

Attitudes to accents

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Esperanto – Lingua Franca and Language Community

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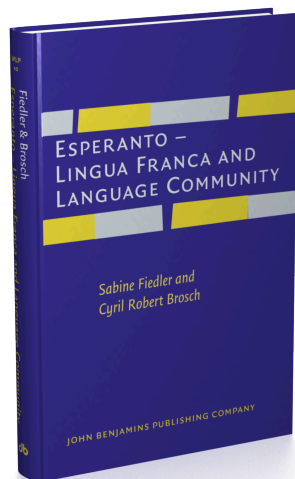
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Attitudes to accents

24.1 Introduction

It is a common experience of probably all adults who have learned a foreign language that however well they learn and apply its grammar and vocabulary, reaching sometimes a very high level of proficiency, they nevertheless fail to entirely abandon the accent that is more or less typical of their native language.¹⁶³ Even foreigners who have lived in a country for decades and are totally capable of expressing every thought in a nuanced manner are in many cases still recognisable as non-natives just because of the variations in the way they speak. Accent is, without doubt, the most persistent and easily recognisable sign of foreignness, and it is no wonder that many attitudes towards speakers of foreign languages are most prominently linked to their typical accents. Although this is true for any language, it has probably been studied most intensively for English, the language that is most frequently learned as an L2 today. Before dealing with accents in Esperanto, we will therefore give some attention to how this topic is currently discussed in ethnic languages, above all in English (24.2). We will then provide an overview of previous research on attitudes to accents in Esperanto (24.3). Then we will present findings from our own research, which is based on an Internet search and interviews with experienced Esperanto speakers (24.4). It focuses on speakers' opinions about the role of this phenomenon in Esperanto communication, but does not aim at an analysis of accents as we encountered them in our dataset.

24.2 Accents in ethnic languages

Studies concerned with non-native speakers' accents in English have shown that such accents are discriminated against by English native speakers (Jenkins, 2007, p. 83). Accents are not only associated with general stereotypes regarding their speakers' assumed ethnicity: foreign-accented speakers are also assumed to be

163. For an overview of the development of accents during second language acquisition, see Beinhoff (2013, pp. 57–66). For the difficulties in acquiring a native-like accent in an L2, see, for example, Tarone (1988) and Moyer (2013).

less competent and less educated than speakers with a native accent (Beinhoff, 2013, p. 31; Fraser & Kelly, 2012). Language attitudes like these can cause problems especially for speakers of low-prestige native accents. Often speakers of certain languages do not face negative attitudes because of the individual strength of their accent, but because of the stereotypes that are associated with that accent. “Asians”, for example, are generally categorised as speaking with accents and therefore discriminated against when applying for jobs, while this is hardly the case with Scandinavians, as Jenkins (2007, pp. 81f.) points out (see also Kaur, 2014). Negative attitudes to certain accents are frequently justified with the argument that their speakers are difficult to understand, although studies have shown that this is a parameter independent from the phonetic traits of the accent (Fraser & Kelly, 2012; Riney et al., 2005). What a person understands often depends on the opinion that he or she has of the interlocutor and his/her accent (Jenkins, 2007, p. 88). This is why Derwing and Munro (1997) propose a distinction between “intelligibility” (defined as listeners’ actual understanding of L2 speech), “comprehensibility” (denoting listeners’ perceptions of understanding or attitudes towards intelligibility) and “accentedness” (referring to listeners’ judgements of the degree of deviation from the norm) (see also Munro et al., 2006 and Trofimovich & Isaacs, 2012).

Reflecting the fact that English is used as a lingua franca today and that in many settings the number of non-native speakers surpasses that of native speakers, research has been expanded to the attitudes that non-native speakers have towards other non-native speakers’ accents (Beinhoff, 2013; Derwing, 2003; Jenkins, 2007). We might expect these to be different from the judgement described above, as speakers who are aware of having a non-native accent as second-language learners themselves, often despite the long time and intensive efforts that they invested in learning English, might be expected to show solidarity with other foreign-accented speakers. Also, as Jenkins (2000) has shown by means of her “Lingua Franca Core”, there are features in native English pronunciation that are “non-core”, i.e. unnecessary for safeguarding intelligibility, so that non-native speakers might be rather relaxed in international contexts, where the majority of interlocutors speak English with linguistic features that are affected by transfer from their first languages.

In contrast to this assumption, research has shown many similarities between the attitudes of non-native and native speakers towards non-native accents in English, especially with regard to the status of accents (Beinhoff, 2013, pp. 31–35, 42–45; Jenkins, 2007, pp. 156–167,). Non-native speakers prefer a native variety (such as British or American English), when asked about their desired target norm for learning and teaching (Crowther et al., 2015; Erling, 2005; Li, 2009; Scales et al., 2006; Subtirelu, 2013; Timmis, 2002) and regard non-native speaker accents as stigmatised. This has been confirmed by a large number of studies and is not even queried by people who criticise accent-based ratings and advocate for a

communicatively based assessment of intelligibility (Jenkins, 2007, pp. 180–186). As Beinhoff (2013) concludes in her study on German and Greek speakers, L2 speakers do not consider their own accent of English to reflect their identity: “[T]hey do not show much solidarity with an English accent from their own L1” (Beinhoff, 2013, p. 125).

In summary, as regards the use of English, highly prestigious native speaker accents represent the norm of pronunciation, and non-native speaker accents are evaluated according to their proximity to such norms. As L1-like accents are hardly attainable by non-native speakers, the latter are often seen (or they see themselves) as deficient speakers – with strong differences depending on their respective L1. Against this backdrop, the endeavour to establish English-as-a-lingua-franca as an endonormative form of English used by its non-native speakers, as a form that is detached from native English, as described in Chapter 2, should be welcomed in that it is a step towards communicative fairness in international communication. Even so, the endeavour seems to be little more than wishful thinking, at least at the moment (see Fiedler, 2010a and Brosch, 2015b: 75–78 for a more detailed discussion).

Accents are not only at the centre of discussions about the use of English, however. They have recently attracted scholarly interest in the context of the so-called new speakers of minority languages. These speakers acquire the language in various ways: through the education system, through revitalisation projects outside the home or other traditional areas where the language is spoken (such as the Gaeltacht in the case of Irish), or as adult language learners (O’Rourke et al. 2015). They have become an important factor for the vitality of minority languages in counteracting the processes of continued language loss and language shift (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2010). There are even examples, such as Manx, where a minority language owes its very existence to the existence of new speakers. Despite this potential contribution to language survival, as Ó Murchadha et al. (2018) point out, new speakers are often not accepted without reservation as legitimate minority language users. They are denied the authority, authenticity and ownership that are necessary to speak “legitimate language” (Bourdieu 1991) and are often perceived as the “other” compared to traditional speakers. Research on minority languages, especially in Europe, illustrates that the non-native-like accent that a new speaker tends to have poses a major obstacle to being accepted as a “real” speaker (see, for example, Costa [2015] on Occitan speakers, Ratajczak [2011] and Dołowy-Rybińska [2018] on Sorbian speakers, MacCaluim [2007] and McEwan-Fujita [2010] on Gaelic learners in Scotland, O’Rourke [2011] on Irish). “You’ll never pronounce it like we do” can be heard as a reaction when new speakers try to contact native speakers of minority languages, as illustrated by Sallabank & Marquis (2018, p. 80) in the case of new speakers of the highly endangered language Giernesiei. Despite occasional studies describing groups of new speakers who claim equal legitimacy

as speakers of a minority language without striving to sound like natives (see Nic Fhlannchadha & Hickey, 2016 for an example), everything tends to emphasise the key position of native speakers even in the area of marginalised languages that are fighting for survival. The lack of an authentic accent is the main reason for such ambivalence.

24.3 Previous research on accents in Esperanto

Esperanto came into being as a written language. Its norm, the *Fundamento de Esperanto* (see Chapter 8), is vague regarding pronunciation. The description of sound qualities leaves much room for variation. The phoneme /r/, for example, according to the examples given, can cover the different phonetic realisations of this sound in French, English or Russian. In his *Lingva Respondo* ('linguistic answer') no. 56,¹⁶⁴ "Pri elparolado en teorio kaj en praktiko" ('on pronunciation in theory and practice')¹⁶⁵ Zamenhof declares that inner-word sound changes (so-called sandhi phenomena), such as palatalisation before *j* or a change from [n] to [ɲ] before the sounds *g* and *k*, are "natural". In his opinion, one should neither fight (*batali*) them nor recommend (*rekomendi*) them as the only correct forms of pronunciation, since they do not cause any misunderstanding or practical inconveniences (*donas nenian malkompreniĝon aŭ praktikan maloportunaĵon*). To our knowledge, Zamenhof never commented on national accents.

What we can say on the basis of our dataset is that speakers show an inclination to sandhi under the influence of their mother tongue (Jansen, 2011; Koutny, 2015). Deviating from Esperanto's one-to-one relation between grapheme and phoneme, as it is taught in language courses, some speakers' pronunciation is characterised by regressive assimilation in words like *lingvo* or *ankaŭ* as shown in (352) and (353).

(352) *Kaj mi klopodas respondi al tiu demando lingve [lɪŋve] kaj etike.* [And I try to answer this linguistically and ethically.] [192 (spa; pres/disc; Lisbon) 67:45]

(353) *[...] ĝi celas doni ankaŭ [aŋkaŭ] la plejfruan uzon [...]* [(...) it aims to give the earliest use as well (...)] [192 (por; pres/disc; Lisbon) 05:35]

164. *Lingvaj Respondoj* is a collection of texts in which Zamenhof clarified linguistic items and rules. They appeared in *La Esperantisto* (1889–1893), *La Revuo* (1906–1908), *Oficiala Gazeto Esperantista* (1911–1912) and other newspapers and were published as a brochure for the first time in 1910.

165. *Oficiala Gazeto Esperantista* 4, 1911, p. 222. See Zamenhof (1962/1911, pp. 11/12).

We also find examples of degemination, i.e. the simplification of a geminate (a double consonant that is pronounced as two distinct phonetic realities) into a single consonant, as described by Jansen (2011).

- (354) *Li tuj ekuzis la lingvon praktike, ekzemple dum petveturado tra Pollando*
[pɔ'lando]
 [He started to use the language immediately, for example, while hitchhiking
 through Poland] [191 (deu; pres; Lisbon) 15:40]
- (355) [...] *metu la horaron, la programon sur la interreto* [Intə'reton] [...] [(...) put
 the timetable, the programme on the Internet (...)]
 [144 (eng; pres/disc; Lille) 56:01]

As described, these deviations do not cause unintelligibility, and they are widely accepted in the speech community, as also confirmed by the small number of repairs in the area (see Chapter 19). Jansen (2011) emphasises that the use of Esperanto has not led to processes such as the diphthongisation of colliding vowels that need separate realisation (e.g. *neutila* 'useless'), nasalisation and vowel deletions, which, as he writes, testifies to Zamenhof's "endeavour to create an easily speakable and understandable language for people with many different mother tongues" (Jansen, 2011, p. 57).

In their chapters on pronunciation, reference works on Esperanto grammar (see Chapter 11) do not address the topic of accents in particular. Wennergren (2020, Chapter 2.1) points out that a language with only five vowels is characterised by high degrees of variation, as its speakers only have to make sure that the quality of one vowel (e.g. *e*) is not too near another one (e.g. *o*) to avoid misunderstanding. He criticises the rules that Kalocsay and Waringhien (1985) present for the allophonic variation of /e/ and /o/. Kalocsay and Waringhien (1985, p. 45) also provide examples of different ways of pronouncing Esperanto vowels by different groups of speakers (e.g. Slavs, Hungarians), which, however, do not seem to be based on empirical work. Thus we were unable to confirm Kalocsay and Waringhien's pronunciation rules in our recordings.

J. C. Wells's (1978) description of the linguistic system of Esperanto includes a section about "good and bad ways of pronunciation" (*bona kaj malbona prononcadoj*), in which he mentions a number of crucial criteria: practical, linguistic, geographical, and sociological. The first refers to intelligibility, i.e. the requirement that the pronunciation of speakers with very different mother tongues in Esperanto must facilitate international communication. According to the linguistic criterion, good Esperanto pronunciation reflects the phonological character of the language, thus the relationship between phoneme and grapheme. For example, /b/ and /v/ have to be clearly distinguished by all speakers. The geographical criterion suggests

that a speaker's pronunciation in Esperanto should not reveal where he/she is from. This is what Wells (1978, p. 26) calls an "international" pronunciation. To acquire it, he recommends that French speakers avoid stressing the last syllable of a word, as they do in their mother tongue, and that English speakers avoid diphthongising the phoneme /o/. Sherwood (1982, p. 189), commenting on Wells's criteria, adds:

This does not imply that mild national accents are not tolerated or even enjoyed, but it appears that speakers do recognize and prize an international or nonnational pronunciation style.

Finally, Wells's sociological criterion marks the speaker as a member of the Esperanto speech community, part of whose culture is that ways of pronouncing certain words have emerged as preferred, such as the articulation of the *r*-sound as an alveolar trill.

Experience shows that Esperanto speakers have developed a fairly homogeneous way of speaking. The rare sources of recorded communication from earlier days (see, for example, Minnaja [ed.], 2001) show that pronunciation has hardly changed over time. In their introduction to a textbook from the 1970s (Dahlenburg & Liebig, 1978, p. 9), the authors point out that the largely uniform pronunciation of Esperanto was a result of its increasing use at international meetings and on the radio. This stabilising factor has become even more relevant since then thanks to the dramatic growth in opportunities for oral communication in Esperanto made possible by technological advancement and increasing mobility (see Chapter 9). The exploration of how this normative pronunciation has emerged, and what it looks like in detail is still a research desideratum, however. Pereltsvaig's (2017, p. 169) assessment that "[t]he phonology of Esperanto is even less well studied than its morphology and syntax" (see also van Oostendorp [1999]) is also true for its practical realisation in language use and the specific matter of accents.¹⁶⁶

Among the few scientific studies of accents in Esperanto, two are of special interest for our research. The first is Lloancy's (1995) exploration of speaker attitudes to various aspects of Esperanto's speech norms, based on sixteen semi-structured interviews conducted in 1992. The interviewees, who were mainly French and included one *denaskulo*, were asked whether they had ever wondered about how to pronounce Esperanto (pp. 23–29), whether they spoke Esperanto with an accent (pp. 30–38), which speakers typically had accents (pp. 39–47), and what they thought about these accents (pp. 48–60). The answers were analysed with regard to the variables geographical/regional background, age, gender, class, political beliefs, profession, and foreign languages spoken. It turned out that none of these variables

166. A number of works should be added to those mentioned by Pereltsvaig (2017), however, e.g. the studies by Traunmüller (1997), de Jonge & Spronck (2005) and Dols Salas (2009, 2015).

influenced how people viewed accents, with the exception of their mother tongue and, according to some participants, age¹⁶⁷ (Lloancy 1995, pp. 60–61). Further findings included the fact that most participants confirmed that they spoke Esperanto with an accent due to the influence of their L1 and viewed this as something negative. However, twelve of the sixteen interviewees saw accents as something totally tolerable in Esperanto, as long as understanding was guaranteed, and some even said they enriched the language. The more critical statements of the other four participants were directed only at longstanding speakers who in their opinion could put more effort into speaking properly. Although these responses make it evident that for the interviewees there was a pronunciation norm – to speak without a national or regional accent – they did not explicitly formulate how that norm should sound.

This gap was closed by the second of the two studies: Bourkina's (2009) exploration of the norm of spoken Esperanto.¹⁶⁸ The author asked 131 Esperanto speakers, mostly from Europe, to listen to short sequences (of about thirty seconds) produced by twenty-five speakers of eighteen different mother tongues (some of them bilingual with Esperanto as an additional L1) and to comment on and rate their speech in an online questionnaire by means of a five-point Likert scale between *nekontentige* ('unsatisfactory') and *perfekte* ('perfect') and, if appropriate, to assign one of the following qualities: *klara* ('clear') – *komprenebla* ('comprehensible') – *imitinda* ('exemplary') – *bela* ('beautiful') – *vera Esperanto* ('real Esperanto'). Free text comments were also invited.

As with Lloancy's study, neither status nor profession exerted an influence on the participants' rating – but, differently from Lloancy's, neither did age. Not at all surprisingly, the speakers who were rated best were very active Esperanto speakers, mostly with long experience in the community. The ten people ranked highest all came from Europe, but had a total of nine different native languages as L1s: Croatian, Czech, English, Finnish, French, German, Polish (two speakers), Russian, and Swedish. Among the ten people with the lowest ratings, there were some speakers from outside Europe such as Japan, China, Brazil (nevertheless speaking a "European" language), and Korea, but also from Ireland and Lithuania, and also

167. Eight of the sixteen interviewees stated that younger speakers had milder accents nowadays, chalking this up to the increase in direct international contacts, radio, music etc. since the 1970s. This seems a plausible guess for 1992. Because of the temporal difference and especially considering the communication revolution sparked by the Internet, it is perhaps not surprising that age played no role in Bourkina's study (2009).

168. Bourkina (2009) is an unpublished PhD thesis defended at Saint Petersburg State University in 2009. We thank the author for making her manuscript available to us (which we obtained as a word document, so there may be minor discrepancies in page counting). A preliminary summary of her work was published in German (Bourkina, 2005).

English, Russian and French were among their mother tongues. This means that at least for speakers of European languages, especially Slavs, the deciding factor in the achievement of good pronunciation is personal competence. The fact that the phoneme systems of Russian or Polish, for example, are very similar to that of Esperanto, makes correct pronunciation relatively easy for speakers, although they have to learn not to use the palatal phonemes they have in their native tongues. On the other hand, the greater structural differences between Esperanto and Asian languages can make it difficult for speakers of the latter to attain a good pronunciation as measured by Wells's criteria. In particular, the rather complex phonotactics of Esperanto, which was designed to embrace as much international (European) vocabulary as possible (see Chapter 11), can indeed be very hard for Chinese or Japanese speakers at the beginning.

Of special interest in terms of speaker attitudes are the attributions of qualities in Bourkina's (2009, p. 161, Table 9) study, as they reveal which features of a given accent have an influence on the rating. As a matter of fact, most speakers (with the notable exceptions of no. 21 from Ireland and no. 22 from Brazil) were attributed a comprehensibility of 80% or above, and even the pronunciation of some low-rated speakers, such as no. 20 from China, was characterised as "clear" by 67%, whereas the accents of the ten "worst" speakers scored low in the categories "exemplary", "beautiful", and "real Esperanto". Evidently, as argued concerning ELF, accentedness is independent from individual or general comprehensibility, to use Munro et al.'s (2006) terminology. As with Loancy, the participants in Bourkina's study seemed to have a clear idea of a normative pronunciation. This idea is narrower than the *Fundamento* would allow, with the result that, for example, uvular or retroflex instead of apical *r* were judged negatively in participants' comments.

Another interesting detail that became clear in the written comments concerned attempts by the listeners to guess the speakers' native languages. While this was easy with the accents of speakers who ranked last – which were occasionally negatively commented on as "Esperenglish", "Francesperanto" (Bourkina, 2005, p. 82) – respondents failed to identify the native languages of the "best" speakers. It seems reasonable that the relative recognisability of the L1 had an influence on the ratings, as can also be concluded from the statements found in Lloancy (1995): good pronunciation in Esperanto is first and foremost pronunciation that does not betray the speaker's mother tongue.

One last interesting finding from Bourkina's study is the mediocre results of the *denaskuloj*. Although Esperanto is one of their mother tongues, they did not appear among the speakers rated best or worst, but in midfield, and they were not recognised as L1 speakers. This can possibly be explained by the way they learn and use the language in the family environment, where intelligibility is more easily attained than in the international speech community of L2 speakers. How to use

Esperanto as a lingua franca is something they will have to learn later. However, this is an assumption that needs to be carefully examined in further studies, at both the theoretical and the empirical levels.

24.4 The role of accents in Esperanto communication

As we have seen in this short survey, accents in Esperanto have so far attracted relatively little interest as a research topic. A similar picture emerges when we study language-related discussions in the speech community, for which, as we have illustrated over the course of this book, Esperanto speakers have a predilection: the theme *akĉento* ('accent') falls far short of other linguistic topics (e.g. the use of individual affixes, the presentation of proper names, the use of participles, or the adoption of new vocabulary). An Internet search resulted in only twenty-seven hits¹⁶⁹ in which the topic was raised, mainly forum posts and comments on videos. They are given in Appendix 1 (webpages). The dataset is further restricted by the fact that the contributions in which the largest number of actual evaluations of accents was found originate from a learning platform (W6–W10). From this situation we can assume that these Esperanto speakers do not have much experience of using the language with other Esperanto speakers (an assumption that is confirmed by the partly erroneous language that we found in these contributions) and that their attitudes might be based more on the ideals of a new learner than their real contacts with proficient speakers.

To gain more information on the role of accents in Esperanto communication, we included a question related to this topic in our interview study on Esperanto use that was conducted with thirty experienced speakers between April 2015 and April 2016 (see Appendix 1). The answers to the question of whether accents cause problems of understanding in Esperanto communication ("Ĉu akĉentoj estas por vi problemo de kompreno?") can be broadly divided into two groups. The first group (seventeen participants) replied in a clearly negative way (*Ne* 'No'), with the majority of them stating that accents are common in Esperanto and therefore a phenomenon to which they have become accustomed, or explaining that it was important to distinguish between accented speech and generally low language proficiency (see Examples (356) to (359)).

169. From a much larger collection of hits (about 190), multiple entries, which were caused by the different language versions of the learners' platform lernu.net and by English Wikipedia articles that were automatically translated into Esperanto within the framework of the project Wikitrans, had to be omitted.

- (356) *Ne, ĝenerale ne ne, plejmulto da homoj havas akĉenton, sed mi ankaŭ scias, ke mi havas akĉenton kaj eble tio estas problemo por iuj homoj, sed por mi, ne, nur se ili estas tute komencanto.*

[No, generally not, no, the majority of people have an accent, but I also know that I have an accent and maybe it is a problem for some people, but for me, no, only if they are total beginner.] [183 (eng; int; Partizánske) 13:23–42]

- (357) *Mi rimarkis ĝenerale, do, mi estas sufiĉe fleksebla. Mit tre ŝatas fonetikon kaj mi parolis kun homoj kun tre multaj originaj lingvoj. Pro tio mi ne havas multajn problemojn.*

[I notice generally, well, I'm sufficiently flexible. I like phonetics and I have spoken to people with a great many mother tongues. Therefore, I haven't got many problems.] [43 (ita; int; -) 17:36–56]

- (358) *Ne, en Esperanto ne. Kie mi trovas problemon kun kompreno, tie estas pro tro baza scio de Esperanto.*

[No, not in Esperanto. Where I find a problem in understanding it is due to too basic a knowledge of Esperanto.] [67 (slv; int; -) 15:01]

- (359) *Ne, ne, eble, se homo havus ekstreme fortan prononcon, sed en tiu kazo evidente devus esti iu ne tre sperta, se la prononco estus tiel forta, ke ĝi vere malhelpus kompreni, tio devus esti nesperta parolanto. Mi ne dirus, ke estas problemo normale.*

[No, no, maybe if someone had extremely strong pronunciation, but in this case, that would obviously be an inexperienced speaker. I wouldn't say that it is normally a problem.] [45 (eng; int; -) 36:59–37:29]

The second group of participants (ten interviewees)¹⁷⁰ answered the question in the negative as well, but in a more nuanced way, mentioning that there were speakers with strong accents that can hamper understanding (see Examples (360) and (361)). Some of them gave examples of deviating forms of pronunciation that are characteristic of speakers with a specific mother-tongue background (see Examples (362) and (363)).

- (360) *Tre malofte. Povas okazi, ke homo vere havas fortan akĉenton, kiu klare devias de la norma prononco. Jes, povas esti miskomprenoj [...], sed tre malofte.*

[Very rarely. It can happen that someone has a really strong accent, which clearly deviates from the normative pronunciation. Yes, there might be misunderstanding (...), but very rarely.] [44 (deu/spa; int; -) 24:11–36]

170. The remaining three interviewees either did not answer the question or misunderstood it, mixing up “akĉento” (‘accent’) and “akcento” (‘word accent/stress’).

- (361) *Nur se la parolado rapidas kaj la akĉento estas tre speciala (ĉina, angla ...). Mi pensas, ke mia franca akcento povas starigi la samajn problemojn.*

[Only if the talk is fast and the accent is very special (Chinese, English ...). I think that my French accent can cause the same problems.]

[207 (fra; written int; -) lines 42–43]

- (362) *Foje, se mi aŭdas francon, por mi ne estas kompreneble kion ili diras. Ili ofte forgesas h-literon, ĉar por ili h estas sensona. Sed se ili diras tion, se ili diras frazon, de frazo mi tamen de frazo mi povas elteni iom da senco de tio, kion ili volas diri [...]*

[Sometimes, if I hear a French speaker, I can't understand what they are saying. They often forget (to pronounce) the letter *h*, as it is silent for them. But if they say this, if they say a sentence, from the sentence, I can make some sense of what they want to say from the sentence nevertheless ...]

[49 (pol; int; -) 32:21–49]

- (363) *Jes, jes, jes, kiam mi estis en Ostendo, mi aŭdis- prelegis iu el Ĉinio. Mi komprenas, ĉar mi komprenas la kuntekston, sed la akĉento estis tute malfacila, ekzemple ili ne diris „Esperanto“, ili diras „Esperando“, ĉu vi komprenas? Sed ne estas partikulara problemo por Esperanto, la problemo de akĉentoj ekzistas en ĉiuj lingvoj kompreneble. Ekzemple mi parolis pri Lingala [...] Se vi parolas kun usonanoj, la akĉento ne estas problemo. Mi povas distingi kiu estas franco, germano, tion oni povas rimarki, la akĉento ne estas la sama.*

[Yes, yes, yes, when I was in Ostende, I heard- someone from China gave a talk. I understood because I understood the context, but the accent was absolutely difficult, for example, they don't say “Esperanto”, they say “Esperando”, do you know what I mean? But it is not a particular problem for Esperanto, the problem with accents exists in all languages, of course. For instance, I spoke about Lingala (...) If you talk to people from the US, accent is no problem. I can distinguish who is French, German, I notice this, the accent is not the same.]

[116 (ish; int; Lille) 21:53–23:38]

From the statements that we found in our Internet search it is evident that speakers are aware of the existence of norms for pronunciation in Esperanto (see Examples (364) to (366)) and that the essence of these norms consists in avoiding peculiarities that make it easy to identify a speaker's L1, in other words, in the adoption of what Wells and Sherwood call an “international or nonnational pronunciation style” (see Examples (367) to (369)).

- (364) *Mia esperanta elparolo estas tre proksima al la normo.*

[My Esperanto pronunciation is very close to the standard.]

(W8)

- (365) *vi provu elparoli korekte*

[you must try to pronounce correctly]

(W6)

- (366) *La pola prononco tre similas la modelan esperantan prononcon.*
[The Polish pronunciation is very similar to the model pronunciation of Esperanto.] (W8)
- (367) *vi devas forlasi vian naciaĵan akĉenton*
[you have to give up your national accent] (W1)
- (368) *La plej granda malfacileco pri elparolo de la sonoj en Esperanto ja estas ke oni pro maldisciplino tre ofte elparolas la literon laŭ sia nacia lingvo. Mi devas esti tre atenta kiam mi elparolas la literon “z” ĉar mi emas diri “s” kio ja ne estas ĝuste.*
[The greatest difficulty with pronouncing the sounds in Esperanto is indeed that due to lack of discipline one often pronounces the letter as in one’s native language. I have to be very careful when I pronounce the letter “z” because I tend to say “s”, which is indeed not correct.] (W23)
- (369) *Sed, miaopinie, prononci Esperanton laŭ naciaj akĉentoj estas tute erara praktiko. Ĉiuj esperantistoj devus klopodi respekti la prononcon indikitan en la Fundamento de Esperanto.*
[But in my mind pronouncing Esperanto according to national accents is a totally wrong practice. All Esperantists should try to respect the pronunciation that is indicated in the *Fundamento de Esperanto*.] (W22)

These opinions confirm the results of Bourkina’s study presented above, according to which a speaker’s Esperanto pronunciation was rated best if, despite their efforts, his or her L1 could not be guessed by the listeners. On the other hand, as we have already learned from the interviews, many Esperanto speakers are used to a diversity of accents in Esperanto. They are willing to tolerate this variety as long as it does not hinder communication (see Examples (370) to (372)):

- (370) *Sed akĉento ne tro gravas, dum la prononco estas komprenebla.*
[But accent doesn’t matter too much as long as the pronunciation is comprehensible.] (W6)
- (371) *Ĉiuj elparolas la vortojn kun iom da akĉento, tamen laŭ mi tio ne ĝenas kaj montras ke la sonsistemo en esperanto permesas iom da “neperfekteco” sen malfaciligi la komprenon. Mi tute ne volas klasifiki la akĉenton de iu el tiuj personoj kiel “forta”.*
[Everyone pronounces words with some degree of accent, but in my opinion this doesn’t hamper and shows that the sound system in Esperanto allows some “shortcomings” without complicating understanding. I do not want to classify the accents of some of these people as “strong”.] (W23)
- (372) *Laŭ mia takso estas la diferenco inter ĝena kaj erariga prononco: prononci “ĉelo” anstataŭ “celo” estas erara, sed “dje” anstataŭ “de” estas nur ĝena; la nacia akĉento devas ne erarigi pri diversaj esperantaj vortoj.*

[In my estimation, there is a difference between disturbing and confusing pronunciation: to pronounce “ĉelo” instead of “celo” is a mistake, but “dje” instead of “de” is only annoying; a speaker’s national accent should not cause confusion about various Esperanto words.] (W22)

It is not uncommon for speakers to combine their plea for tolerance towards accents with references to the ideals of the Esperanto community (see Examples (373) to (377)):

- (373) *Estas estimindaj ĉiuj parolantaj manieroj.*
[All manners of speaking should be held in high esteem.] (W6)
- (374) *Pro sia universaleco Esperanto kompreneble ne havas iun devigan akĉenton.*
[Because of its universality Esperanto of course doesn’t have any compulsory accent.] (W7)
- (375) *Diri kiujn oni plej malbone komprenas estas iomete malĝentila, ĉu ne? Tio iusence signifus ke la priparolitaj esperantistoj ne estas tre bonaj [...] kaj kiuj tion diras???*
[Saying which (accents) you understand worst is a bit impolite, isn’t it? This would in some way mean that those Esperantists are not very good (...) and who is saying that???] (W10)
- (376) *Ni estas samideanoj. Se ni komprenas, kial diru unu el ni estas pli bona ol alia??*
[We are fellow thinkers/supporters of Esperanto. If we understand, why should we say one of us is better than another?] (W9)
- (377) *Mi ne devas honti pro mia germana akĉento, ĉar por ĉiu homo Esperanto estas fremdlingvo.*
[I don’t have to feel ashamed because of my German accent, because Esperanto is a foreign language for everyone.] (W19)

Occasionally, participants bring their experience with accents in other foreign languages to bear, and compare this with the situation in Esperanto (see Examples (378) to (380)).

- (378) *Ĉu akĉentoj konsistigas al vi problemojn de kompreno?*
Ĝenerale ne. Povas okazi, ke iu havas fortan akcenton, akĉenton, sed malofte okazis, ke tio estis kaŭzo de miskompreno kaj flanke mi povas diri, ke angle tio estas multe pli ĝena afero. Okazis al mi, ke mi parolis kun ĉinoj aŭ bharatanoj en la angla kaj tio estas ege malfacile por mi kompreni.
[Do you find accents can hamper your understanding?
Generally not. It might happen that someone has a strong accent, but it rarely happens that it leads to misunderstanding, and, by the way, I can say in English this is a much more disturbing thing. It has happened before that I spoke to people from China or India in English and this was very difficult for me to understand.]

(379) *Ĉu akĉento estas por vi problemo de kompreno?*

Eh, do en Esperanto tre malofte. Tio estas en la angla estas multe pli grava problemo, ĉar ekzemple en la firmao mi kelkfoje parolas kun homoj el Azio kaj ankaŭ el aliaj eŭropaj landoj, Italio, kaj tiuj estas foje vere malfacile kompreneblaj en la angla. En Esperanto tiu problemo multe malpliofte okazas.

[Do you find accents can hamper your understanding?

Uh, well, in Esperanto very rarely. In English it is a much more serious problem, as, for example, in the company I sometimes speak with people from Asia and also from other European countries, Italy, and they are occasionally very difficult to understand in English. In Esperanto this problem occurs much more rarely.] [63 (deu; int; -) 21:16–53]

(380) *Ĉu akĉento estas por vi problemo de kompreno?*

En Esperanto ne, eble kiam mi estis en Ĉinio antaŭ multaj jaroj, kelkfoje estis malfacilo pri “r” kaj “l”. Sed ne, ne, mi malofte spertas tiun problemon. Kiam mi laboris eh en internacia firmao, tiam venis kelkfoje angloparolantoj el Irlando kaj tiam estis tre malfacile kompreni.

[Do you find accents can hamper your understanding?

Not in Esperanto, perhaps when I was in China many years ago, there were sometimes problems due to “r” and “l”. But not, no, I seldom encounter this problem. When I worked uh in an international company, English speakers occasionally came from Ireland and then it was hard to understand them.]

[46 (swe; int; -) 17:22–18:04]

These findings support Solís’ (2012) study on the Esperanto speech community. Joel, one of the thirteen participants of her questionnaire study, says:

[I]t’s accepted that people are going to have an accent. [...] It’s not like you’re excluded [...] if you have an accent in English or whatever and you’re with all native speakers. They’re going to pick up on that and want to know where you’re from. With Esperanto, no one’s going to criticize the accent. (Solís, 2012, p. 70)

What is striking in Esperanto, especially against the backdrop of what we found as regards English and new speakers of minority languages, is the fact that non-native speaker accents in Esperanto are frequently seen as something to be appreciated. In a speech community that consists almost exclusively of non-native speakers (with a small group of natives who have at least one other native tongue), a variety of accents can be regarded as enriching.¹⁷¹ This finding, already reported in Loancy’s

171. Marjorie Boulton (1994–2017), a British author and poet writing in both English and Esperanto who is held in high regard in the speech community, is an example of an eminent Esperanto speaker whose strong English accent was tolerated or even appreciated by many (see also Example (202) in Chapter 20.4.1).

(1995) study (see Chapter 24.3), is evidenced by our interviews, in which two participants state that they find accents in Esperanto charming (*havas iom da ĉarmo*) ([48 (swe; int; -) 22:50] and lovable (*aminda*) ([209 (ish; written int; -) line 42]). See also Examples (381) to (383) from the Internet search:

- (381) *Kaj persone mi taksas tiun akĉenton tre ĉarma. :)* [And, personally, I find this accent very charming.] (W1, comment on a video)
- (382) *Mi ŝatas akĉenton de poloj. Kiam mi unue aŭdis prononcon de Esperanto en mia lernolibro, ĝi estis elparolita de pola virino; ĝi allogis min. Se la libro uzus alian modelon, Esperanto ne allogus min.*
[I like the Polish accent. When I first heard the pronunciation of Esperanto in my textbook, it was pronounced by a Polish woman; it appealed to me. If the book had used another model, Esperanto would not have appealed to me] (W8)
- (383) *Kia bela akĉento! [What a beautiful accent!] I loved listening to your voice and your recitation of the poem really impressed me with how beautiful Esperanto sounds. I've been studying it mostly through books the last couple months and don't practise speaking it out loud. But it really does sound absolutely lovely! Thank you! (the trills in your Rs are wonderful, something I can't match...)*
(W16, reaction to a US-American's recitation of a poem in a video)

From the opinions and answers obtained from our studies, one might conclude that, although they strive to speak in a way that does not allow inferences to be made about a speaker's mother tongue, Esperanto speakers are well aware of the existence of accents in Esperanto communication and that they are willing to tolerate them. When negative comments directed against individual groups of speakers and transfers from particular national languages are expressed, they are often combined with positive evaluations of other accents and the wording is usually moderate. It is therefore not surprising that the harshest expression that we found, "terura" ('terrible'), referred to the speaker's own accent (see Example (386)).

- (384) *La pola prononcado tre allogas min kaj miaopinie la slavaj lingvoj estas tiuj kiuj plej alproksimiĝas al la dezirata elparolo, libera de la fortaj akĉentoj kutime trovataj en la portugala, hispana, angla, germana kaj franca.*
[The Polish pronunciation appeals to me very much and, in my opinion, the Slavic accents are those that come nearest to the desired pronunciation, free from the strong accents usually found in Portuguese, Spanish, English, German, and French.] (W7)
- (385) *Tro forta franca akĉento. Mi eĉ komence dubis, ĉu oni kantas vere en esperanto?*
[Too strong a French accent. In the beginning I even doubted whether it was really being sung in Esperanto] [W12, a reaction to a song presented by the Esperanto singer JoMo on YouTube]

(386) *Ho dankegon ! Diru ke mi ne havas brazilan akĉenton estas granda komplimento. La brazila akĉento estas terura [...] Nia ĉefa problemo estas la litero A. Ni kutime prononcas naze [...]*

[Oh, thank you very much. To say that I don't have a Brazilian accent is a big compliment. The Brazilian accent is terrible (...) Our main problem is the letter A. We usually nasalise it.] (W21)¹⁷²

The fact that accented speech is a frequent characteristic of Esperanto communication and that the majority of speakers tolerate (or, occasionally, even appreciate) this feature does not mean that accents are never the butt of jokes. Sources W13, W14, W15 and W27 (see Appendix 1 webpages) bear testimony to this. An example is a humorous contribution to the cultural programme of the Esperanto meeting *Somera Esperanto Studado 2018*, “La oficiala akĉento de Esperanto” (the official accent of Esperanto), in which a speaker imitates Hungarian, Czech, German, Danish and French Esperanto speakers in quick succession. The comical effect, however, does not seem to be evoked by the accents alone, although presented in exaggerated ways, but from the rapid change by one and the same speaker. Competent speakers like this one are not only able to “get rid of” their own national accent but also have a good enough grasp of the features of other accents to parody them well.

24.5 Some concluding remarks on accents in Esperanto

In this chapter we have dealt with accent, which we define, in line with current research (e.g. Munro et al., 2006), as the degree to which a speaker's pronunciation sounds different from an expected production pattern. Accentedness and comprehensibility (how the listener rates difficulty in understanding) should be distinguished from intelligibility (the extent to which a speaker is actually understood). In Esperanto as in other languages, an utterance can be rated as strongly accented, but nevertheless understood perfectly well.

As studies have shown, Esperanto speakers are aware that pronunciation norms exist. In contrast to the situation in ethnic languages, Esperanto pronunciation is not rated according to its proximity to prestigious native speaker accents – in fact

172. Interestingly, the same self-deprecation is found in Lloancy (1995, p. 53), where she writes about herself “Kiel ĉiuj Franclingvanoj, mi penadis (kaj plu -as...) ne havi la teruran, forigendan, malbelan... francan akĉenton, kun ĉiama timo, ke ĝi tamen revenis (-as, -os)” [Like all francophones I have been trying and go on trying to not have the terrible, ugly... French accent one has to get rid of, with the constant fear that it nevertheless has come (is coming, will come) back]. Considering her overall style of writing, it is hard to believe, however, that this harsh self-criticism is justified.

in Esperanto, *denaskuloj* are not recognisable by their accents – but based on an abstract norm. Be that as it may, this norm is nevertheless easier to attain for the speakers of some national languages (Slavs) than for others (Asians).

Esperanto pronunciation is considered to be good or “international” when it does not manifest features typically associated with a speaker’s L1. Nevertheless, most Esperanto speakers do have an accent that gives away their native language. Although the odd negative comment is heard and speakers with strong accents are occasionally mocked, the topic is relatively rarely a subject of discussion. Instead, accented speech is considered an ordinary feature in a second-language community and therefore generally accepted or seen as a gain for the speech community.

