of a language.

Awareness of accent diversity will not baffle monolingual users of English either, who are sometimes unfairly portrayed either as natural 'international' speakers, with minimised chances of joining the labouring hordes of language learners or, conversely, as hapless re-learners of their own/one language (Derwing & al. 2002; Werth 2008) for the benefit of its internationalisation, in what must almost feel like a breach of copyright. Monolingual users of British accents, for example, know that they "need to work on [their] US accent" if they want to be understood

by an 'English'-speaking automaton (Metro Mobile 2008). If we can go out of our accent ways to accommodate to a machine, we can do the same for the sake of making human accents mutually intelligible too.

Awareness of variability, of its benefits and pitfalls, is precisely what will help generate *intelligible* accents, from monolingual and multilingual users alike. Linguistic communication necessarily takes place among individuals with idiosyncratic uses of (the same) language. Navigating diversity in search of intelligibility is what communicating through language is all about. We all know how to do this because we all learned our first language(s) in exactly this way.

We can start our search for intelligibility in the language classroom. Classroom accents need not be scripted to the millimetre. Learners and teachers may find relief in being allowed to use their own accents in class, to talk with and to talk about. They can target what is usable instead of what is 'on target' or not, and feed usability back into the learning itself: the way to find out what makes sense to users is to observe their uses. Usable also means two other things. It means, first, taking full advantage of the shift from printed to audio material that is currently emerging. I am persuaded that accents are the 'last' thing to be 'learned' in a language because of unnecessary reliance on print (whiteboards included). Granted, resorting to print is a consequence of oral variability, because printed forms of language are unifying. But it also fosters oral variability, not least as spelling pronunciations from beginner readers who cannot know better, because printed forms are meant to be visually matched to spoken ones, not the other way around. To learn about accents, all you need is what you share with other human beings, your ears and your vocal tract, starting with hands-on drilling of *their* abilities in class (not drilling of 'English sounds'), which draw on what your *body* (not your mind) already knows about languages. Learners will gain awareness of what they can do (not of what they cannot), from where work on accent proper can begin, in turn drawing on shared accent learning strategies.

Second, usable also means focusing away from controlled contexts towards everyday contexts of relevance to the learners. They are the buyers of the English product on offer, for their own use. Casual conversation and the negotiation of daily concerns in a new language have been shown to reflect linguistic proficiency far more accurately than response to traditional classroom routines (Gardner & Wagner 2004). Matched spontaneous use of the language by fellow-learners and teachers can only reinforce

exposure to a variety of real-life accents and to what is acceptable among them. For example, that there is no need to correct a pronunciation of the word *tune* as 'choon' (Wells 2008: 28).

Guided practice of articulatory/auditory capabilities and exposure to accent variability are the cornerstones of the intelligibility goal that is to be achieved together. Working towards multilingual accents does not mean working to find some kind of conflation of actual accents, with their roots amputated into a neutered, one-size-fits-all accent. There is as much reason to promote one single multilingual accent by dodging multilingual variability as to promote a single monolingual accent, which would amount to more of the same curtailing of learners' choices. What working towards multilingual accents does mean is learning to adapt to *user-friendly* accents, as speaker and listener, working towards the knowledge that intelligibility is an issue in communication and that intelligibility-for-all is a myth. Many learners have been fooled into thinking that other learners use the same language in the same way as they do, because they have all learned 'English'. Navigating intelligibility in an international language is besides a matter of etiquette. Learning to adopt a "listener-friendly pronunciation" (Gilbert 2008: 17) is evidence of good language manners: the new language may be yours for the using, but the *using* is precisely what the language is there for. You cannot share the use of something that does not make sense to fellow-users.

English has not expanded worldwide through top-down promotion of a single accent, although inspection of pronunciation teaching material would lead to believe otherwise. English has become what it is because of what its users have made of it. Continued practice of a language naturally shuns fossilised uses, drawing instead on the dynamics of the language itself. The international success of English is proof that diversity, not uniformity, is marketable. Diverse accents, obsolescence and emergence of accents are part and parcel of the life of a living language, of what makes it usable: they show not what is being done *to* the language, but what can be done *with* it.

My proposal is to tap real-world multilingual intelligibility that percolates from the bottom up, shifting from a perception of international English as a 'local, but for use elsewhere as-is' textbook variety, to what I believe is the true nature of an international language: flexible use. Intelligibility draws closely on flexibility. If we learn to make ourselves intelligible and make others intelligible to us in ways that are within our reach, we will put this knowledge

to good use, because we only strive to make sense of what we *know* can make sense to us. Knowing how to make sense of multilingual accents is as much a matter of favouring the prime participants in the teaching-learning contract as a matter of usability, and hence of survival of the language itself.

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