

Understanding accents: Effective communication is about more than simply pronunciation

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Pavel Trofimovich and Talia Isaacs are studying accent and comprehensibility in speakers of English as a second language. Credit: Concordia University

With immigration on the rise, the use of English as a second language is sweeping the world. People who have grown up speaking French, Italian, Mandarin or any other language are now expected to be able to communicate effectively using this new lingua franca. How understandable are they in this second language?

Instead of assuming that someone who sounds different is not communicating effectively, we need to listen beyond the accent, says Concordia University applied [linguist](#) Pavel Trofimovich and his University of Bristol colleague, Talia Isaacs. Their work tackles the

tricky question of what distinguishes accented speech from speech that is difficult to understand. Their results show that accent and comprehensibility are overlapping yet distinct dimensions.

"Accent is linked to particular ways in which individual sounds, [syllables](#) and words are produced, which are commonly subsumed under the pronunciation label. Comprehensibility, which is by far the more important concept for achieving successful oral communication, is linked to grammar and vocabulary," explains Trofimovich, who is part of Concordia's Department of Education.

In their new article published in the high-impact journal [Bilingualism: Language and Cognition](#), the team treats comprehensibility as one aspect of being successful at communicating in a second language. They show that producing comprehensible speech is more than simply a matter of proper pronunciation.

Trofimovich points out that "lots of teachers, researchers, policy makers and members of the general public equate the accents of non-[native speakers](#) of English with their ability to communicate effectively. We wanted to examine whether accent and comprehensibility, which are interrelated concepts, could, in fact, be teased apart."

"Disentangling accent from comprehensibility will help us refine the assessment of the second-language-speaking ability, particularly in contexts where successful communication is important for getting the job done," says Isaacs, who is part of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Bristol in the UK. "It can also help identify aspects of speech that don't actually affect listeners' understanding but that, nonetheless, may be used for negative stereotyping."

For their study, the researchers audio-recorded 40 adults whose first language is French, explaining a picture sequence in English. Their

narratives were then played back to 60 novice raters and three experienced teachers of English as a Second [Language](#).

The listeners rated each narrative separately for comprehensibility and "accentedness," using numerical rating scales. Their scoring was then examined in relation to 19 measures, derived through independent analyses of the speech, including word stress, pitch, grammatical errors and fluency. Finally, statistical associations were examined in conjunction with teacher comments on the linguistic influences on their ratings.

Provided by Concordia University

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