Accent, Identity and Linguistic Homelessness

Introduction

Nowadays, perhaps more than ever before, people are moving around the world and making homes for themselves in countries far from their places of birth. What might the linguistic implications be, however, for the children who move from one country to another, and potentially back again to their home country? If we assume that accent is part of our identity and overall sense of self, then a change in accent might subsequently lead to a change in identity and self-perception for such children. Within this paper, I apply the relationship between accent and identity to English-speaking children who grow up in two English-speaking countries, placing this topic within the framework of 'cultural homelessness' (Vivero and Jenkins, 1999b; Vivero and Jenkins, 2011). Given the overall dearth of research within this specific area, however, regarding accent change in English bi-dialectal children[1] – and more specifically how this change impacts on identity – this paper seeks to discuss this phenomenon, arguing that it can ultimately lead to '*linguistic* homelessness'.

Personal Background

While this paper focuses on relevant theoretical issues, I offer my own comments in relevant places. Having been raised as a boy in both England and the United States, I can appreciate the relationship between accent and identity. Though born in the United States, by the age of 11 I had lived in England for seven years and in the USA for four years and the moving back and forth brought with it changes in accent and subsequently, my overall identity.

Background to the Paper

Turner (1999:8) references social identity, describing it as 'a person's definition of self in terms of some social group membership with the associated value connotations and emotional significance'. Arguably, language is one factor in this identification, with language use considered to be 'a series of acts of identity' (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985:181), with

[1] In this paper, 'English bi-dialectal children' refers specifically to native English speaking children who grow up in two different English-speaking countries.

Chambers (2003:274) stating that 'the underlying cause of sociolinguistic differences, largely beneath consciousness, is the human instinct to establish and maintain social identity'.

Several studies have specifically focused on the link between language and identity (Labov, 1966; Labov, 1978; Ochs, 1993; Foreman, 2000; Jones, 2001; Myers, 2006; Evans and Iverson, 2007; Becker, 2009), with a central claim that accent can contribute to identity as it indeed shows identification with a particular social group (Foulkes and Docherty, 1999; Myers, 2006; Trudgill, 1986). Kinzler, Shutts, DeJesus and Spelke (2009:624) state that 'language may provide an…important, social category that guides inferences about individuals from infancy throughout adulthood'. Mugglestone (2003) further states that accent acts 'as a marker of group membership and as a signal of solidarity' (page 43) and 'each utterance…becomes in effect an act of identity' (page 57). Therefore, the phonetic realisation of each word we speak identifies us as a member of a social community, a community with which we might take pride in and therefore seek such identification.

The rationale for a focus on children's accent and identity is based on the fact that it is during childhood that so much of the child's identity is shaped and crafted, through the influence of parents, peers and teachers. The person the child will become is a product of these influences, and many more, and the influence of accent on a child's identity should not be underestimated. It is arguably when children acquire a new accent and are perceived differently by others, and subsequently perceive themselves differently, that the change is felt regarding their sense of self.

It is conceded that growing up in two different countries involves cultural adjustments that play a large role in the child's development and which have an impact far beyond accent change. This paper does not deny this; rather, it seeks to discuss the role of accent change as a factor in its own right within English bi-dialectal children's identity and hopefully reveal something of an otherwise relatively under-investigated subject. Considering that there are perhaps many English bi-dialectal children being raised outside their native country, this paper can hopefully make a timely contribution in terms of exploring relevant issues regarding language and identity.

What is Cultural – and Linguistic – Homelessness?

Cultural homelessness refers to the situation faced by children who reside in more than one culture during their early life and as a result, may experience a sense of not belonging to one culture or the other. Vivero and Jenkins (1999b) explain that this 'homelessness' is based on a feeling of not belonging, of not having a cultural home in the sense of lacking a single culture as a unified reference group to which a child can feel secure. Kanno (2000) discusses the issue of bicultural Japanese children, *kikokushijo*, who leave Japan to live overseas with their parents and the issues they face, such as difficulties adjusting to their new culture.

Language difficulties (i.e. having to learn a new second language) can be one of the challenges faced by such children, and others, yet Mooradian (2004) references accent change as a positive result from living overseas, categorising it within language competence (to also include having possibly developed a new language). A study of Isogai, Hayashi and Uno (1999), however, suggests that accent change can be perceived as quite negative, and potentially lead to adjustment problems for the child when returning home from overseas. They focus specifically on Japanese children who grow up in both Japan and overseas, referencing the term global nomads to describe such children. Within their study, they report on a Japanese boy who, returning to Japan from having lived abroad, had to change his accent from the one he had acquired overseas, to one deemed more accurate for Japanese standards. Thus, a new accent, and well as a new language, had been acquired, yet the former was seen as problematic.

Multicultural or bicultural (Mooradian, 2004) might be fitting terms to describe such children, and it is acknowledged that there could be potential benefits to being part of two cultures. Church (1982) states that many bicultural individuals experience a positive change in their identity based on having experienced identity growth. However, we should not dismiss the potential negative realities for some children. Vivero and Jenkins (2011) discuss the fact that culturally homeless children report feelings of being different, feelings of isolation and a sensation of not belonging. It is again conceded that any difficulties faced by such children can go far beyond the linguistic realm, to include homesickness, making new friends and even anger toward their parents.

However, it is reiterated that a change in accent can lead to a change in identity and this in turn can lead to confusion regarding a child's sense of self; this too can be challenging. If a child's accent has adopted features of the new country's speech and retained features from his/her native country, a hybrid-accent would result – neither one, nor the other. This is an apt metaphor for the child's identity and even as an adult, I have been told

that my accent is 'an interesting combination' (of British and American), that I sound 'half and half', or that I sound like 'an educated American'. Chambers and Trudgill (1980) might refer to this as a 'fudged dialect'; I refer to it here from more of a sociolinguistic perspective: *linguistic homelessness*.

However, even in cases in which the child's accent has fully acquired features of the new region's pronunciation, this still contributes to linguistic homelessness by virtue of the child being identified as a member of their foreign home (at least by those outside the family) when returning to their native country. At this point, the child may well ask 'which country *is* my native country?' When returning to the USA to visit when living in England, I was sometimes asked by strangers what part of England I was from; at this point, an otherwise 'perfect' English accent did not make me feel that I was English *per se* (nor did I feel completely American anymore). We see again this notion of a hybrid identity, symbolised partly by accent use, and subsequent perception by others as well as self-perception, again a case of linguistic homelessness.

Accent and Identity

While there have been studies which have focused on the relationship between language and identity within children (Carrington and Short, 1995; Martin, Smith and Dhesi, 1998; Howard and Gill, 2001; Scourfield, Dicks, Drakeford and Davies, 2006; Dong, 2007; Kinzler, Shutts, De Jesus and Spelke, 2009; Polat and Mahalingappa, 2010), the discussion tends to be rather implicit and/or is provided somewhat as a side-note to a larger discussion of, say, sociological factors. However, there are some notable exceptions.

Macaulay (1977) analyses the speech of several children in Glasgow with regard to their pronunciation of the glottal stop as a variation of the phoneme /t/. There is resistance to this pronunciation for upper class children, but it is quite common for the middle and working class children in the study, showing how class can be a factor in both one's social and linguistic identity. Moreover, Macaulay states that for adult males in middle class, white collar jobs, there is a resistance to the glottal stop as a means to 'get ready to enter the labor force' (page 4), where its use would be stigmatised. Eckert (1989) discusses the sociolects involved with two Detroit high-school groups, the Jocks and the Burnouts. Compared with the Jocks, the Burnouts rely on much more double negation in their speech and back the vowel in *lunch* so that the result is a sound more like *launch*. While this sound is common in

parts of Detroit, its more prominent use in one social group over another signifies both individual, and group identity, and the pronunciation also signifies membership on a wider level, as 'identification with the local non-mainstream community' (page 67). Likewise, Snell (2010) discusses the use of possessive *me* as in *me pencil's up me jumper*, suggesting that this is a marker of identity in terms of locality (Teesside), but more specifically, class (it is used more by working-class children).

Perhaps one of the most significant ways in which language and identity are intertwined is in the speech of African-American children, specifically speakers of African-American Vernacular English, also known as Ebonics. Wassink and Curzan (2004) cite the idea of language ideology, referring 'to all beliefs or dispositions toward language, including those that linguists take to be "truths"' (page 175). Within the US there is an ideology amongst some African-American youths that to speak Standard English is tantamount to 'selling out' as Standard English is sometimes synonymous with 'talking white'. To use Ebonics, therefore, is seen as 'keeping it real', yet risking social stigma (from some whites and African-Americans alike). The social stigma can be seen with the idea of 'young, Black, male, and dangerous', (which) continues to be an important social construct for dominant America. Many Americans hold an ideology that marks that construct by associating it with a way of speaking, among other behaviors' (page 181). Chisholm and Godley (2011) expand the discussion of Ebonics by focusing on three bi-dialectal African-American high school students in terms of their use of language and attitudes toward it. The students come away with an understanding of how their identity is tied to their language use, yet consider Ebonics to be slang and unprofessional and they 'did not fully or primarily identify as speakers of AAVE' (page 462), suggesting that identity is not something that can be necessarily assumed by the teacher in terms of how students categorise themselves based on speech. Chisholm and Godley (2011:462) suggest, in line with Canagarajah (2006), that 'code-meshing' be used in the classroom, which involves 'the ways in which more than one dialect can be and is integrated for rhetorical effect'.

However, the overall gap within the literature, to my best knowledge, is a lack of studies focused on the relationship between accent change and subsequent identity change, and more specifically within English bi-dialectal children raised in two (English-speaking) countries. A study by Sankoff (2004) comes close, however, in terms of providing an example of how a child's accent had changed by adulthood and how this might be tied to a change in identity (likewise, how a change in self-perception necessitates, consciously or

otherwise, a change in accent). Sankoff (2004) tracked the linguistic development of two British children, based on the 7-up series in which children were interviewed every seven years. One of the children, Neil, was interviewed at 28 and Sankoff had noted a general tendency for him to lose the short-U from his speech, when compared to his speech patterns as a boy. Sankoff speculates that 'perhaps Neil's abandonment of the Short-U pattern, tied to the locus of his painful adolescence, is part of his rejection of an entire life style' (page 14). In other words, a change in Neil's phonetic inventory could be seen in tandem with a change in his identity – an identity of being a grown man who perhaps hopes to leave the past behind.

A study by Chambers (1992) does address accent change within Canadian children (aged 9-17) who move to England. The missing element, however, concerns how their identity changes alongside their accent. Chambers' study reveals that children tend to adapt to the new dialect's vocabulary (e.g. *pants – trousers*) more quickly than they adapt to new phonetic realisations, such as the differences in pronunciation in words like *tomato*. A suggested link to identity might be provided with a comment from one of the children in interview, Sam, who admitted trying to sound more English when around (English) friends. 'I think I sound less English [with the interviewer] 'cause I try harder when I'm around my friends. I try to fit in with everyone so I don't be the odd one out or something ... And when I'm home, like when I talk to my brothers and stuff, I don't try as hard.' (page 676). This suggests that speech adjustment to make oneself understood by people in the new linguistic environment (whether part of accommodation or not), can be based on a desire to fit in with a circle of peers. In this sense, Sam might be said to adopt an English persona via his accent.

Payne (1980) explains that children tend to copy the speech of their peers more than adults, with Kerswill and Williams (1996) also pointing to adolescents' tendency to use more non-standard forms in their speech as a means to differentiate themselves from adults and fit in better with their peers. From my own experience when living as a boy in England, I recall that even when I had acquired an English accent, I would still use local words with friends in order to sound even more like them. This had a twofold effect. First, it unintentionally reinforced an English identity yet second, it allowed me to be 'part of the crowd'. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985:181) further explain this phenomenon, saying, 'the individual creates for himself the patterns of his linguistic behaviour so as to resemble those of the group or groups with which from time to time he wishes to be identified'.

Likewise, Le Page and Tabouret-Keller explain that individuals also adjust their speech ‘so as to be unlike those from whom he(she) wishes to be distinguished’ (ibid). This was the case when I was living in England and spending time with relatives visiting from the US, during which time I would often switch back to an American accent when I was with them. This was done as a marker of identity (i.e. ‘I am an American’), but in conjunction with showing allegiance to the larger community of Americans and distinguishing myself as being ‘not British’. Bell (1984) also discusses this in terms of divergent accommodation, which involves using a dialect to distinguish oneself from the interlocutor (and possibly to demonstrate unfriendliness) based on the maintenance of a different accent, for example, which could also signal a desire to show solidarity with one’s ‘native’ group.

Tagliamonte and Molfenter (2007:673) also investigate the accent change that occurs within Canadian children who move to England, and offer subtle clues to identity following a change in the children’s speech: ‘the second dialect, once in place, leaves an indelible imprint on the transported individual. Indeed, these children’s return to Canada and to Canadian English is not complete to this day…they all use British English features some of the time… Freya, in particular, is still called “England girl” by her peers…thus, even at the furthest reaches of second dialect success, these children, like most transplanted individuals, will always retain “flavors” of their mixed repertoires…these shibboleths of their individual personal histories may always mark them as distinct from the groups they even now identify with’. The question that I pose is how might children feel about such distinctness, especially in the context of trying to fit in with peers, a process in which children arguably do not wish to be ‘different’. The process of returning home from overseas is known as re-entry, which Mooradian (2004) sees as synonymous with culture shock (Uehara, 1986). Gaw (2000) elaborates, saying that the return to one’s native country can be problematic as the individual feels uncomfortable due to their new cultural identity, of which language change is one aspect. Mooradian (2004:43) further states that ‘younger individuals…report having a harder time with the adjustment process’ and Storti (1990, 2001) states that the return home from overseas can indeed be upsetting.

The discussion in Chambers’ study, however, does not necessarily point to any particular adjustment difficulties, at least not those that stem from a change in identity. In fact, it could be the case that the children in his study, and others like them, merely regard an accent change as a means of better adapting to their new environment, and in this sense, feel *less* conflicted precisely because their accent change facilitates their settling in. However,

two points need to be considered. First, we have no specific information about the children in the study regarding any perceived change in their identity; therefore, while it is difficult to speculate either way, this is a gap in Chambers' study which could have otherwise made for an interesting discussion. Second, what might the implications be for the Canadian children when they visit Canada? Any comments made about their English accent (as well as any personal feelings of being settled in England), may perhaps play a large part in how they perceive themselves in a new way; though this does not suggest a challenge for the child, it can be.

From the moment we open our mouth and speak, others will tend to perceive us based on *how* we speak. Therefore, an American living in the USA but speaking with an English accent will arguably be perceived as English, at least by strangers who are unaware of his/her personal details. Therefore, perception by others based on accent becomes a reinforcing factor in one's identity. A desire to resettle in one's native country can therefore be offset somewhat if an individual is perceived by others as belonging to a *different* country. As stated by Llorente (2001:69), 'skin color and foreign accents provide the most obvious clues to identity since they are easy to recognize…they constitute undeniable marks of a person's belonging to…a given cultural system'. What are the implications, however, when an individual does not feel a complete sense of belonging to one culture or the other? Likewise, we might consider a situation in which the child, upon returning to his/her native country, tries to fit back in again, yet is identified as belonging to the 'other' culture based on a newly acquired accent.

This ties in with the work of Du Bois (1903) who used the term double consciousness to define the dilemma faced by African-Americans regarding their two selves: the black self and the American self. He explains that there are two unreconciled strivings, consisting of these two selves and the need to negotiate between the two. Gaw (2000) also states that a person might see themselves as a product of both cultures, which could be viewed as positive (e.g. having expanded one's world), but also negative (i.e. 'who am I?'). Likewise, I put forward the suggestion that there exists a *linguistic* double consciousness – synonymous with linguistic homelessness mentioned earlier; 'consciousness' in that the child is aware of his/her two national identities (e.g. 'English' and 'American'), but 'linguistic' in the sense that changes in accent, and perceptions by others based on this change, once again reinforce one identity over another but could add to identity confusion on the child's part. This can be especially true if, upon returning to one's native country, itself challenging, the child's

attempts to reclaim his/her original identity are thwarted by being identified as a member of the previous culture which he/she has departed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is much more to investigate regarding English bi-dialectal children in terms of how accent change leads to identity change and how this in turn is perceived by the child. Are such children comfortable with the new culture to the extent that their new accent symbolises their settlement? Or, do such children regard a change in accent as a hindrance to settling back into their home country? Likewise, upon return visits to their native country, if not permanent settlement, are they perceived differently and how does this affect their self-perception? I of course concede that my personal experiences do not, nor can they of course, speak for all children who grow up in two different cultures. Even against the backdrop of the literature which indeed points to difficulties in adjusting to a new culture and difficulties *readjusting* to one's native culture, we still cannot make sweeping generalisations regarding children.

On the one hand, children are generally resilient and may not feel particularly conflicted about starting again in a new country and any accent change may not be considered as either positive or negative. In terms of identity, the child may not feel any different at all and accent could be regarded by the child as a rather superficial marker of identity in the first instance. The literature also acknowledges that these bicultural children may in fact regard their experiences with a positive attitude, seeing themselves as having gained knowledge of another culture and being more experienced in the world. Indeed, I do not wish to paint an entirely bleak picture of such children and even when they do have difficulties (re)adjusting, I have made clear that accent change may play a small role in this beyond more immediate concerns such as making new friends and 'learning the ropes' of their new culture. However, it would be presumptuous to assume that the experiences of bicultural children are generally positive. The literature makes it clear that there are indeed challenges involved with moving overseas and identity issues can be a key factor. This is perhaps more acutely felt if the child moves overseas and then returns to his/her native country – this is where the duality of identity mentioned within this paper can be seen more prominently perhaps.

A longitudinal study in the manner of Chambers' (1992) work is a good starting point for future research, but with the added dimension of discovering more about language change in terms of identity change and if any change in identity is perceived positively or negatively by the children. There is more work to be done and arguably, it needs to be done as it can help us better understand the (re)adjustment process for English bi-dialectal children when they come to reside in a new country. This paper, through relating the subject to a framework of cultural identity issues, has hopefully made a start, however small. Considering there are perhaps many children being raised across two cultures nowadays, and this is arguably a growing trend, then this gives further impetus for research to be conducted on the linguistic and socio-cultural challenges that these children face.

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