

What makes an accent in a foreign language lighter

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The more empathy one has for another, the lighter the accent will be when speaking in a second language. This is the conclusion of a new study carried out at the University of Haifa by Dr. Raphiq Ibrahim and Dr. Mark Leikin of the Department of Learning Disabilities and Prof. Zohar Eviatar of the Department of Psychology at the University of Haifa. The study has been published in the *International Journal of Bilingualism*. "In addition to personal-affective factors, it has been found that the 'language ego' is also influenced by the sociopolitical position of the speaker towards the majority group," the researchers stated.

We all know how to identify the average Hebrew speaker trying to speak English: the Israeli accent is an easy give-away. But why is there an accent and what are the factors that make one speaker have a heavier accent than another? One possibility is based on the cognitive discipline, which suggests that our [language](#) system limits the creation of language pronunciations in a non-native language. Another explanation is derived from the socio-lingual field, which claims that socio-affective elements have an effect on accent and that the [second language](#) constitutes an image label for the speaker in the presence of a majority group.

"Israel is a perfect lab location for testing the topic of second languages, because of the complex composition of its population. This population is made up of immigrants who learn Hebrew at an advanced age; an [ethnic minority](#) of Arabs, some of whom learn Hebrew from an early age, and others who learn the language as mature adults; and a majority group of native Hebrew speakers," the researchers explained.

The first stage of the study divided participants - students from the University of Haifa - into three groups: 20 native Hebrew speakers, 20 Arabic speakers who learned Hebrew at the age of 7-8, and 20 Russian immigrants who learned Hebrew after age 13. The participants' socioeconomic characteristics were identical. All were asked to read out a section from a report in Hebrew, and then to describe - in Hebrew - an image that was shown to them. The pieces were recorded and divided into two-minute sections. Additionally, the participants filled out a questionnaire that measures empathetic abilities in 29 statements.

The second stage of the study took 20 different native Hebrew speaking participants. They listened to the pieces that had been recorded in the first stage, and rated each piece according to accent "heaviness". Subsequently, each participant from the first stage was given a score on the weight of his or her accent and another score for level of empathy.

The study has shown that the accent level of Russian immigrants and of native Arabic speakers is similar. It also revealed that for the Russian immigrants, there is a direct link between the two measures: the higher the ability to exhibit empathy for the other, the weaker the accent. Amongst the Arabic speakers, however, no such link - either positive or negative - between level of empathy and heaviness of accent could be seen.

The researchers' hypothesis is that in the group of Arabic speakers, a new factor enters the 'language ego' equation: sociopolitical position. "We believe that the pattern among Arabic speakers demonstrates their sentiment toward the Hebrew-speaking majority group, and the former consider their accent as something that distinguishes them from the majority.

Our research shows that both personal and sociopolitical aspects have an influence on accent in speaking a second language, and teachers giving

instruction in languages as second languages, especially among minority groups, must relate to the social and political connection when teaching," the researchers explain.

Source: University of Haifa ([news](#) : [web](#))

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