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CAN A FOREIGN ACCENT BRAND A NATION?
SERBIAN EFL LEARNERS’ PERSPECTIVE

Abstract: This paper³ explores whether Serbian EFL learners can recognise which nationality stands behind a particular foreign accent, with the aim to investigate if a foreign accent could be regarded as a nation’s specific brand. Having in mind that a foreign accent assumes the L1 phonetic and phonological features that occur while speaking an L2, we found it interesting to analyse if it was possible for Serbian EFL learners to “see through” the foreign accent and recognise the mother tongue of the speaker who speaks with the particular accent. The empirical study consisted of a quasi-experiment incorporating a testing procedure during which Serbian EFL students had the task to circle the country from which the speaker whose recording they had just heard came from. A short survey about the testing followed the main procedure. The chosen population of students included both students with prior formal knowledge of English international varieties, as well as students who were laypersons in this regard. The obtained results were statistically analysed and showed the strikingly high percentage of correct recognition of a speaker’s national descent, especially within the group of students who took the Varieties of English course taught at the Faculty of Philology and Arts in Kragujevac. However, taking into consideration that the other group of students likewise had a relatively high percentage of foreign accent recognition, we are led to conclude that a foreign accent can indeed be regarded as a specific brand of a nation. Since our findings show that accurate accent identification is positively correlated to the estimated degree of foreign accentedness, the study is also relevant in its pedagogical

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aspects as the results point to foreign language learners’ diverse perceptions and are indicative of their knowledge of linguistics in general.

Keywords: foreign accent, brand, mother tongue, International English, Serbian EFL learners.

1. Introduction

With the predominant influence of English as a lingua franca and its ubiquitous use, which has resulted in a greater overall number of non-native than native speakers, it is expected that EFL or ESL learners should be aware that their outside-the-classroom interaction could involve speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Marian, Shook 2012). The most recent estimate by Crystal (Crystal 2019: 115) that there are more than 2.3 billion users of English in the world raises important diversity-related questions in ELT methodology and emphasises the issues concerning the redefinition of the notion of a “native” speaker. Due to the mother tongue interference and various linguistic and extralinguistic factors, one of the first impressions a listener of a non-native speaker makes is often based on the degree of foreign accent. This can sometimes cause problems in terms of comprehensibility and intelligibility, since accented speech takes about 50 milliseconds longer to process than non-accented speech (Munro, Derwing 1995). Likewise, research has shown that with background noise accented speech is more difficult to understand than native-like speech (Munro 1998). The relevant literature does not entirely agree upon the features of pronunciation contributing to foreign accent perception as more or less prominent, i.e. whether it is the segmental or suprasegmental level of phonology that induces a higher degree of foreign accent. What is interesting and positive for the language comprehension is the fact that listeners, under the given circumstances, can easily adapt to the speech characterised by a foreign accent, and general comprehension may improve significantly over a relatively short period of time (Cristia et al. 2012: 9).

Various factors affect the perception of a foreign accent, including the mother tongue, age of the onset of L2 learning, L2 experience and amount of input, as well as diverse affective factors (Flege et al. 1995). It goes without saying that speakers’ familiarity with different foreign accents appreciably affects their perception of foreign accentedness (McDermott 1986). The perspectives towards foreign accentedness have drastically changed over the years – from regarding it as a speech impediment in need of therapy (Wójcik 1980 in Major 1987), to viewing it as a relatively systematic deviation from the accent of native speakers (Munro 1998).
Studies related to the perception of the degree of a foreign accent prevalingly focused on native speakers’ evaluations of non-native speech (Moyer 1999). There are, however, studies focusing on the perceptions by non-native speakers with participants more or less knowledgeable in linguistics (Thompson 1991). Various scales have been introduced, among which the nine-point rating scale proposed by Riney and Takagi (1999), which shall be adopted for the purpose of the present paper.

2. Models of pronunciation in efl classrooms

There is still an unresolved debate on what the model set for foreign language learners regarding the desired level of pronunciation should be. The situation is made even more complex by the fact that pronunciation is more difficult to standardise than grammar or vocabulary, especially when taking the global use of English into consideration (Hudson 1996). The discussion was opened ever since renowned linguists such as Quirk (1990) and Kachru (1991) presented their opposing views on the topic – the former advocating for the existence of a sole native standard as a yardstick in foreign language learning and the latter acknowledging the role of international varieties that need to be taken into consideration when setting the goals for learners. For others, Received Pronunciation remained the “eminent” accent (Wardhaugh 1998: 43).

Based on our experience with students and EFL teachers in Serbia, we can say that there is still a prevalent opinion that British English pronunciation represents the desirable attainment in pronunciation learning. Previous research on the attitudes to international varieties of English demonstrated a higher degree of preference towards the native varieties (McKenzie 2008; Zhang 2009) and, although teachers seem to be familiar with the need for introducing students to diverse varieties of English, the dominant publishers of English textbooks and materials available to Serbian teachers and learners offer publications in British English only. Despite students’ awareness of the existence of international varieties, they continue to strive for native-like pronunciation (Derwing 2003; McKay 2012). The last two decades have abounded in research on the acceptance of different varieties of English in the language classroom (Jenkins 2015; Matsuda 2017), with some prominent authors proposing the idea of the endonormative model making localised versions of English acceptable (Kirkpatrick 2007).
3. Foreign accent recognition and discrimination research

Research has shown that listeners have different attitudes regarding speakers with a foreign accent, which may occasionally result in negative stereotyping and professional discrimination (Lippi-Green 1997). About forty years ago, Kalin and Rayko (1978) investigated native speakers’ negative stereotyping and discriminating against Italians, Greeks, Portuguese, West Africans and Yugoslavians, deeming them more suitable for lower status job positions. Similarly, foreign accentedness correlated negatively with income in a study on Mexican Americans (Dávila et al. 1993). To determine how experience with non-native speech affects people’s attitudes, Sato (1998) demonstrated that rural high school students rated non-native speech more negatively than native speech in terms of personal and educational dimensions of speakers in question. Nevertheless, there are studies in which participants rejected such classifications of speakers and refused to make generalisations of the entire nation merely based on the speech of one sample recording (Derwing et al. 2002).

Negative stereotyping aside, research has also focused on how accurate people are in identifying languages behind a foreign accent and the cues that may serve as signals of their choice. Kolly et al. (2014) found that listeners relied on temporal cues and applied delexicalisation when deciding on the differences between the English-accented and French-accented German language. It is also the case that uvular trills often remind speakers of German, and nasalised vowels signal French-accented speech, while unrounding of front rounded vowels may point to English as the language underlying a foreign accent (Mareuil et al. 2008). Sometimes the knowledge of a language may not be a reliable predictor of the level of recognition of foreign accents. Major (2007) found supporting evidence in accent ratings of Brazilian Portuguese between groups of people with and without the knowledge of the language they rated, implying that speakers’ first or second language had nothing to do with foreign accent judgments.

In Serbian EFL context, research on foreign accent perception is rather scarce. In a study on foreign accent ratings and its communicative effects on native and non-native speakers, both lay and trained in linguistics, Jerotijević-Tišma (2017) detected more rigid evaluations within the group of linguistically skilled participants, yet it was concluded that both native and non-native speakers perceived a foreign accent in a similar fashion.

Following the previously presented theoretical background and rationale, the present study focuses on accentedness ratings and foreign accent recognition on
the part of Serbian EFL students with and without prior knowledge of different varieties of English, chiefly in terms of formalised academic settings. More precisely, we aimed to investigate whether Serbian EFL students are able to recognise the national origin of the speakers whose English is marked by a foreign accent, thus implying that a foreign accent can be regarded as a unique way to brand a particular nation.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research questions

With the proposed aims of the paper in mind, the empirical part of the study was based upon the following research questions:

- How do Serbian EFL students rate foreign accents of various speakers of English coming from different parts of the world?
- Can Serbian EFL students recognise where the speaker comes from?
- Do the accent ratings and identification correlate?
- Which of the foreign accents is believed to be the easiest to recognise?
- Are the accent ratings and foreign accent identification dependent on students’ familiarity with international varieties of English and their features?

4.2. Participants

Participants in the study were fourth-year English-major students at the Faculty of Philology and Arts, University of Kragujevac. The chosen sample of the participants (32 in total) was divided into two groups based on their prior formal knowledge on international varieties of English: 18 (G1) being relatively familiar with the features of the varieties since they attended the Varieties of English course for three classes a week at the time of the investigation, and 14 (G2) belonging to a control group, having no prior formal knowledge in English varieties (G2). The first group consisted of 11 male and 7 female participants, with a mean age of 22.83, and the second one of 2 male and 12 female students, with a mean age of 21.71. The distribution of students relative to gender and number is comparatively uneven.
due to the fact that students could freely choose the academic subject they wanted to attend. Since accent recognition represented one of the regular class activities, there was no intention to exclude any of the participants. The particular sample was selected because the participants were in their finishing year of undergraduate studies and already fairly familiar with the structure and features of the English language, literature and culture.

4. 3. Instruments and Procedure

For the purpose of the present study, recordings of 21 speakers were collected from the International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA)\textsuperscript{4} database and adapted beforehand, and the sample of recorded speech was carefully selected bearing in mind that all the speakers belonged to what Kachru (1995) calls the Expanding Circle of Englishes. They were all speaking English as a foreign or second language since we wanted to ensure that they possessed a foreign accent as opposed to being the speakers of international varieties with their own specific features of pronunciation. The speakers talked about their own personal life and experience and the recordings represented spontaneous speech. We made certain that the speakers were of different age and gender and that they came from all the available continents. Finally, 21 sample recordings lasting around 60-120 seconds each were played to our participants and their task was to rate the degree of foreign accent on a scale from 1-9 – starting from the least prominent to the most prominent (Riney, Takagi 1999; Guion et al. 2000), and then to circle the country of the speaker’s origin, where four possible answers were offered in a multiple choice questionnaire. The number of options was chosen having the usual composition of the supplied answers in a multiple-choice type of questionnaire in mind, with two distractors being countries with similar sounding languages and the rest being picked at random. The post-listening task was dedicated to answering the question whose participant’s foreign accent, i.e. country of origin, was the easiest to identify. Accordingly, the instruments for the present study were two-fold: a sample recording on the one hand, and a questionnaire with a rating scale, multiple choice questions and one open-ended question on the other.

The entire listening and answering procedure was performed during the winter semester of the 2018/2019 academic year at the Faculty of Philology and Arts, University of Kragujevac, ensuring that both groups of participants had equal conditions for listening to the recordings. Since the students were supposed to form

\textsuperscript{4}Available at https://www.dialectsarchive.com/dialects-accents
their judgment based on their first impression, the recordings were exceptionally played more than once, i.e. only in the cases when the quality of the recording itself prevented the participants from forming an immediate opinion. The entire examination lasted approximately 35 minutes, with the recorded sample lasting about 26 minutes in total. A closer description of the recorded speakers is provided in Table 1:

| Speaker | Country      | Age | Gender | Occupation          |
|---------|--------------|-----|--------|---------------------|
| S1      | Ghana        | 30  | male   | student             |
| S2      | Hong Kong    | 20  | female | singer, B.A.        |
| S3      | Saudi Arabia | 18  | male   | student             |
| S4      | Norway       | 32  | female | theatre director    |
| S5      | Germany      | 30  | male   | visual artist       |
| S6      | Greece       | 58  | female | PhD                 |
| S7      | Somalia      | 42  | male   | unknown             |
| S8      | Russia       | 50  | female | university professor|
| S9      | Japan        | 51  | female | English teacher     |
| S10     | Puerto Rico  | 59  | female | retired teacher     |
| S11     | Zimbabwe     | 44  | female | secondary school    |
| S12     | China        | 23  | male   | University student  |
| S13     | Italy        | 47  | female | financial advisor   |
| S14     | Dominican Republic | 45 | male   | maintenance worker |
| S15     | India        | 33  | female | housewife           |
| S16     | Papua New Guinea | 24 | male   | civil engineer      |
| S17     | Turkey       | 28  | male   | PhD student         |
| S18     | France       | 68  | male   | financial advisor   |
| S19     | Romania      | 30  | female | theatre director    |
| S20     | Bangladesh   | 30  | male   | PhD student         |
| S21     | Serbia       | 40  | female | pianist             |

4.4. Data processing

The obtained results were numerically processed using the SPSS statistical software package, version 24.0. The analysis included descriptive statistics and percentage counts for the accent ratings and recognition, Pearson’s bivariate correlations for estimating whether accent ratings and accent identification show linear connectedness, and the Mann-Whitney U test, for comparing the results of the chosen groups of the participants in our study.
5. Results and discussion

Table 2 presents the results of the conducted tests for foreign accent ratings and identification accuracy for both groups of participants. In the case of foreign accent ratings, it seems adequate to clarify that we chose means in lieu of median scores because the analysis involved ordinal data and found information on the mean more informative.

Table 2: Foreign Accent (F.A.) Ratings and Accuracy of Identification

| Speaker       | F.A. Ratings Mean G1 | Accuracy G1 (%) | F.A. Ratings Mean G2 | Accuracy G2 (%) |
|---------------|-----------------------|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| Ghana         | 5.11 SD=1.08          | 16.7            | 5.29 SD=1.20         | 21.4            |
| Hong Kong     | 5.11 SD=1.41          | 27.8            | 5.35 SD=1.55         | 28.6            |
| Saudi Arabia  | 6.83 SD=1.04          | 61.1            | 6.64 SD=1.15         | 71.4            |
| Norway        | 3.56 SD=1.04          | 33.3            | 4.5 SD=1.02          | 28.6            |
| Germany       | 7.56 SD=1.09          | 77.8            | 7.5 SD=1.29          | 64.3            |
| Greece        | 4.89 SD=1.02          | 38.9            | 5.21 SD=1.12         | 35.7            |
| Somalia       | 7.83 SD=1.15          | 61.1            | 8.21 SD=0.80         | 42.9            |
| Russia        | 8.06 SD=1.11          | 88.9            | 8.07 SD=0.99         | 78.9            |
| Japan         | 8.22 SD=0.73          | 77.8            | 8.36 SD=0.93         | 64.3            |
| Puerto Rico   | 7.28 SD=0.96          | 72.2            | 8.57 SD=0.51         | 57.1            |
| Zimbabwe      | 8.44 SD=0.70          | 88.9            | 8.14 SD=1.23         | 71.4            |
| China         | 6.72 SD=0.75          | 88.9            | 7.79 SD=0.80         | 50              |
| Italy         | 6.39 SD=0.98          | 100             | 6.21 SD=0.70         | 92.9            |
Upon initial observation of the data from Table 2, we notice some general tendencies within both groups. Namely, we see that G2 tends to rate a foreign accent a little higher than G1, the accuracy percentages being a little lower than that of G1. The G1 participants, i.e. the group that had prior formal knowledge on international varieties of English, evaluated speakers from France, Zimbabwe, Japan, Russia, Turkey and Somalia as speakers with the most conspicuous foreign accent. At the same time, speakers from Norway, Romania, Papua New Guinea and Serbia were rated the lowest on the scale of foreign accentedness.

The situation is similar with the G2, i.e. the group with no prior formal knowledge on varieties, mainly when it comes to the lowest rated speakers. However, G2 rated the speaker from Puerto Rico as the one with the most noticeable foreign accent, along with speakers from France, Zimbabwe, Russia, Japan and Turkey. The similarity of groups’ decisions is striking, but it may be attributed to the strength of foreign accent influence on making an impression on an interlocutor, rather than to the influence of familiarity with international varieties of English.

When it comes to an accuracy percentage, the differences between groups are more evident, with G2 being generally less accurate than G1. Consequently, a conclusion can be drawn that the influence of the knowledge of varieties may have come in handy for the participants here. The highest percentage of identification accuracy was registered for the speakers from France and Italy for both groups, followed by Russia, China and Zimbabwe speakers. The fact that speakers from Italy
and France received the highest accuracy scores indicates that students recognise
European languages more easily, since they are more familiar with them in the
sense of having been more exposed to them, especially through music and films. Obviously, speakers from Romania, Dominican Republic and Serbia posed the
greatest difficulty for recognition, since both groups displayed the lowest accuracy
scores for these speakers. Simultaneously, the accent ratings are low for these
speakers as well, which may indicate the interrelationship between foreign accent
strength and simplicity of recognition. It seems particularly surprising that the
students were not able to recognise a foreign accent coming from a speaker with
the same mother tongue as their own, but this could be explained by low foreign
accent rating values.

Table 3 displays the results of statistical analyses, where a non-parametric Mann-
Whitney U test was chosen to account for the differences between groups in terms
of accent ratings and recognition accuracy. To reiterate, a bivariate correlation test
was selected in order to investigate whether there was a linear interconnectedness
between accent ratings and accuracy of foreign accent recognition within the
individual groups of participants.

Table 3 Results of Statistical Analyses

| F.A. Ratings Comparison | Accuracy Comparison | G1 Correlations | G2 Correlations |
|-------------------------|---------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Mann-Whitney U=50878.500 | Mann-Whitney U=50253.000 | r=0.153 | r=0.375 |
| p=0.057 | p=0.013 | p=0.004 | p=0.001 |

Foreign accent rating comparison results show that there is no statistically
significant difference between the two groups, which leads to the conclusion that
familiarity with international varieties did not significantly affect the way our
students had rated the degree of foreign accentedness. However, we can see that
in some cases the second group had the tendency to rate foreign accentedness a
little higher than the first group, which can be a manifestation of a higher level
of tolerance for a foreign accent developed during the Varieties of English course.

On the other hand, accuracy percentage comparison shows a statistically
significant difference between the groups, with the first group being more accurate
in foreign accent recognition, which in turn can be attributed to the experience
they had listening to various recordings during the academic course they attended.
It should be emphasised that the second group likewise showed a relatively high
percentage of foreign accent identification, which goes in line with the assumption that a foreign accent represents a singular brand of a particular nation.

Correlation testing results are very interesting, since both groups displayed a positive correlation (a statistically significant one) between foreign accent ratings and recognition accuracy. Participants displayed higher accuracy scores for those accents they rated higher in terms of the degree of foreign accentedness. This practically means that the stronger the foreign accent, the easier it is to recognise.

Finally, in the concluding stage of the testing we asked the participants *Which of the speakers was the easiest/hardest to recognise?* According to the self-report, the easiest was French for both groups (88.89% and 100%), and the most difficult was Dominican Republic for G1 (44.44%) and Papua New Guinea for G2 (57.14%).

6. Conclusion

Empirical research showed no statistically significant difference between the analysed groups in terms of foreign accent rating. Also, the results of the conducted investigation show a high percentage of identification accuracy for both groups of participants. Speakers from France, Zimbabwe, Japan, Russia, Turkey and Somalia received the highest foreign accent ratings, while speakers from Italy and France exhibited the highest identification accuracy.

The conducted analysis likewise pointed to the statistically significant correlations between foreign accent ratings and accuracy scores. More precisely, a positive correlation was found for the estimated foreign accent strength and the level of accuracy, which led us to conclude that the more prominent the foreign accent was, the easier it was for students to recognise where the speaker came from.

The obtained results can lead to two possible conclusions: that accent identification is independent of the knowledge of varieties, or that the second group of students (at least some of its members) possessed knowledge on the varieties although it had not been acquired during the *Varieties of English* course. Consequently, one of the observed limitations of the study is the lack of diagnostic testing administered before the examination. It is, however, important to add that the testing was initially made difficult due to temporal and logistic limitations, as well as the lack of adequate testing tools that would assess the knowledge objectively since the level of exposure to different varieties of English from external, non-academic sources is highly variable. To gain more insight into the specificity of the phenomenon, some room for future research can be dedicated to mechanisms
of foreign accent imitation, as well as on investigations concerning foreign accent perception by students who are not majoring in language and literature studies.

Regardless of the recognised limitations, and bearing in mind that both groups displayed high levels of foreign accent recognition, a conclusion can be drawn that foreign accents do indeed represent specific and authentic brands of particular nations. Since a language is often taken to be one of the most distinctive features of cultural and national background, and since its oral realisation is more diverse and generally more recognisable as a specific mark of one’s social identity than its written counterpart, our findings indicate that a specific accent serves as a strong instrument of association with a corresponding nationality.

Additionally, the results of the present paper underscore important pedagogical implications for English as a foreign language taught in Serbia and elsewhere. Familiarising students with features of different varieties of English may have several benefits – not only can it decrease negative stereotyping and increase comprehension, but it can also lead to a higher self-esteem and confidence, which could result in raising the level of motivation for learning.

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Rezime

Rad istražuje da li srpski studenti anglistike mogu prepoznati koja nacija stoji iza stranog naglaska, odnosno odakle dolazi govornik čiji je engleski jezik markiran stranim naglaskom. Na taj način nastojali smo da ispitamo da li se strani naglasak može smatrati svojevrsnim brendom jednog naroda. Imajući u vidu da strani naglasak podrazumeva da fonetsko-fonološke karakteristike maternjeg jezika izbijaju na površinu pri govornikovoj upotrebi stranog jezika, analizirali smo da li je moguće da studenti engleskog kao stranog jezika „dokuče” strani naglasak i prepoznaju maternji jezik govornika. Empirijsko istraživanje je sprovedeno u formi kvazieksperimenta sa testiranjem ocene i prepoznavanja stranog naglaska. Preciznije rečeno, zadatak studenata je bio da zaokruže zemlju iz koje dolazi govornik, a nakon glavnog testiranja usledila je kratka anketa. Odabrana populacija ispitanika sastojala se od studenata koji su o varijetetima engleskog jezika imali određeno predznanje, kao i od studenata koji nisu formalno prošli kroz akademski kurs o internacionalnim varijetetima engleskog. Dobijeni rezultati su analizirani statistički i pokazalo se da ispitanici iznenađujuće dobro prepoznaju kom narodu pripada govornik sa stranim naglaskom, a naročito studenti koji su pohađali kurs Varijeteti engleskog jezika na Filološko-umetničkom fakultetu u Kragujevcu. Takođe je ustanovljeno da tačnost prepoznavanja pozi-
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tivno korelira sa stepenom istaknutosti stranog akcenta. Imajući u
vidu da je i druga grupa ispitanika tačno prepoznavala zemlju porekla
govornika, nameće se zaključak da strani naglasak može na izvestan
način brendirati jedan narod. Dobijeni rezultati imaju važne peda-
goške implikacije, naročito za kontekst učenja stranog jezika, budući
da ukazuju na karakter percepcije učenika stranog jezika i njihovo
znanje o jezičkim osobnostima uopšte uzev.

Ključne reči: strani naglasak, brend, maternji jezik, engleski kao in-
ternacionalni jezik, srpski studenti anglistike.

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