# 2   The myth of non-accent

> The poets were not alone in sanctioning myths, for long before the poets the
> states and the lawmakers had sanctioned them as a useful expedient. ... They
> needed to control the people by superstitious fears, and these cannot be aroused
> without myths and marvels.
>
> <div align="right">Strabo, <em>Geographia</em></div>

*Myth* is understood broadly as a story with general cultural significance.[1]
In the study of myth, veracity is secondary to the way in which a story
symbolizes human experience more generally. What is particularly inter-
esting is the way that myths are used to justify social order, and to
encourage or coerce consensual participation in that order.

Standard language and its corollary, non-accent, are more usually
referred to as *abstractions* than they are as myths. And in fact, this is a
logical connection, as is borne out by the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s
definition: "[an abstraction is] the idea of something which has no inde-
pendent existence; a thing which exists only in idea; something visionary."
From this follows quite neatly Milroy and Milroy's suggestion that
*standard language* need not be understood as any specific language, but
as "an idea in the mind rather than a reality – a set of abstract norms to
which actual usage may conform to a greater or lesser extent" (1991:
22–23).[2] We can extrapolate from this position to call non-accent not any
particular variety of US English, but a collectively held ideal, which brings
with it a series of social and regional associations.

Nevertheless, it is useful to consider standard language and non-accent
both as abstractions and as myths. It is only by doing so that we can come
to understand how the collective consciousness came to be. Myths are
magical and powerful constructs; they can motivate social behaviors and
actions which would be otherwise contrary to logic or reason. Before we
can consider the mythical and very concrete powers of a term like non-
accent, however, we must first consider its opposite.

We have come a good way into our discussion without defining the term
*accent*. Perhaps the reason for that is clear by now: in as far as linguists

are concerned, accent can only be a fuzzy term. It is widely used by the public, however, in interesting ways. Thus we must stop to consider what we mean by accent, and how the term is put to use.

In a more technical way, accent is used to distinguish stress in words (*The accent is on the second syllable in "baNAna"*) or in sentences (*That's ANOTHER fine mess you've gotten us into!*); it can be used as a diacritic, but this is most often done in conjunction with the writing of other languages. More generally, accent is a loose reference to a specific "way of speaking." There is no official or technical specification for what this might mean in linguistic terms, but there are two widely recognized elements to what serves to distinguish one variety of a language from another in the minds of speakers:

- *Prosodic features*   The study of the phonology of a language includes consideration of intonation, or patterns of pitch contours. This includes stress patterns, both at the lexical and at the sentence level, but it also touches upon other factors such as tempo of speaking. For example, speakers of English tend to call languages or varieties of language which tend toward an up-swing in stress at the end of words *lilting*, or *sing-song*, or some Romance languages *rapid-fire*.
- *Segmental features*   We acquire, as part of our first language, the sounds of the language which fall into two major categories: vowels and consonants. Each of these sounds exists in relation to one another in a phonological structure. In the discussion above, it was pointed out that some speakers of US English distinguish between *Mary, merry*, and *marry*, or between *caught* and *cot*, while others do not, which is one indication that there are many possible phonological systems for US English.

Thus, a working definition of accent as it is used in this book follows:

*Accents are loose bundles of prosodic and segmental features distributed over geographic and/or social space.*

It is important to distinguish further between two kinds of accent: first language (L1) and second language (L2).

L1 accent is really no more than what we have been discussing all along: structured variation in language. Every native speaker of English has some regional variety, with the particular phonology of that area, or a phonology which represents a melding of one or more areas, for some people. In a similar way, everyone has several bundles of variants which are available to them and which they exploit to layer social meaning into their spoken language. Most usually we use geography as the first line of demarcation: a Maine accent, a New Orleans accent, an Appalachian accent, a Utah accent. But there are also socially bound clusters of features which are superimposed on the geographic: Native American accents, black accents, Jewish accents.[3] Gender, race, ethnicity, income, religion – these and other

elements of social identity are often clearly marked by means of choice between linguistic variants.

L1 accent is, then, the native variety of US English spoken: *every native speaker of US English has an L1 accent*, no matter how unmarked the person's language may *seem* to be. This includes people like Connie Chung, Peter Jennings, Cokie Roberts, and Bill Moyers, prominent broadcast news and commentary personalities who are generally thought to be speakers of a Standard US English (this term will be discussed more thoroughly in chapters to come).

So where does accent end and dialect begin?[4]

This touches on one of the most intriguing and complicated questions of sociolinguistics. Why is Dutch considered a separate language from German, and Swiss German not? Why do many call the variety of English that many African Americans speak *black slang* (or a black accent) but call Cockney and Gullah dialects? Max Weinreich is widely quoted as pointing out that a language is a dialect with an army and a navy; I would like to add to that observation that a dialect is perhaps nothing more than a language that gets no respect.

If it is possible to try to distinguish between accent and language variety on purely linguistic terms, then a rough division can be made as follows:

Two varieties of a single language are divided by *accent* when differences are restricted primarily to phonology (prosodic and segmental features).

If two varieties of a single language also differ in morphological structures, syntax, lexicon, and semantics, then they are different varieties, or dialects, of the same language.

If two varieties of a common mother language differ in all these ways, and in addition have distinct literary histories, distinct orthographies, and/or geopolitical boundaries, then they are generally called different languages.

Style or code shifting is a term reflecting the speaker's ability to switch between languages or language varieties dependent on a large number of factors. It is a complicated process, and one that has been studied intensively. For our purposes, however, it is enough to say that when a speaker is shifting between two varieties of one language which are closely related, it will sometimes be appropriate to speak of "accent" and sometimes of "variety." Thus it is useful to retain the term accent to talk about phonology, but it is important to remember that this is a fluid category.

L2 accent is very different. When a native speaker of a language other than English acquires English, accent is used to refer to the breakthrough of native language phonology into the target language. Thus we might say that an individual has a Welsh accent, or a Tagalog accent, because the phonologies of those languages influence the learner's pronunciation of US English, and this is accomplished with differing degrees of success.

Thus far it has been set forth that

- all spoken human language is necessarily and functionally variable;
- one of the functions of variation is to convey social, stylistic, and geographic meaning;
- the majority of the work of variation is carried out below the level of consciousness.

Given these facts, what is non-accent? Is it what we call a standard, or mainstream spoken language? And given the fact that accent is just short-hand for variable language (which is in some ways a redundant term) what can a "standard" US English be, but an abstraction?

In spite of all the hard evidence that language must be variable and must change, people steadfastly believe that a homogenous, standardized, one-size-fits-all language is not only desirable, it is truly a possibility. This language does not exist *in fact*, but it certainly does exist as an ideal in the minds of the speakers. This takes us back to our opening science-fiction scenario, in which the positive ramifications of a world in which we are all the same size and weight are so appealing, so enticing, that we overlook the biological realities of our physical selves. Before we go on to ask how we are able to fool ourselves so thoroughly, we must first deal more carefully with the question of the mythical homogenous standardized spoken language. Until the impossibility of such a thing is established incontrovertibly, people will continue to pine after it, and, worse, to pursue it.

Let's start with an example.

James Kahakua is a native of Hawai'i and bilingual speaker of English and Hawai'ian Creole English (HCE) (commonly referred to, erroneously, as *Hawai'ian Pidgin*).[5] Mr. Kahakua, a meteorologist with twenty years of experience and considerable educational background, applied for a promotion which would require that he read prepared weather reports on the radio. It is important to note that this promotion would have entailed the reading of previously prepared weather reports, in which the syntax and lexicon of the broadcasted language would be under the direct control of the news producer.

Mr. Kahakua was not given this promotion. His employer found him unqualified to do so, not because he is incapable of reading, but because as a bilingual English–HCE speaker, he has a Hawai'ian accent.

Subsequently, Mr. Kahakua sued his employer under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, on the basis of language traits linked to national origin, and he lost. He lost because the judge, who was not a native of Hawai'i, believed that it was reasonable to require that radio announcers speak "Standard English" (which was not defined explicitly), and furthermore, he added that "there is no race or physiological reason why Kahakua could not have used standard English pronunciations" (Matsuda 1991: 1345). The speech pathologist who testified on behalf of the employer gave the judge ammunition when she testified:

I urgently recommend [Mr. Kahakua] seek professional help in striving to lessen this handicap. ... *Pidgin can be controlled.* And if an individual is totally committed to improving, professional help on a long-term basis can produce results.

(Matsuda 1991: 1366; original emphasis)

This is a very good – if very disturbing – example of our basic belief about language: if we want to, if we try hard enough, we can acquire a perfect language, one which is clean, pure, free of variation. Language which is not *perfect* does not have to be accepted. The judge and the speech therapist are sure of themselves: they stake their professional reputations on their statements that Mr. Kahakua could, if he wished, comply with what they see as a reasonable request of his employer. I make the claim, however, that Mr. Kahakua can no more comply with the demand that he completely lose his native phonology – his accent – than he could comply with an order of the judge to grow four inches, or, and much more controversially, than it would be possible for him to change the color of his skin.

This is a large claim, one people will not take on faith because they have been taught that the opposite is true. Putting aside the question of personal freedoms protected under the law, putting aside the issues of social identity, is it true that it is not within the power of the individual to change their language?

A linguist's first impulse is to answer this question, very simply, yes. It is not possible for an adult to substitute his or her phonology (one accent) for another, *consistently and in a permanent way*. But! The non-linguist will jump in. What about my Aunt Lillian, who came here from the Ukraine and has no accent at all? What about Eddie Murphy, who can switch from AAVE to sounding like an upper-middle-class broadcaster without a moment's hesitation? And there's Joe's wife, who just gave up her Brooklyn accent when it caused her problems in medical school.

What does it mean to lose an accent? Are we talking about replacing one way of speaking with another, or adding a new phonology to a person's existing inventory? Are we demanding that a person – Mr. Kahakua in this case – sound one way for a brief period of time, or that he always sound that way? These are important points, but before we look at them and the underlying presumptions, it is necessary to go back and consider the language acquisition process. We begin with some generalizations which are more linguistic *facts of life*:

- There is a finite set of potentially meaning-bearing sounds (vowels, consonants, tones) which can be produced by human vocal apparatus. The set in its entirety is universal, available to all human beings without physical handicap.
- Each language uses some, but not all, sounds available.
- Sounds are organized into systems, in which each element stands in

relationship to the other elements. The same inventory of sounds can be organized into a number of possible systems.

- Children are born with the ability to produce the entire set of possible sounds, but eventually restrict themselves to the ones they hear used around them.
- Children exposed to more than one language during the language-acquisition process may acquire more than one language, if the social conditioning factors are favorable.
- At some time in adolescence, the ability to acquire language with the same ease as young children atrophies.[6]
- There are as yet poorly understood elements of cognition and perception which have to do with the degree of success with which an adult will manage to acquire a new phonology, or accent.

These are very dry facts. Let's approach this in another way.

First, think of all the sounds which can be produced and perceived by the human vocal apparatus as a set of building materials. The basic materials, vowels and consonants, are bricks. Other building materials (wood, mortar, plaster, stone) stand in for things like tone, vowel harmony, and length, which are part of the articulation of vowels and consonants, but provide another layer of meaning-bearing sound in many languages. Thus far, we are talking about phonetics: the production and perception of the full set of possible sounds.

Children are born with two things: a set of language blueprints wired into the brain, which gives them some intuitive understanding of very basic rules of language; and a set of tools which goes along with these blueprints.

Now think of the language acquisition process as a newborn child who begins to build a *Sound House*. The Sound House is the "home" of the language, or what we have been calling *accent* – the phonology – of the child's native tongue. At birth the child is in the Sound House warehouse, where a full inventory of all possible materials is available to her. She looks at the Sound Houses built by her parents, her brothers and sisters, by other people around her, and she starts to pick out those materials, those bricks she sees they have used to build their Sound Houses. She may experiment with other bricks, with a bit of wood, but in the end she settles down to duplicating the Sound Houses she sees around her. She sets up her inventory of sounds in relationship to each other; she puts up walls, plans the space: she is constructing her phonology.

The blueprints tell her that she must have certain supporting structures; she does this. She wanders around in her parents' Sound Houses and sees how they do things. She makes mistakes; fixes them. In the process, she makes small innovations.

Maybe this child has parents who speak English and Gaelic, or who are natives of Cincinnati and speak what is commonly thought of as Standard

US English, as well as African American English Vernacular. The parents each have two Sound Houses, or perhaps one Sound House with two wings. She has two houses to build at once. Sometimes she mixes materials up, but then sorts them out. Maybe she builds a bridge between the two structures. Maybe a connecting basement.

The child starts to socialize with other children. Her best friend has a slightly different layout, although he has built his Sound House with the exact same inventory of building materials. Another friend has a Sound House which is missing the back staircase. She wants to be like her friends, and so she makes renovations to her Sound House. It begins to look somewhat different than her parents' Sound Houses; it is more her own. Maybe the Gaelic half of her Sound House is neglected, has a hole in the roof, a collapsing floor. Maybe she is embarrassed by the AAVE Sound House and never goes there anymore, never has a chance to see what is happening to it. Maybe in a few years she will want to go there and find it structurally unable to bear her weight.

Now imagine this.

When the child turns twenty, she notices another kind of Sound House, built by Spanish speakers, which she admires. She would like to build an extension to her own Sound House just like it. She looks for her blueprints and her tools, but they have disappeared. Puzzled, she stands on the street and looks at these Sound Houses: they are different. What is different about them? Look at that balcony. How do you build that? Why do the staircases look like that?

With her bare hands, she sets out to build an extension to her original Sound House. She sees bricks she doesn't have in her own inventory, but how to get back to the warehouse? She'll have to improvise. She's a smart woman, she can make a brick, cut down a tree. She examines the Sound Houses built by Spanish speakers, asks questions. The obvious things she sees right off: wow, they have fireplaces. The less obvious things – width of the doors, for example – slip right by her at first. She starts in on the long process. *How did you build that chimney?* she asks. *I don't know*, says her informant. *I was a kid at the time, and I've lost my blueprints.*

If she's lucky, she has a guide – an informed language teacher – who can point out the difference between the extension she is trying to build and her own Sound House. *Look*, this guide will say. *You're mixing up blue and ultramarine bricks! We use blue for this kind of wall, ultramarine for that. And you certainly can't put a pale pink brick next to a cerise one. Oh*, she says. *I hadn't noticed.* And thus she will begin to differentiate more carefully, for example between two very similar vowels which are distinctive in the language she is learning.

She works very, very hard on this extension. But no matter how hard she works, the balcony will not shape up; it is always rickety. There's a gap in the floorboards; people notice it and grin.

In absolute amazement, she watches her little sister build the exact same Sound House with no effort at all, and it is perfect. She points this out to her guide. *But your sister still has her blueprints and tools,* says her guide. Then she sees a stranger, an older man, building the same extension and he is also taking less time, just galloping through. His Spanish Sound House looks like an original to her.

*Oh no,* her guide tells her. *It's very good, no doubt, but look there – don't you see that the windows are slightly too close together? It would fool almost everybody, but those windows give it away.*

She digs in her heels and moves into the extension, although the roof still leaks. She abandons her original English Sound House for months, for years, she is so dedicated to getting this right. She rarely goes back to the first Sound House anymore, and the Gaelic Sound House is condemned. When she does go back to the English Sound House, and first goes through the door, it seems strange to her. But the structural heart of her Sound House is here, and it's still standing, if a little dusty.

Her Spanish Sound House feels like home. When people come to visit, they are amazed to find out that it's not her first construction. They examine everything closely. Some of them may notice very, very small details, but they don't say anything. *There's the guy down the block,* they tell her, *he's been working on the same extension for longer than you and he'll never get it right.*[7]


Adult language learners all have the same handicap in learning a second language: the blueprints have faded to near illegibility, and the tools are rusted. Regardless of how much energy and dedication and general intelligence, no one is capable of getting the blueprints and tools back, and we must all build new Sound Houses with our bare hands. When the judge claimed that there was no physiological reason that James Kahakua could not speak mainstream English, he was simply wrong.

It is crucial to point out that the structural integrity of the targeted second Sound House – which here stands in for accent – is secondary to the language learner's skill in actually *using* the target language. Accent has little to do with what is generally called *communicative competence*, or the ability to use and interpret language in a wide variety of contexts effectively.[8] There is a long list of persons who speak English as a second language and who never lost their accents. They never managed to build an English Sound House which would fool anybody at all into thinking that they are native speakers, but their ability to use English is clear. This group includes people like Henry Kissinger, Cesar Chavez, Derek Wolcott, Butros Butros Ghali, Benazir Bhutto, Corazon Aquino, and Joseph Conrad who represent the political and sociocultural mainstream, but who do it in an accented English. Do people like these choose to speak English with an accent? Have they not worked hard enough, long enough? Are they not smart enough?

The same questions are relevant to native speakers of English with marked or stigmatized regional or social accents. When we think of Ann Richards, Jessie Jackson, or Ed Koch, do we think of people who cannot express themselves? Are these people who willfully refuse to give up Texas, African American, or New York varieties of English for something less socially marked, or are they incapable of doing so?

Because two phonologies are similar, we think, it must be easier to build a second Sound House. Why can't Mr. Kahakua – who after all has an English Sound House to begin with – just make a few adjustments that will transform it into what passes as a mainstream English Sound House? If Meryl Streep can do any variety of English, why can't he?[9]

The answer is, Meryl Streep can't do it either, unless she is doing it for a short period of time and in a limited context. In the filming of a movie, Meryl Streep does her accents while the camera is running, with stops every few minutes. If she gets it wrong, they can try again. Under these favorable circumstances, many people could imitate another variety of English quite admirably – but for others, not even this is possible. There are many examples of actors criticized roundly for not pulling off an accent, in spite of expensive tutoring, and the possibility of many takes of each utterance. In either case, whether we have an English Daniel Day-Lewis who truly sounds – up on the screen – as if he were an American frontiersman, or an American Kevin Costner who tries but fails to convince us that he is English enough to be Robin Hood, we are not talking about a permanent Sound House; it is a fake store front that won't stand up to a strong and persistent breeze. And it takes an exceptional talent to achieve even this limited amount. Now, what about Eddie Murphy, or any number of other African American entertainers who seem to switch effortlessly from one variety of English to another?

Eddie Murphy built more than one Sound House *as a child*, when he had the resources and the tools to do so. He observed not just the Sound Houses of his parents and peers closely enough to duplicate them, but he paid close attention to other types of Sound Houses, and he built multiple rooms: the broadcaster room, the old Jewish male room, the southern Black evangelist room. He can move in and out of them with ease, and he does so as part of his profession. Some of these rooms are no doubt more structurally sound than others. This is not an uncommon occurrence; many African Americans grow up bidialectal. For adults, however, the option to *become* bidialectal is severely compromised.

At a sociolinguistics conference a few years ago, a colleague who works on the vowel changes known as the Northern Cities Chain Shift came to my presentation. Afterwards she said to me "You know, it was really fascinating to listen to you, – oh, and your talk was good too." The whole time I had been presenting my work, she had been listening closely to my vowels, and making notes to herself. When I was reading from prepared text, she told me, my vowels pretty much stayed put, but when I looked

up from my papers and spoke extemporaneously, and with some considerable emotion, my vowels started on a steep forward slide: the chain shift in action. The more attention I pay to speech, the less I participate in the shift; this is an indication that some part of me feels compelled to move away from my background when I am speaking as an academic. But when I am involved in my subject, when I forget to monitor my speech carefully, my origins come forth: I am a native of Chicago, and a resident of Michigan, and I cannot pretend to be anything else. This has been pointed out to me by many non-linguists; people are proud to be able to listen to me (or to anybody else) for a minute and then put me on the map.

All this happens in spite of the fact that my professional training has made me aware of the way I use subtle choices available to me, and in spite of the fact that sometimes I don't particularly want to announce to the world where I am from. I have no choice but to live in the Sound House I first created as a child, which bears the structural hallmarks of the social being I am.

It is true, however, that some people are better at putting together second or even third and fourth Sound Houses. Not perfect ones, but very good imitations. The differential ability to do this is something not very well understood, but strong circumstantial evidence indicates it has nothing to do with intelligence and not very much to do with application. On the other hand, it certainly does have something to do with cognition, and – for lack of a better or more precise term – with an ear for language. Focused training, or the process of drawing the adult language learner's attention to processes he or she would not otherwise notice, can have some effect. It is possible to *adjust* an accent, to some degree. We can work on that second Sound House, with guidance. But it is not possible to substitute the second Sound House for the original. Accent reduction courses, if they are well done by persons well trained in phonology and phonetics, who understand the structural differences between the languages, may achieve that much: they might reduce an accent, but they cannot remove one.

However, accent reduction courses make an implied promise: *Sound like us, and success will be yours. Doors will open; barriers will disappear.* There are two problems here. The first is the claim that it is possible to "eliminate" an accent, which is reminiscent of magic creams to remove cellulite and electromagnetic belts to make undersized children grow. The second, almost more disturbing, implication is that discrimination is purely a matter of language, and that it is *first and primarily* the right accent which stands between marginalized social groups and a bright new world free of racism and prejudicial treatment.

A close and cynical reader of my arguments – of which there will be many – will point out that I have made two statements which seem to contradict each other. I have gone to some length to establish that all spoken language is variable, and that all language changes. Thus, the

Sound Houses we build change over our lifetimes. At the same time, it seems that I am arguing that Sound Houses *cannot* be changed. I have been critical of speech pathologists who claim this is possible. In fact, these statements are not contradictory.

A Sound House is a living, evolving product of our minds, a mirror of our changing social beings. We redecorate constantly, with a keen eye for what the neighbors are doing. Little by little, we may move a wall, rearrange the bricks, add windows. One person builds a patio, and maybe that catches on, in the same way that somewhere, one day (in a way sociolinguists have never been able to observe) the *hawk–hock* merger caught on and began to gain linguistic and social currency. Other people began to build patios, and before long, other structural changes began to follow. If you're going to build a patio, after all, you have to put in a door to get to it. Or perhaps a different analogy is needed here: we are all biologically subject to the aging process; no one is exempt from those changes over time. But neither can we willfully bring the aging process on, or stop it. Thus our Sound Houses do change over time but in ways which are out of direct control.

But can a Sound House be torn down and replaced?

The answer must be *no*. The true ability to build second and third Sound Houses *past the language acquisition stage* is undocumented. It may exist; there are certainly rumors enough of such persons, who *as adults* acquire a second variety of their native language, or another language altogether with absolute and complete native fluency. Persons who are capable of this would never let the phonology of their first language interfere with their second language, regardless of the topic being discussed, or the amount of emotion brought to the table. Such persons would have to be able to stand up to close phonetic analysis of their language – and not just by phoneticians, but also by native speakers, who are incredibly sensitive to the subtle variation in language. Perhaps most important, such persons would have to have complete control of the structured variation active in the target language.

I would hypothesize that if such persons exist at all, adults who are capable of learning to absolutely and cleanly substitute one accent for another are as rare as individuals who can do long division instantaneously in their heads, or have photographic memories. If they do exist, it would be interesting and important to study them, because it would seem that these are adults whose language acquisition function – the hard wiring in the brain – failed to stop working at the usual time.

If a person is very dedicated, works hard, and has good guidance, it may be possible to fool some of the people some of the time. The question is, *of whom do we require this trick, and why?* If a mainstream, homogenous US English is something logically and reasonably required of broadcast news reporters, why was it required of James Kahakua, and not of Peter Jennings, who speaks English with a Canadian accent? And,

a more difficult question: what is right or wrong about asking Mr. Kahakua to pretend? If he is capable of faking an accent, why shouldn't his employer ask him to do this, for those few minutes he is reading the weather on the radio?