

**Accents**  
**Tracey M. Derwing**  
**University of Alberta and Simon Fraser University**

***What is an accent?***

An accent is the patterns a person uses to produce sounds (vowels and consonants) and prosody (intonation, stress, tone) in speech. Everyone has an accent. Normally children acquire the accent of their local speech community; people from outside that community will be perceived to have an accent because their speech patterns are dissimilar. Regional differences in accent are familiar—such as the differences in the speech of a New Yorker, a Californian and a person from Alabama. Regional differences can occur even in small geographical areas, e.g., Swiss German has several distinct accents. Moreover, accent can vary by class. Consider England, where socio-economic differences are easily detected in speech: An upper-class Londoner may speak Received Pronunciation (RP) or the King’s English learned in private schools, while a Londoner who attended state-funded schools may speak Estuary English.

Most people who learn another language (L2) after their first (L1) have an L1-influenced accent when speaking the L2. Linguists have shown that babies attend quickly to ambient language sounds and start ignoring sounds not in their L1, ultimately making it more difficult to acquire sounds and prosody in an L2. That said, many L2 speakers are fully comprehensible without any instruction. Wide-ranging individual differences occur across speakers who share the same L1 and same proficiency level in their L2. Listeners are incredibly good at detecting an L2 accent, but much less good at identifying which language it comes from.

***What are some challenges an accent may cause?***

Both L1 and L2 accents can identify a speaker as an ‘outsider’ – someone not originally from a given community. In extreme cases, an accent is a life-or-death matter. Accents can be the deciding factor in determining whether an asylum seeker is a refugee or an economic migrant. If an assessor decides by means of accent that a person is not a refugee, that individual may be deported. Research has shown that assessors sometimes make mistakes, which can result in death. This is an extreme consequence, but many people face discrimination and negative attitudes towards their accent on a daily basis. Accented speech can make it more difficult to rent accommodations, get hired for a job, or be included in social events. Researchers have argued that accent discrimination (both L1 and L2) is correlated with skin colour; they have also noted that movie villains often have a foreign-sounding accent, reinforcing the notion that an accent is bad (e.g., Alan Rickman’s German accent in *Die Hard*).

A practical problem with some accents is that they can be difficult for listeners to understand. If someone struggles to communicate because of their pronunciation, they may seek help from accent coaches, many of whom make wild claims that accents can be “eliminated” in as little time as 30 days. Millions of dollars are extracted yearly by entrepreneurs offering useless and sometimes harmful accent reduction courses. It is important that speakers check the credentials of providers of accent programs; it is preferable to attend a program with certified language teachers than employing online accent coaches, who may not have any credentials whatsoever.

***What can be done to enhance communication across accents?***

Communication can be improved across accents. First, language teachers can improve speakers’ intelligibility (how much a listener understands of the intended message) and comprehensibility (how much effort the listener expends to understand the message), even after many years of entrenched speech patterns, with instruction based on individual learners’ needs. Pronunciation

work is not included in many language programs, partly because language teachers feel inadequately trained, but learners generally want it. Second, listeners who work with persons with accents can be trained to better comprehend accented speech and to develop strategies to interact successfully. Psychologists have shown that empathy towards a person with an accent can be enhanced through relatively simple exercises. The responsibility for successful communication should be shared by all parties: Speakers, listeners, teachers, researchers and policy makers.

### **Suggested References**

Derwing, T. M. & Munro, M. J. (2015). *Pronunciation fundamentals: Evidence-based perspectives for L2 teaching and research*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1075/llt.42>

This book covers in depth all of the topics discussed in the brief.

Levis, J. M., Derwing, T. M., & Munro, M. J. (Eds.) (2022). *The evolution of pronunciation teaching and research: 25 years of intelligibility, comprehensibility and accentedness*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1075/bct.121>

This book includes some seminal and new articles about accented speech.

Lippi-Green, R. (2012). *English with an accent: Language, ideology and discrimination in the United States*. London: Routledge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203348802>

### **Author Biography**

Tracey Derwing is professor emeritus in the University of Alberta's TESL program, and an adjunct professor in Linguistics at Simon Fraser University. Her research interests include enhancing communication for L2 learners and their interlocutors (especially pronunciation), immigrant and refugee settlement issues, and citizenship education.