

# HOW ACCENTS MEAN

*Jan Anward*

In *Fonetik 93. Papers from the Seventh Swedish Phonetics Conference*,  
Uppsala University, Dept. of Linguistics:RUUL 23,1993, 77-80

# HOW ACCENTS MEAN

*Jan Anward*

*Department of Linguistics, Stockholm University  
S-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden*

1. A line of inquiry is opened up, once we realize, with Stevick (1976: 51-59), that a foreign accent is not a physiological or biological necessity, but has a meaning.

That a foreign accent is not a physiological or biological necessity is supported by the varied evidence reviewed by Stevick, as well as by Leather and James (1991), and Thompson (1991), which shows that under certain conditions not only children but also teenagers and adults can learn to speak a foreign language without an accent.

Stevick's main point is that the way you speak a foreign language or variety shows how you relate to speakers of that language. An accent signals to that group of speakers that you are not a real member of their group. The often reported uneasiness felt by speakers of a language, when they find out that a fluent and idiomatic speaker of their language learnt it only some years ago, illustrates this. What causes uneasiness in such a case is precisely the failure of that speaker to signal his 'true' membership status.

At the same time, an accent signals to speakers of your native tongue, as well as to yourself, that you still are a member of their group. The likewise often reported case of students who resist an idiomatic pronunciation of a foreign language in class in order not to prove socially unacceptable to the other students illustrates this.

There are other cases which can be explicated in a similar way. If, for some reason, your native tongue group is not important to you, a foreign accent may not be needed. "Seliger et al. (1975: 20) report that among a group of people who had learned a foreign language after puberty, those who learned it without an accent had relatively few close friends who spoke the same first language as they did, compared with those who learned the same new language with an accent." (Stevick 1976: 53) Likewise, Thompson (1991) found that Russian immigrants in New York who do not belong to any Russian-speaking group spoke English with less accent than Russian immigrants who do belong to such a group. Stevick's intriguing self-analysis of which foreign accents of English he has mastered also belongs in this category. Moreover, you may use an accent to differentiate between various native tongue groups. A phonetician once told me that he speaks idiomatic Hungarian to his Hungarian friends, but broken Hungarian to Hungarians he does not care to associate with.

At a seminar in Uppsala (March 1993), where I presented this story of accent, Stig Eliasson and Traugott Schiebe challenged me to 'tell the whole story'. According to them, there is a 'mechanical' side to accent which is not considered in my story. And they can indeed be construed as right. The very existence of accent and the possibility of accent-free L2 speech depends of course on the precise nature of successful L2 acquisition. What is known about the acquisition of L2 speech (see Leather and James 1991 for a state-of-the-art report) suggests that L2 speech, at least for adults, is initially interpreted in terms of L1 categories, and that a reinterpretation in terms of L2 categories takes time, since such a reinterpretation requires both an adequate amount of exposure to genuine L2 speech and an adequate amount of practice. Speaking L2 with an accent is then a natural stage in L2 acquisition, independently of any meaning that might be attributed to such an accent.

My story of accent would then take over where this mechanical story ends, explaining why people do not achieve accent-free L2, even though L2 exposure and practice have been adequate, or why people resist and avoid adequate L2 exposure and practice. However, it is possible to go deeper into the mechanics of L2 acquisition and ask why people tend to interpret L2 speech in L1 categories. As shown by the ethnomethodological tradition (Garfinkel 1967, Heritage 1984), categorization is not a socially neutral activity. People are willing to spend considerable interpretive work on maintaining 'normality of perception'. Interpreting L2 speech in L1 categories may well be an instance of interpretive work aimed at maintaining the interpretive framework of an L1 group, whereas a more open, empathic attitude may indicate a process of assimilation to the interpretive framework of another group. Viewed in this way, very little of the 'mechanics' of foreign accent would be socially neutral and meaning-free.

2. Speaking in a particular language is thus open to two interpretations:

- (1) I say this in this group's language
- (2) I say this in another language

*This group* and *this group's language* are indexical notions. *This group* is the group within which the speech event occurs. *This group's language* (or *our language*, or simply *language*) is the language (or combination of languages) used by that group. *This group's language* contrasts with *another language*, any language not used by that group.

Acts of saying something in a certain way, such as (1) and (2), serve to record the dynamics of the speech event, by indexing continuity and change in the identity of its components, their properties and their relations to each

other. A crucial property of such indexical information is that it can not be denied, except by a metacomment (Levinson 1979, Anward 1986). To use Wittgenstein's distinction between what is said and what is shown (Wittgenstein 1921), indexical information is always shown, never said.

Using a Wierzbicka style of meaning explication in terms of a small number of semantic primitives, which are also lexical universals (see e.g. Wierzbicka 1992), we can explicate the indexical information carried by (1) and (2) as in (3) and (4). [Note though that *group*, *show* and *belong* are not among the primitives recognized by Wierzbicka.]

- (3) I say this in this group's language  
By saying this in this group's language, I show this:  
I belong to this group
- (4) I say this in another language  
By saying this in another language, I show this:  
I belong to another group

Speaking L1 in an L1 group falls under (1): *I say this in this group's language*. The speaker signals membership in only one group, the L1 group. Speaking L1 in an L2 group falls under (2): *I say this in another language*. Again, the speaker signals membership in only one group, the L1 group. Speaking L2 with an L1 accent falls under both (1): *I say this in this group's language* and (2): *I say this in another language*, irrespective of whether the speech event occurs in an L1 group or in an L2 group. In both cases, the speaker signals membership in both groups, and can thus remain rooted in the L1 group. Speaking accent-free L2 in an L1 group falls under (2): *I say this in another language*. The speaker signals membership in only one group, the L2 group, and can not remain rooted in the L1 group. Speaking accent-free L2 in an L2 group, finally, falls under (1): *I say this in this group's language*. Again, the speaker signals membership in only one group, this time the L2 group, and can not remain rooted in the L1 group.

An accent, then, is a way of construing one's speech in another language so that it falls under (1), as well, and can be interpreted as in (3). Put in another way, an accent is a defense against sounding different, not because sounding different is bad in itself, but because sounding different has a meaning that you do not want to convey.

## References

- Anward, J. 1986: Emotive expressions, in Ö. Dahl (ed): *Papers from the Ninth Scandinavian Conference of Linguistics*, Stockholm, 39-52
- Garfinkel, H. 1967: *Studies in ethnomethodology*, New York: Prentice-Hall
- Heritage, J. 1984: *Garfinkel and ethnomethodology*, Cambridge: Polity Press
- Leather, J. and James, A. 1991: The acquisition of second language speech, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 13: 305-341
- Levinson, S. C. 1979: Pragmatics and social deixis: reclaiming the notion of conventional implicature, *BLS* 5: 206-223
- Stevick, E. 1976: *Memory, meaning, and method*, Rowley, Mass: Newbury House
- Thompson, I. 1991: Foreign accents revisited: The English pronunciation of Russian immigrants, *Language Learning* 41: 177-204
- Wierzbicka, A. 1992: Lexical universals and universals of grammar, in M. Kefer & J. van der Auwera (eds): *Meaning and grammar*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 383-415
- Wittgenstein, L. 1921: *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, London: Routledge