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SYMPHONY OF VOICES: L2 ACCENT'S ROLE IN CRAFTING IDENTITIES IN ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL

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Abstract: This paper delves into the intricate relationship between accent, identity, and intelligibility in the realm of English Language Teaching (ELT). Departing from the conventional focus on intelligibility as proposed by Crystal, the author advocates for a nuanced examination by incorporating the concept of native-like accent alongside identity. The metaphorical coin introduced here portrays identity on one side and native-like accent on the other, symbolizing the interplay between these two facets. Unlike the dichotomous portrayal of identity and intelligibility, the author argues that they are not mutually exclusive but rather intricately intertwined. Drawing on insights from Jenkins (2000), the paper challenges the notion that achieving intelligibility necessarily compromises one's identity. It contends that individuals can maintain their cultural identity while achieving sufficient communicative clarity in international contexts. By redefining the parameters of accent in ELT, this paper seeks to broaden the discourse and promote a more inclusive understanding of linguistic diversity.

Keywords: Accent, Identity, Intelligibility, English Language Teaching, Linguistic Diversity

INTRODUCTION

The need for intelligibility and the need for identity often pull people and countries in opposing directions. The former motivates the learning of an international language, with English the first choice in most cases; the latter motivates the promotion of ethnic language and culture. Conflict is the commonsense when either position is promoted insensitively (Crystal, 1997; Jenkins, 2000). The author wishes to go a bit further and put instead of Crystal's intelligibility, as one side of the coin, a rather notorious concept in ELT, native-like accent. Therefore, the coin will be one with identity on one side and nativelike accent on its other side. The reason for having a coin like this, rather than Crystal's is that he does not believe that identity and intelligibility are on opposing camps, nor do they 'pull people in opposing camps'. For one's speech may enjoy the desired intelligibility for a normal interaction in an international context without their identity being under threat (Jenkins, 2000). The opposite, however, may not ring true when the language learners speak a second language with an accent as accurate as that of the first language speakers. The second language learners seem to show disloyalty to their primary social

identity (Gatbonton et al., 2005) in that they have cut the 'umbilical cord [in this case, accent] which ties [them] to [their] mother[in this case, social identity]' (Daniels, 1997; Seidlhofer, 2001). So far, as it is obvious through either Crystal's appreciation of the two sides of the coin or one's own personal observation, the critical reader can acknowledge that there are fragile and complex interrelationships between accent, identity and the manner through which "language [in this case, accent] becomes a determinant of identity construction and individuals manipulate it to exaggerate or downplay their identity" (Jones, 2001). Therefore, for the detailed explanation of the relationship between identity and accent, the two sides of the coin, a metaphor used by the author himself, one needs to enter the dark room with a lantern in order to describe the intended parts of the elephant, the head and tail of the coin in this case. As for the sake of systematicity and coherence both in the readers' minds and the text itself, it should begin with the pronunciation as the starting point and relate it to the other side of the coin identity. Therefore, the focus will be more on pronunciation, in this text accent and pronunciation are two terms used interchangeably with no difference in meaning in general and the junctions where they come to meet will be addressed in detail. To begin with, there are two contradictory principles in the literature, according to Levis (2005), so far as pronunciation pedagogy is concerned. The first one is the 'nativeness principle' whose goal is for second language learners to achieve native-like fluency in the target language pronunciation. This principle was once the most dominant paradigm before the 1960s, but its popularity waned as the 'critical period hypothesis' raised issues, claiming the infeasibility of this ideal goal (Lenneberg, 1967; Scovel, 1995; Levis, 2005; Roberts, 1959; CelceMurcia et al., 1996; Kenworthy, 1987; Coulmas, 2005). The second one which is the topic of discussions in language teaching-related disciplines is the 'intelligibility principle' which will be dealt with later on in this paper.

NATIVENESS PRINCIPLE

Among factors such as age, motivation, the native language, amount of exposure to the second language, phonetic ability (aptitude) and attitude toward the target speech community, which seem to be of great importance in the process of second language learning (Kenworthy, 1987; Celce-Murcia et al., 1996), ones like motivation, amount of exposure to the second language and phonetic ability have been recognized to be positively correlated with more native-like pronunciation (Sic.). However, none of them seem to overcome the effects the age factor exerts on the second language learning process (Kenworthy, 1987; Flege and Frieds, 1995; Moyer, 1999; Levis, 2005; Krashen, 1973; Scovel, 1969; Celce-Murcia et al., 1996). It was the very right moment for the accent reduction programmes to come on the scene because a native-like accent appeared as the most wanted paraphernalia both by students and teachers, with the latter being more after that. "Accent reduction courses [make] an implied promise [in the USA]: Sound like us and success will be yours. Doors will be open; barriers will disappear" (LippiGreen, 1997; Marx, 2002). So as to embark upon a detailed explanation of the relationship between the 'nativeness principle' and identity, a complete theory is called for. The theory adopted is Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which itself consists of two quite distinct dimensions. The one which is the topic of discussion in this part of paper is 'Convergence' according to which language learners accommodate their speech to that of the interlocutor in order both to be liked and understood and to proclaim themselves members of the interlocutors' communities (Giles and Coupland, 1991; Cited in Jenkins, 2000; and Jenkins, 2002). The second aspect of this theory is 'Divergence' phenomenon in which the language learners try to distance their speech from that of the interlocutor (Jenkins, 2002) in order to keep their own in-group identity intact and stay loyal to their speech communities (Gatbonton et al., 2005). One of the motivations behind 'nativeness principle' is for second language learners to gain access, through convergence, to material resources, e.g. wealth, and symbolic ones, e.g. friendship, of the target speech community, which in turn increases the value of the their

'cultural capital', which is defined as “the knowledge and modes of thought that characterize different classes and groups in relation to specific sets of social forms” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Norton, 1995). This seems seldom possible, if not impossible, for language learners with heavy accents. The reason might be the fact that accent plays the role of a gatekeeper (Bourdieu, 1991; Cited in Golomek and Jordan, 2005) and “speaking with a foreign accent identifies the other as a member of an out-group and is likely to evoke negative stereotypes” (Bresnahan et al., 2002). Therefore, in order to enter the fortress, in this case the target speech community, the language learners have to do away with their first language accents and converge towards the target speech communities instead, according to CAT. Because accent has been deemed one of the most effective markers of identity (Seidlhofer, 2001; Sifakis and Sougari, 2005), as L2 learners want membership of the new speech community, this may prove an obstacle to the target group membership, as was the case with the only participant in Ali's (2006) study in which Maria totally abandoned her primary ethnic identity, Mexican, so as to integrate in the target speech community. One can, nevertheless, analyze the interrelationships between nativeness principle, accent and identity from a different angle: Schumann's Acculturation Theory (1978) according to which “the degree of a learner's success in second language acquisition depends upon the learner's degree of acculturation” (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996). It is evident from the study carried out by Lybeck (2002) that those language learners who identified the most with Norwegian native speakers, the target speech community in this study, acquired a more native-like accent and since the way people speak (accent) reveals who they are (identity) (Jones, 2001), it sounds as if accent might be one of the elements among others to be highly influenced by the acculturation process. Therefore, the more the language learners acculturate to the target language speech community, the more they are likely to acquire a native-like accent. One of the underlying premises regarding the relationship between identity and accent on the one hand and acculturation process on the other, is, according to the author, that the more the second language learners acculturate to the target speech community, to the same degree they lose the phonological features of their first language, hence the loss of the first language and identity and achievement of a new one 'self-translation metaphor'(Pavlenko, 1998; Marx, 2002). As stated, one of the factors which is of enormous help to second language learners to acquire a native-like pronunciation is motivation. In fact there are close interrelationships between motivation, pronunciation, and identity in Schumann's acculturation theory. So far as motivation is concerned, Schumann believes there are two types of successful acculturation (1978). In the first kind, the second language learners portray a kind of integrative motivation which is taken by those language learners who want to integrate or converge based on ACT in the target speech community (Norton, 1995; Celce-Murcia et al., 1996). In the second type of successful acculturation, the language learners manifest a kind of 'assimilative motivation' (Graham, 1985; CelceMurcia et al., 1996) which implies that the second language learners wish not only to integrate in the target speech community but they also consider themselves as 'indistinguishable' members of the target speech community (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996). As a matter of fact, the second language learners who have a kind of assimilative motivation and at least integrative one for being acculturated in the target speech community would acquire a more native-like accent and the same attrition phenomenon may besiege their identity. It is time the author briefly had a word about the construct of identity in general before he turns to the other side of the coin: the relationships between the 'intelligibility principle', pronunciation and identity. The kind of approach to identity followed in this text and its construction process is the poststructuralist view of identity. According to the leading proponents of this perspective the identity of an individual is considered “diverse, contradictory, dynamic and changing over historical time and social space” (Norton and Toohey, 2002). Therefore, our identities are not 'natural facts”with which we are born, rather 'things we construct fictions, in effect” (Joseph, 2004). Another idea to mention is that we have multiple identities which

itself stems from two other distinct concepts. One is the fact that we play different roles, parent, teacher, student, boss, friend and so on, in the society, so we change our identities as we change the roles and to the number of roles we play in our lifetime we construct different versions of our identity. The second one is Smuts (1927) 'consciousness of other selves', according to which there are 'as many versions of us as out there as there are people whose mental space we inhabit' (Joseph, 2004). So one can claim that every time language learners engage in interaction, they are not only engaged in an information-exchange game, they are also' constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and who they relate to the social world' (Norton, 1997; Park, 2007; Hansen, 1997; McNamara, 1997; Richards, 2006; Gumperz, 1982; Elinorochs, 1993; Cerule, 1997).

INTELLIGIBILITY PRINCIPLE

The immense popularity nativeness principle once enjoyed due to its having bestowed the native-like pronunciation upon second language learners and teachers soon declined. For it was believed that for some reasons, the most salient being second language learners' age, acquiring a native-like pronunciation had proved rather impossible, except in some exceptional cases, for adult second language learners (Flege and Frieds, 1995; Moyer, 1999; Levis, 2005; Krashen, 1973; Scovel, 1969; Murcia et al., 1996; Kenworthy, 1987). Furthermore, it was not important how well the second language learners acquired the target language accent because in any case they were still being christened 'an inferior copy of the master's voice' (Lin et al., 2002). With the decline of nativeness principle, a rather more desirable and realistic one came on the scene: 'Intelligibility principle'. The intelligibility principle gained popularity because acquiring native-like accent was no longer recommended by the EFL/EIL professionals, nor was it at one with the learners' physical and psychological needs. Since the kind of context non-native speakers engaged in interaction was an international one (Jenkins, 1998, 2000, 2002), and in international contexts it is nonnative speakers rather than native speakers/non-native speakers who communicate with each other the most (Lin et al., 2002). Another reason for its popularity was and is that second language learners' accents are a reflection of their identities and if they wish to acquire a native-like accent in a foreign language, they should at first do away with their first language accent, hence their identities (Jenkins, 2000; Jones, 2001; Sifakis and Sougari, 2005). An optimum situation would be one in which EIL can both accommodate the speakers' own identities and serve as a successful means for communication in the relevant context. In EIL, a native-like accent is no longer desirable, consequently with this came the idea of redundancy of accent reduction programmes. So there is no need for the second language learners to eradicate as far as possible the phonological features of their first language, and do so with their identities, too (Jenkins, 2000). Because of the negative connotations the accent reduction programmes had brought with themselves, wiping out the first language accent and doing away with the language learners' first language identities, Jenkins proposed a five-stage 'accent addition' programme which 'adds' the second language accent as far as it is necessary for mutual phonological intelligibility (Jenkins, 2000). With the spread of English as an international language and its effects on the authority of the native speaker, questions were raised concerning the 'ownership of English' (Widdowson, 2003). It is believed that when a language spreads over the world, many changes happen to the language that is inevitable (Rajadurai, 2007). This inevitability of change is in line with Widdowson's representation of the English language as a 'virtual language' which is 'variously actualized', resulting in 'adaptation and non-conformity' (Widdowson, 2003). Adaptation is the same as pluralism and non-conformity is in contradiction with the set-in-stone inner circle norms (Widdowson, 2003). This actualization of English in various contexts resulted in new owners for the language, thus denying first language speakers of English the right to dictate and set standards. They were no longer viewed the 'custodians' of language, rather one group of users of the language (Rajadurai, 2007). Seeing English as an international language that belongs to all users from diverse national, ethnic

backgrounds might be at variance with the concept of acquiring native-like pronunciation and identity shift, for in this way there is no native speaker or dominant speech community to approximate to, hence giving rise to first language varieties of English (Pavlenko, 2003). Therefore, the authorities behind this argument claimed that setting a native speaker standard would result in a 'failed enterprise' view of second language learning in adulthood (Cook, 1999). So what happens when language learners are looked upon as outsiders or even 'intruders' (Dalton and Seidlhofer, 1994), due to their accents, in the new speech community? How can they prove themselves? Golombak and Jordan (2005) claim that they can construct an identity through a wide variety of channels such as Cook's concept of Multicompetence (1999), Anderson's 'imagined communities' and 'imagined identities' (Joseph, 2004) without their identity being under threat as long as they wish to integrate in the target speech community. Some scholars like Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994) have a foot in both camps. On the one hand, they think of a foreign accent as an 'asset rather than a handicap' for the second language learners because speaking with a foreign accent can put them in a situation in which they are placed outside the 'power game' in the target speech community. On the other hand, they propose that 'power is not the only defining characteristic of social relations', sometimes language learners may intend to express their 'solidarity' with the target speech community through approximating their accent to that of the target speech speakers. This latter process, however, may bring some possible problems for second language learners such as being labeled an 'intruder' by the target speech community. This approximating too much to the target speech community accent might be fully accounted for according to Bell (1984, 2001) 'audience design', based on his 'language style' theory. The 'audience design' deals with the ways language learners linguistically accommodate to their particular norms of the people they are addressing (Levon, 2006). On the other hand, according to Bell, the language learners may intentionally wish to manifest their salient social identities through language in this case, accent. This latter process, which is the same as the one in CAT, is grounded in Bell's 'referee design' in which language learners diverge from the target speech community accent in order to show loyalty to their home identity (Levon, 2006). Porter and Garvin (1989) even went a bit further than Dalton and Seidlhofer and claim that: A person's pronunciation is one expression of that person's self-image. To seek to change someone's pronunciation whether of the L1 or of an L2 is to tamper their self-image, and is thus unethical morally wrong (Dalton and Seidlhofer, 1994).Sometimes the case might be neither, when the speakers make intentionally situational use of first language or second language phonological features in order to project the specific type of identity the situation and the interlocutor both call for (Levon, 2006). This rather unique phenomenon was reported in a study conducted by Leven (2006) in a Jewish speech community in America. It was revealed that the participants utilized released word-final /t/ (typical of Jewish speech community and identity) when among their young peers, but the same participants favoured glottalized /t/ (typical of the American speech community and identity) when being interviewed by the researcher, an American speech community member.

Conclusion

The concept of pronunciation so as to be in one with language learners' identities should be addressed in large part on the basis of the context of instruction (Levis, 2005) and language learners' purpose of learning English (Seidlhofer, 2001). Those language learners who mainly engage in interaction with interlocutors in an Inner Circle context may copy an inner circle model. On the other hand, those language learners from Outer and Expanding Circle may find it inappropriate to use an Inner Circle model and adjust to one with its features mostly based on their first languages and identities (Jenkins, 2000). One may look at the interrelationship between identity and pronunciation (accent) through his/her own subjective binoculars, but this should not make him/her forget, what Norton (2000) recommends, ”how the person understands possibilities for the future” (Jenkins, 2005). What does

this mean here? The kinds of identity the language learners opt for surely depend in large part on the range of possibilities they see. One never knows.

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