

## Reviewing Non-Standard Languages and Social Identity

Rongjia Chen<sup>1, a, †</sup>, Puisum Tsoi<sup>2, b, †</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Linguistics, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB T6G 2R3, Canada

<sup>2</sup>School of Literature and Journalism, Sichuan University, Chengdu, Sichuan, 610207, China

<sup>a</sup>rongjia@ualberta.ca, <sup>b</sup>cecillia1120@163.com

<sup>†</sup>These authors contributed equally.

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**Abstract:** This paper reviews the relationship between non-standard language varieties and social identity theory under different contexts. The main arguments were raised from perspectives of both the first language (L1) learners and second language (L2) learners. We started out with a context of learning environment, which is the non-standard language of second language acquisition (SLA) speakers and social identity; then we continued with the contexts that are less focused on learning community, and more on the major phenomena in a social group with multiple ethnicities and immigrants, which lead to our second topic, the non-standard language varieties and sociolinguistic discrimination. The results of our analysis show that foreign accent is an important component of building up a sense of social belonging and social identity during the process of SLA learning, and the attitude of the native speakers of the target language towards different foreign accents impact the self-awareness of the learners. Our analysis also reveals that even within one language, variations exist among varieties, typically standard and non-standard, due to social factors in terms of economics, regions and ethnicities, which could lead to linguistic discriminations that put threat on some specific varieties and reduce the variety diversity. In addition, after careful review of relevant study, we observe that there are still blanks in the field that future researcher needs to fill in, for example, studies on network languages and some small languages with a small number of speakers.

### 1. Introduction

Non-standard language or dialect refers to a variety in a language that is not conventionally and socially beneficial, and usually associated with second language learners, regions, etc. [1]. However, it is mostly linguistically equal as standard language. Standard language is the variety promoted by public institutions within a society that is the language of literature, education, and politically powerful, which might provide them with higher social status. The criteria of determining standard language is predominantly influenced by social, historical and political factors [1]. In this paper, we narrowed the topic to their associations with social identity, which is an indispensable component of self-cognition and self-esteem. Languages have been a common tool for people to build their social identity, then assimilate themselves to the social groups. Languages could also be the weapons to defend their social culture and status. In this paper, we will illustrate the relationship between non-standard language and social identity theory in association with two main topics, namely SLA speakers and linguistic discriminations. We will discuss these two parts in terms of both first language speakers and second language speakers under different social circumstances.

### 2. The Non-Standard Language of L2(Second Language) Speaker and Social Identity Building in SLA (Second Language Acquisition)

#### 2.1 The Background of the Research of L2(Second language) Learner and their peers' accent

One of the most significant figures of the non-standard language is “foreigner talk” (a kind of speech

or pronunciation which is non-native), commonly shown as various accents, which are affected by their L1(Mother Language) of users.

The non-standard language of L2 learner would directly affect the attitude of response during their communication with others, both in positive and negative aspects. There are some accents which are considered more elegant and associated with sophistication, such as the European accents. While there also are some accents suffering from stereotyping, harassment and discrimination. During L2 acquisition, L2 learners show different opinions of their own accent according to the response they have got from listeners. Some of the L2 learners may choose to adopt it, while others may make every effort to disengage themselves from the accent. Meanwhile, the process of social identity building of these L2 learners is developing silently, forking into different sides.

As we have mentioned before, since the process of social identity building is closely related with social interaction, it is essential to analyze this procedure in social contexts from the view of native speakers and L2 learners distinctively. The following passages will start our discussion about several common standpoints of foreign accent from the perspective of L2 learners, positive and negative.

#### *L2(Second Language) Learners Attitudes towards Foreign Accent*

Major indicates that foreign accents could be easily discerned by not only native speakers but also L2 learners [2]. Although people have the same ability for accent distinguishing, their attitudes toward foreign accent are diverse; sometimes even run in the opposite direction. From the perspective of the L2 learners, their “foreigner talk” is part of their ethnic group identity and they take different attitudes to their foreign accent. The mimic of the pronunciation of the target language could be a threat to their social identity when two language groups (L1 and L2) are in conflict, while there does exist some other nations where regards the imitation as a simple way to pursue intelligibility and comprehensibility.

The experiment carried by Gatabonton indicated that the Francophones in Quebec regard their peers’ L2 accent in the target language as a symbol of these peers’ level of ethnic affiliation [3]. Their positive ascription about peers’ ethnic affiliation reduced along with the decrease of L2 accent in peers’ English speech, feeling threatened by the Anglophones. The more accented their peers’ speech was, the more likely that labels of “loyalty” would be attached to those L2 speakers in the mono-ethnic condition. Because of that, the moderately accented as well as the heavily accented ones were more likely to be chosen as leaders. In such a context, it is possible and even imperative to sacrifice intelligibility and comprehensibility in order to maintain the important status of social identity through the “foreign talk”.

In another part of the same experiment, the research team examined the attitudes of native Chinese learners of English in Montréal toward their peers’ English learning oral output. The result was exactly the reverse of the previous one: although they would also assign more ethnic affiliation to the peers who showed more L2 accent in their English speech, there wouldn’t be any “Anglophones threat” in their mind. For the Chinese in this study, their own degree of ethnic group affiliation and ethnic identity could be compromised in a certain degree to guarantee the efficiency in the L2, which also reflected in the leader choosing: the Chinese learner would prefer to vote for those non-accented speakers to the moderately accented and heavily accented speakers. Overall, it is hardly surprising that some L2 learners chose to preserve foreign accent as a shield to defend threat from the target language since L1 is always shown as their clearest expression of identity. Such behavior may distort the social identity building and develop into a stubborn prejudice, which would bring negative effects to L2 acquisition at the same time. In contrast, those who keep an open mind on accent and identity would gain more motivation and opportunity to improve their oral output since they wouldn’t sacrifice intelligibility for social identity.

The reason for this alteration in attitude and affiliation could be what Downs mentioned in his book *Language and Society* [4]. Downs chose Montréal in Quebec as the place to study bilingualism not only because this is where that one finds the two languages in regular contact and a sizable immigrant population, but also because it is an economic center. Even though Montréal is considered as a Francophone province, relatively few francophones are monolingual in french, while almost all anglophones are monolingual in English. Part of this has to do with the fact that in 1960, English dominated economic life in Quebec. In other words, it is easier for monolingual anglophones to get a good job. This was reflected in company advertisements, occupation and income (e.g. the jobs

advertised in English were the white-collar ones). Therefore, the high status of English gave rise to high rates of bilingualism among francophones, which widened the gap between the two ethnicities.

As Derwing and Munro said, intelligibility and accentedness (how different a pattern of speech sounds compared to the local variety) are partially independent [5]. In other words, it is possible to be completely intelligible with a foreign accent. These two features could be co-existing during L2 oral output, so there is no need for those L2 learners to struggle with their accent all the time. It could become a wolf in sheep's cloth, but it could also benefit the L2 learners. As Pica noted, the generally accepted goal of pronunciation teaching was native-like speech, but that goal was clearly unrealistic. Therefore, the foreign accent is something that could never be easily erased by L2 acquisition. The foreign accent should be and only be regarded as an invisible identity card instead of an excuse for self-imposed isolation [5]. We would argue that there is no precise definition of a "correct accent" or a "wrong accent". Instead, we agree that "standard/ non-standard pronunciation" exist. What we could define is a "standard pronunciation" which is marked in the international phonetic alphabet. Imitating the standard pronunciation does not mean to admit the "inferiority" of the learners' mother tongue or to praise the superiority of the target language, but an attempt to speak in a natural way.

## 2.2 The non-standard language and sociolinguistic discrimination

- Variability of language is not constrained to imperfect mastery of L2, there are also non-standard forms used by native speakers. For instance, accented English is a form of non-standard (imperfect mastery), but there are also non-standard forms used by anglophones (e.g.: ain't), that are in fact rarely used by learners of English. Linguistics usually use the term "grammatical" to describe how "accurate" people speak, instead of what they are supposed to say (according to some book or pedant). However, not all mistakes that we make while speaking or writing are technically wrong, sometimes it is just a matter of standard and non-standard speech or spelling. With the problem of linguistic continua and multifactorial characteristic of language, it is hard to define the boundaries between languages. Therefore, linguists such as sociolinguists prefer the term "variety" as a neutral term. It applies to any kind of language we want to consider as an entity, for example "Canadian English", but also, "middle class Canadian English".
- According to what Milroy and Milroy mentioned in their book, standard variety is the most codified one among all other varieties, more in terms of lexicon and grammar, less in terms of pronunciation, however, it is not always the most logical or systematic, such as in English, the pronominal system. Standardization is a question of ideology and norms imposed from above by society [1]. Ideology simply means the way that people looking at things, not the way that things naturally and inherently are. It is subjective for people to think it is obvious and natural that some speech varieties are better than others. However, it is like a convention, largely arbitrary and deeply entrenched in people's mind. As noted in the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association's (ASHA) Position Paper on Social Dialects, "the English language is comprised of many linguistic varieties". ASHA's position is that "no dialectal variety of English is a disorder or a pathological form of speech or language". The position paper further noted, however, that "society has adopted the linguistic idealization model that standard English is the linguistic archetype" [6]. This notion clearly sums up what it means by standard varieties are socially better.
- Milroy and Milroy also pointed out the importance of knowing the standard and stated that not doing so blocks social mobility [1]. For example, according to Adler, a job applicant who speaks in a non-standard dialect may be penalized when applying for jobs requiring middle-class communication skills [7]. Some employers may consider not speaking the standard variety as carelessness and laziness, which shows that although all varieties of language should be linguistically equal, the standard one is socially privileged and comes with more prestige. Furthermore, Cole argued that "the underlying erroneous (and elitist) assumption of imposed standard English is that all nonstandard English-speaking people are 'at risk for becoming lower-class, blue collar, or even illiterate and unemployable if they are not taught to code-switch to standard English" [8], which points out that standard and non-standard language is continuously

affecting the attitude and opinions of employers towards employees in workplace and the fact that language using is considered closely intersected with social hierarchies.

- Based on the study Lindemann did in Georgia State University, familiarity and socio-political relationships with countries of origin appeared to play a role in how native speakers rate other English varieties with accents from different regions. Evaluation was often central to description, with a category of stigmatized, often “broken”, English used for all non-native speakers except perhaps (Western) Europeans [9]. This is considered as linguistic discrimination, a phenomenon that is usually not tolerated for other social divisions, but it is publicly acceptable [1]. It emphasizes the point that the way one uses language is related to who you are and where you are from. This study also backs up the view that although linguists have publicly stated that all language varieties are equal, varieties are only equal in a linguistic sense, not in a social sense [4].
- Connecting to the social identity theory, if language is a tool for people to link themselves with their origin, then how people use language reflects the way that they view themselves or the way that they want to be viewed. In the light of Gal’s study done in an Austrian border village Oberwart, they found that young women are more willing to speak German, which is related to urban value, instead of Hungarian, which is related to peasant value [10]. Their preference is an expression of self-identity, and it is a social choice echoed and bolstered by a linguistic one. The fact that they want to assimilate to the language of higher status and urban lifestyle indicates how they see themselves and how they hope to be seen as well.

### **3. Research Gap and Future Direction**

In this review, we find that most of the studies in the field of non-standard language are focused on 1) local dialect and accent and 2) the comparison between colloquial style and literary style. While there are few studies on the “Internet buzzword”, a brand-new kind of non-standard language, which started to spread over the network since the 21st century and widely used among the youth. This research gap may due to the peculiarity of “Internet buzzword”- it is too novice and unstable, changing and innovating at a rapid speed along with the renewal of hot points on social media. Therefore, we suggest that future research on non-standard language might extend to include “Internet buzzword”. In addition, since English is an international language, it plays an essential role in research as a tool to express meanings and a main target to be explored in linguistics fields. Hence, most of the research on non-standard Language is English based, which neglected the importance of other languages. There is a large number of languages which exist in a non-English social surrounding (e.g. some Asians and Africans languages), but there are few studies about the non-standard language in these language systems. Therefore, we suggest that future research should cover more minority languages and dialects.

### **4. Conclusion**

Based on the articles, we observed that non-standard language plays an essential part during the process of social identity building in both language acquisition and social gaze aspects. During the process of SLA, non-standard language is commonly known as “foreign accent”, which can indicate the ethnicity of the language user, contributing to a high proportion of social identity building. L2 learners who speak different mother tongues come to the foreign accent of their peers’ demonstrate different attitudes towards their peers’ foreign accent. Those whose L1 is in conflict with L2 would show a conservative and hostile attitude towards their peers who make a native L2 pronunciation, trying to preserve their own ethnic identity by rejecting standard L2 pronunciation. While there are many show a positive attitude and don’t feel that their social identity is threatened by L2.

Another important finding to note is that social discrimination also affects languages. For native speakers, there could be a judgment of superior and inferior accent or dialect due to the regional differences (e.g. the economic conditions). Accents or dialects, which come from a region with low economic conditions are more likely to be discriminated. Furthermore, L2 speakers who also own identity of immigrants would also be treated in different ways according to their accent. Those who

own an Eastern accent are more possible to encounter culture harassment. In the future, there should have more teachers and L2 learners paying attention to the relationship between non-standard language and social identity before and during the process of SLA in order to build up a positive attitude towards accent and dialects. In summary, an objective overview of the non-standard language and social identity could break the barrier of negative social gaze, providing an environment that can improve accents tolerance and motivate L2 learners by reducing the stereotypes of accents.

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