

## Accent and Club Membership: Implications for Production and Perception

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### Abstract

A popular assumption is that our ability to acquire accents disappears around puberty and that after puberty, we can only improve our accents with hard work and study. We hypothesize that our ability to acquire other accents is with us our entire lives, as evidenced by our ability to use other accents when imitating others. We are, however, reluctant to use this competence in normal conversation: Accent is a marker of belonging to a group; it marks club membership, and we may not feel that we are full members of the club that uses that accent. Club membership also influences perception: we may think we hear an accent when it is not there, influenced by a speaker's appearance and assumptions about their apparent club membership.

**Keywords:** Accents, club membership, critical period, accent perceptions, identity

Until recently, it was assumed that the ability to acquire a convincing accent in a second language disappeared around puberty because of a neurological barrier. After the end of a 'critical period', accent improvement, it was thought, could only occur because of diligence and study. One version of the neurological barrier has been disproven (Krashen, 1973), yet the concept of a critical period is still accepted. Hammond (1990) provided evidence for this belief. He interviewed adult native speakers of Spanish living in Miami who had studied ESL for at least two years. Fifty-one per cent agreed that "hard-working and intelligent people can always succeed in eliminating a foreign accent" (p. 145). We

predict that interviews done today would give similar results. But, there is little evidence supporting the hard work hypothesis. Hard work here is, of course, studying and taking accent improvement classes.

The research, however, shows that this kind of hard work is of limited value. Saito and Plonsky (2019), after an analysis of 77 studies, concluded that “pronunciation teaching is most effective when it targets specific pronunciation features and when gains are measured using controlled tasks (word and sentence reading)” (p. 40), similar to the conditions that need to be present for the use of consciously learned rules of grammar. These rare specific pronunciation features can refer to the limited distinct sounds in different languages. For instance, one of the authors of this paper, NA, is a native speaker of Farsi/Persian. Farsi is a language that does not include the /w/ and /θ/ or /ð/ sounds that are found in English. Before knowing about them, NA would pronounce words that included such sounds using /v/ and /t/ sounds such as /vɛt/ for the word “wet” and /tɪŋk/ instead of “think.” Learning more about the distinctions helped NA to notice/hear and understand the differences between the sounds and be able to pronounce them correctly. However, her overall accent in English was not affected by these isolated experiences.

(Note: Krashen (2013) reported on six descriptions of commercial accent improvement programmes. Only one of the six referred to evidence supporting the programme developers’ claims that their programme was effective, but the only citation was an unpublished Master’s thesis.)

We present here a different point of view, one based on an old idea, the idea that accent is a marker of “club membership,” of belonging to a certain group, a group based on some common feature, such as ethnic background or even personality (Krashen, 1997; Smith, 1988). In fact, the main function of accent may be marking membership in a group. A clear example comes from Fischer (1958): schoolboys in Boston who considered themselves to be “tough” were more likely to shorten the -ing ending on verbs to -in (“going” to “goin”). What is especially interesting is that those who consistently used the reduced form were also able to speak using the full form, and used it when it was appropriate (e.g. with teachers).

### Enter the Output Filter

Our hypothesis is that we acquire accents quite well, and this ability is available throughout life. There is no critical period for the acquisition of an accent. We are, however, often very reluctant to use what we have acquired: An “output filter” stops us from using an accent used by members of a group that we feel we do not belong to. A case in point is an experience that one of the authors of this paper, SK had nearly 60 years ago, a conversation that changed his thinking about critical periods.

A British consultant named Gerald Mosback visited the school SK was teaching at in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Mosback told SK about the horrible language classes they had endured in secondary school. Students in Mosback’s French class in secondary school in the UK had to take an oral exam after a year of French, and a part of it was a conversation with a group of French teachers, all in French, not a pleasant experience for a teenager. Mosbach hated the class, hated the kind of exam he had to take, and developed an intense dislike for anything French. He decided to display his disdain by exaggerating and thereby insulting everything French during his exam. He wore a beret, imitated what he thought was French body language, and spoke in what he thought was an exaggeration of a French accent. The result: He received the highest marks possible. One of his teachers said, *Why didn’t you talk like that when you were in my class?*

Mosbach thought he had been ridiculing the teachers, but in reality he was showing how much he had naturally acquired, without trying and without any desire to do so, at an age considered too old for natural and perfect acquisition of a second language. His output filter was down, and an improved version of French emerged, one he had acquired quite well, but it was a version he would never use in public, because he did not feel like a member of the French-speaking ‘club’.

Accents and identities are also notably intertwined. At times having a foreign accent can be about both club membership of how we feel welcome/accepted by the native speakers of our second language, as well as having our own original accent can signal how we also identify with our native language/culture and our desire to retain our primary identity. The ‘Foreignness’ in our speech in this regard can be part of our identity that we do not necessarily want to give up/diminish by

becoming speakers of other languages. This phenomenon can be seen within the immigrant populations around the world who preserve their accents after years of immigration, however, they can imitate the native accent of their second language depending on different situations or when they are performing accents as a third person, for instance when telling stories or jokes as a different character other than themselves.

Even within the native speakers of a language, this variety can be witnessed. For example, there is a wide spectrum of accents even within the American-English territory, such as the New England accent, Boston accent, New York accent, southern accent, midwestern accent, and Californian accent, just to name a few variations. Many of these native speakers can switch from their native regional accent to the “standard” American English accent depending on their needs and outside factors. Similarly, in Iran there are many variations of Farsi accents, including the Isfahani accent, Shirazi accent, Turkish accent, Shomali accent to name a few. Many of the speakers with these accents can also perform the standard Farsi accent which is closer to the Tehrani accent if they wish to and according to different situations such as for study and work purposes.

Our suspicion is that this happens frequently. When we are imitating, joking, or telling a story, we can speak using second language accents that are much closer to native speaker accents than the accents we would use in “normal” conversation. (This predicts that actors who have convincing accents in second languages or in dialects of their first language in films would feel uncomfortable when using these accents in daily conversation.)

### **Club Membership and Comprehension**

We often assign club membership to people before we hear them speak, based on their appearance. This can affect the perception of speech. In Rubin’s study (1992), subjects heard a speech sample spoken by a native speaker of English. Subjects were shown either a picture of a ‘Caucasian-looking’ or an ‘Asian-looking’ subject and were told that the person in the picture was the speaker. Subjects who saw the picture of the speaker with ‘Asian’ features were more likely to say they heard an accent when none was there.

Assignment of club membership based on appearance can affect

comprehension profoundly (Ashtari & Krashen, 2021). This was confirmed by “Karl,” who posted this comment online in reaction to a paper by Krashen and Ashtari (2021) titled, “*Is accent in the mind of the listener?*”. Karl spoke Indonesian as a second language very well. He tells us that he “worked as a professional interpreter ... And over the phone, I would often be mistaken for a local, surprising people when they later met me in person. However, if I spoke to people with no context (shop workers, waiters, people on the street for directions, etc.) they would often look at me confused as though I had not even spoken in human language and ask me to repeat several times. I always assumed that they were expecting they would not understand me (the majority of Western expats there do not speak great Indonesian), so they were not really even listening when I spoke.”

Ashtari (2014) reported a similar phenomenon. Eighty per cent of proficient ESL students reported that native speakers of English did not understand them when they spoke English even though their grammar and pronunciation were reasonably accurate. Even the appearance of a light accent combined with looking slightly different led to the assumption that their English language competence was low.

## Conclusion

The club membership hypothesis affects our production AND our perception. We are inhibited from using a style of speaking that we have acquired but that is not associated with a club we belong to, even if we have acquired it very well, and we sometimes think we hear an accent when one is not there, influenced by the speakers’ appearance and apparent club membership.

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