



Accent for Listeners

PronPack

PRONUNCIATION FOR LISTENING

Mark Hancock

HANCOCK McDONALD ELT

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PronPack: Accent for Listeners

Mark Hancock



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Introduction

This book is designed to help teachers of English understand how accents of English vary around the world, and which features of pronunciation are most likely to differ from one accent to the next. Awareness of accent variation is important in helping learners of English to understand the different accents they are likely to encounter while listening.

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Accent-friendly pronunciation teaching

Accent is a key feature of every voice we hear in English, and it can have a great impact on how well we understand a speaker. Yet in English Language Teaching, you can easily get the impression that learners will only ever need to understand one or two of the accents out there, and accent variation is rarely focused on. Books which *do* focus on accents tend to be written with a specialist audience in mind and are inaccessible to a wider readership. This book aims to change that by providing a brief but systematic overview of accent in English, written in clear and simple terms and without recourse to specialist jargon and symbols.

Systematic and focused

There is now an increasing recognition of the importance of accent in listening, and authors often recommend that we should expose learners to a greater variety of accents in the classroom. This is obviously a welcome development, but efforts in this direction could benefit by being more focused and systematic. This has proved difficult because books on accent often make use of complex terminology and the full International Phonetic Alphabet (not just the limited Phonemic Alphabet commonly used in classrooms). This book sets out to avoid these pitfalls by avoiding jargon and using creative ways of describing accent differences using key words and homophones.

For the student

The content of this book is directed ultimately at the learner. The volume culminates in a collection of lesson materials designed to give learners systematic and focused exposure to features of pronunciation which tend to vary across accents. Actual classroom-ready material is provided on the support website, but the ideas, explanations and rationale for this material are here in this volume.

For the teacher

This book is aimed at the learner of English, but *via the teacher*. In order to effectively teach learners about accents in English, teachers will benefit from a clear overview of the topic themselves. This includes an understanding of the history behind these variations, and the geography of their spread, and these topics are covered, as well as more details about the features of pronunciation which vary from accent to accent.

Pronunciation for Listeners

This book is part of the *Pronunciation for Listening* series. These books focus on the neglected but crucial listening aspect of pronunciation. The other titles are *Connected Speech for Listeners* and *Word Recognition for Listeners*. The first of these focuses on grammar, the second, vocabulary and this volume focuses on accent.

This book and how to use it

This book consists of four sections. **Sections A** and **B** are background reading. **Section C** focuses more on specific pronunciation features which vary across accents, and **D** contains practical teaching materials and ideas for highlighting these features in class.

Section A

Contains 12 short chapters introducing key themes relating to the topic of accent in language learning. You can read this section straight through for a complete overview of the issues related to accent. On the other hand, the chapters are free-standing, meaning that you can dip into them at separate times if you prefer. The topics include what accents are, how they change, how they relate to pronunciation, and how they may feature in the teaching of English.

Section B

Looks at regional accents around the world and the key ways in which they differ from one another. The first chapter in the section explains what regional accent variation is, and each chapter which follows provides a brief overview of accents of English in a specific area of the globe. The final chapter looks at second-language accents of English.

Section C

Outlines some of the most significant pronunciation features which differ across accents. This section of the book looks in more detail at those specific features of pronunciation which stand out as being variable across accents. Most of these features relate to consonant or vowel sounds, since these are both noticeable and relatively easy to describe without requiring too much theoretical background knowledge.

Section D

Provides practical material for accent awareness raising activities in language classrooms. There is material for 24 lessons, each raising awareness of a specific pronunciation feature which varies across accents. Each lesson is based around a short rhyming text containing multiple examples of the target feature, followed by explanatory notes. The actual lesson material for taking into the classroom, including audios and images, can be freely downloaded from the support website for this book.

Support website

Classroom materials for this book are provided on an accompanying website, www.pronpack.com. This material consists of a PowerPoint file with a slide for each of the 24 lessons in **Section D**. The slides include the short texts for the lesson accompanied with a colour illustration and audio files in which we hear the text read out in three or four different accents.

Audio material

As the book suggests, any audio required for demonstrating the short texts in different accents can be generated by the teacher using good online text-to-speech tools. Alternatively, you can use the audio provided on our support website, which was generated from the Elevenlabs website: <https://elevenlabs.io/app/speech-synthesis/text-to-speech>.

Section A Orientation

In this section, you will find 12 short chapters introducing key themes relating to the topic of accent in language learning.

You can read this section straight through for a complete overview of issues related to accent. On the other hand, the chapters are free-standing, meaning that you can dip into them at separate times if you prefer. The topics include what accents are, how they change, how they relate to pronunciation, and how they may feature in the teaching of English.

A1 Accent and identity

A definition of accent, and discussion of how it relates to place of origin, social class, personal identity, and linguistic background.

Everybody has an accent

Everybody has an accent. It is their own personal way of speaking a language, with characteristic pronunciation features – vowel and consonant sounds, and patterns of stress and intonation. Typically, people share most features of their accent with a group – usually other people from the same place and social class. For this reason, accents are given a label referring to regional or class origin, such as a southern accent, or an upper-class accent.

Accent is related to dialect, but while a dialect includes all aspects of the language, including grammar and vocabulary for example, accent only relates pronunciation.

We should remember that people sometimes use the word ‘accent’ in a different way. For example, they may say things like, ‘David’s got an accent’, as if it were possible *not* to have an accent. However, in effect, this is just a shortened way of saying, ‘David’s accent is different from the normal accent around here’. For the purposes of this book, we need to emphasise: if you speak at all, you speak with an accent. The impression that someone has no accent is an illusion.

Accent and regional identity

National and regional accents evolve over a long period of time, among people living in specific locations. Populations who have remained for many generations in the same place, without moving around much, are those which are most likely to develop the most distinctive accents. Populations which are recently arrived and/or more mobile, often moving from place to place, will not have such distinctive accents. For English, an example of the former would be England (where accents vary greatly), while an example of the latter would be Australia (where accents vary little). Regional accents are often described as being either ‘broad’ or ‘mild’ – both have noticeably regional features, but these are much stronger in the ‘broad’ version of the accent. Often, individual speakers are able to shift between broad and mild versions of their own accent, according to context. Typically, they will use the milder accent in more formal contexts, or with people who don’t share their accent.

Accent and class identity

Accent is not only related to place; it's also related to class. In 1966, William Labov published a now-famous study of accent variation in New York City, based on research in three department stores – one working class, one upper class and one halfway between (Labov 1966). In these stores, he elicited from the staff the phrase *fourth floor*. In the upper-class store, staff pronounced the **R** letters in these two words. In the working-class store, they didn't. It appears that in New York City, pronouncing your **R** was a marker of being posh.

It's interesting what happened in the middle-class store. Here, the staff first said the words without the **R**. However, when asked to repeat (the researcher pretended to misunderstand), they tended to pronounce the **R**. It seems that the staff here were aware of the posh form and could move towards it when necessary. This shows us that the world is not divided simply into posh people and the rest. There is also accent shifting; people might want or need to speak posh, even if they are not themselves particularly upper-class.

Accent and personal identity

We often say that people *have* an accent, but it's also possible for people to *do* an accent. In other words, people may have conscious control over it. We saw this in the middle-class store in Labov's experiment: people shifted their accent in the direction of a more prestige variety when they felt it necessary. This is not automatic: some individuals choose to do it, others resist, wishing instead to show loyalty to their local or working-class identity. People also differ in their *ability* to modify their accent – some can adopt a wide range of accents at will, while others lack that talent. The ability to change accents seems effortless for some but may be hard-won for others.

People are often egocentric regarding accent. They feel that only other people have accents – people who speak differently from them. However, this might depend on which specific accent you speak. If you speak with a broad local accent, you are often forced to recognise that fact because you are constantly told about it, at school and elsewhere. If, on the other hand, you speak with a 'standard' accent, you might never be told about it and you can easily go through life with the illusion that you don't have an accent.

Accent and historical identity

Several European languages have spread to other continents through colonialism, establishing themselves as the main or one of the main languages of other countries. In some cases, the incoming settlers have largely replaced the native populations, meaning the imported language now has a first-language status, as in the case of English in the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. These places have developed standard forms of their own. The distance between the accents of these places and

British accents depends on how long ago the settlement occurred. North America was settled earlier and the accents there have had plenty of time to grow apart. New Zealand was settled most recently and the accents there are still relatively close to the accents of Britain.

In other cases, the colonizers came and left, leaving the native populations speaking the colonial language alongside their own indigenous languages, as in the case of English in India and Nigeria. These countries have recognisable accents of English, strongly influenced by the indigenous languages of these regions.

Accent and linguistic identity

Most people who speak English in the world today are not native-speakers. If you grew up speaking a language which is not English, that first language is likely to be the biggest single influence on your accent. However, this will vary massively from person to person. Some simply want to use English to communicate and they are perfectly happy to do so with an L1-influenced accent; indeed, some may actively want to assert this linguistic identity. Others, for one reason or another, are keen to speak a more 'nativelike' version of English. Thus, a label such as 'Chinese English' is likely to include a variety of accents, at one extreme being very strongly Chinese-influenced and at the other extreme, it might be indistinguishable from, say, 'American English'.