A fundamental aspect of recent research on second language acquisition (SLA) has centered on the notion of accent and its relevance for second language (L2) pronunciation teaching and learning. Claims of the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) point to the unlikelihood of achieving a native accent for individuals who begin learning L2 pronunciation post-puberty. Research examining such claims has been mounting throughout the past three decades or so, with findings of some studies negating the absoluteness of the CPH claims and showing exceptional cases of adults gaining native-like fluency in the L2 after puberty (e.g., Bongaerts, Planken & Schils, 1995). A sub-field of research on accent was directed towards investigating “foreign accent” as the general phonological ultimate attainment of L2 learners and its implications for individuals inside educational settings and their interactions in society. Some of this research has focused on the possible personal and social ramifications of foreign accent and its relation to notions of status, ethnicity and power. It is in this last domain that Foreign Accent: The phenomenon of non-native speech by Alene Moyer is located.

In this volume, Moyer explores the multifaceted nature of accent and holistically illustrates factors that contribute to the development of a foreign accent. The book comprises seven chapters that discuss neurobiological, cognitive, affective, instructional, and sociolinguistic relevance to non-native accent. Chapter 1 begins by defining the concept of accent linguistically and explicating it as a layer of communicability in the L2, and exhibiting predispositions towards accent. Chapter 2 leads the reader to the realm of neurology in relation to phonology and the emergence of foreign accent showing how the CPH is relevant in predicting accent and how the plasticity of the brain before puberty allows for the development of native accent. Chapter 3 presents a socio-psychological perspective by raising awareness of intrinsic and extrinsic individual variations and the influence of a wide array of interacting personality factors that play a part in developing fluency.

Chapter 4 discusses practical and theoretical underpinnings of sounding foreign beginning with reviewing historically politics relevance to standardization, progressing into discussing communicative effects of foreign accents, and ending with how the society reacts to foreignness. Chapter 5 explores ethno-cultural ramifications of accent from a legal perspective, noting instances of discrimination and
social isolation suffered by individuals with foreign accents. In Chapter 6 the discussion moves to the pedagogical implications of foreign accent in the language classroom, and investigates the impact of instruction on eliminating foreign accents. It raises a distinction between two approaches to phonological teaching: formal and discoursal training, arguing for the superiority of the latter. It also presents some strategies to address accented speech in the classroom. Chapter 7 brings the story to a sophisticated end that could be the start of further research on this complex construct that we term “accent”. The chapter questions the relevance of “standard” accents in today’s society in light of global developments on bases of demographic and contextual changes, and thus provides perspectives to researchers on how to judge nativeness in studies that look at native and non-native judgments of speech samples.

The value of this book lies in two major areas. The first is Moyer’s holistic view of accent, evident in the diversity of factors she considers as contributing to the development of a foreign accent, and the wide array of possible ramifications of having a foreign accent. Second, not only does Moyer raise awareness of the concept of accent with its dense components and layers, but in Chapter 6, “Accent and instruction” she also offers some classroom strategies to address accented speech. Though we may ultimately question the statement at the very beginning of the chapter promising to find “formal, instructed practice as a means to change … [accent]” (p. 146) in light of phonological fossilization claims (Han, 2013), it is conceivable to accept the argument for the efficacy of some classroom techniques that may help fostering phonological fluency among L2 learners. Viewing accent as a “skill” clarifies the first impression I had towards the word “change” in the statement above and supports the scholarly proposition of giving more attention to prosodic aspects, voice quality, and pitch changes to develop the communicative abilities of learners and to simultaneously minimize the pitfalls of accented speech. Accent is indeed a skill that could be developed by practicing language in use and this backs the discoursal approach to teaching phonology called for in the volume.

Another strength of the book relates to Moyer’s clear discussion and explanation of different terminology related to the field. She considers often-controversial issues such as standardization, intelligibility, comprehensibility, and accentedness considering these as “matter[s] of some debate” (p. 171), and discusses how attitudes towards “standard” and “correct” pronunciation have changed over time noting that “the whole notion of nativeness has become murky” (p. 91; italics in original), and showing how non-native accents can be effective in communicative situations. This view has been and still is one of the hotly debated issues in Applied Linguistics and Language Teaching for the simple reason that this proposition runs counter to learners’ wishes and adherences. The great majority of students and some teachers still view nativeness as the goal of learning and teaching despite such professionally and scholarly dispositions in this regard (see, for example,

All in all, the volume enriches our understanding of both L2 pronunciation teaching and research. In light of current global developments of English as an international lingua franca and its implications on concepts of nativeness and foreignness, it becomes clear that such terminologies are blurred given evidence of successful communication achieved by non-native – “foreign-accented” – speakers in various communicative contexts (Jenkins 2000). This should be reflected in L2 pronunciation teaching in both SL and FL classrooms but more strongly in FL contexts where such developments have not yet reached the majority of students and teachers who still adhere to native-speakerism as the only possible target to aim for. Second, this account sets out clear guidelines for researchers in the field on how to establish reliability in studies that mainly look at native versus non-native judgments of accented speech and that explore differences between native and non-native speech samples. Such studies, in light of the clear distinctions raised here in this volume, should move beyond this criterion of nativeness to considering degrees of communicability to measure superiority or success.

References


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