

“NEUTRALIZE YOUR NATIVE ACCENT”:

The ideological representation of accents on accent reduction websites

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Tämä tutkielma jatkaa amerikkalaisen sosiolingvistisen tutkimuksen ja lingvistisen antropologian perinnettä ottaessaan tutkimuksen kohteeksi kieli-ideologiat. Kieli-ideologiat ovat jaettuja uskomuksia kielistä ja niiden puhujista. Aksentti-ideologia näkyy siinä, miten aksenteista puhutaan, miten niitä arvioidaan ja arvostellaan. Ideologioita vahvistetaan ja haastetaan jokapäiväisessä kielenkäytössä.</p> <p><i>Aksentinhäivytystä</i> tarjotaan Yhdysvalloissa ei-syntyperäisille englannin kielen puhujille. Tavoitteena on muokata puhujan aksentista mahdollisimman amerikkalainen, häivyttäen puheesta syntyperäiset piirteet. Jokapäiväinen syrjintä vieraita aksentteja kohtaan, työmarkkinoiden kilpailuhenkisyys sekä aksenttien negatiiviset representaatiot mediassa ajavat ihmisiä näille kursseille, joiden tavoitteena on täydellinen kielellinen integraatio.</p> <p>Internetissä aksentinhäivytykskursseja markkinoivat kymmenet eri yritykset ja yliopistot. Tämän tutkimuksen aineistona toimivat aksenttikurssien nettisivut, joita analysoidaan diskurssianalyysin keinoin. Kurssien markkinoinnissa hyödynnetään strategioita, jotka pohjaavat ideologioihin kielistä ja niiden puhujista. Näiden strategioiden keskiössä on se, miten eri aksentteja kuvataan, eli aksenttien ideologiset representaatiot.</p> <p>Ihanteellinen aksentti, eli amerikanenglannin mahdollisimman standardoitu muoto, kuvataan neutraalina epäaksenttina, joka on paitsi arvostetuin kommunikaation muoto, myös tehokkain tapa saada viesti perille. Sen puhujat ovat älykkäitä, sillä he ymmärtävät tämän vaikean kielimuodon eri vivahteet. Yksikielisyyden ihanne näkyy siinä, että ideaalin kielimuodon kuvataan sopivan joka tilanteeseen, arkipäivän keskustelusta kansainväliseen työseminaariin.</p> <p>Ei-natiivit aksentit esitetään esteinä kommunikaatiolle. Puhujan esitetään olevan yksin vastuussa kommunikaation onnistumisesta, vaikka todellisuudessa kuuntelijalla on yhtä suuri vastuu siinä, meneekö viesti perille. Aksenttikursseja tarjotaan kliinisessä ympäristössä, muiden puheongelmien ympäröimänä, mikä saa aksentin vaikuttamaan vakavalta häiriöltä. Kursseilla tuputetaan kulttuuritietoutta ja pragmatiikkaa ääntämisen lomassa, mikä saa ei-natiivit puhujat vaikuttamaan tietämättömiltä.</p> <p>Laajemmalla tasolla aksenttien representaatiot kytkeytyvät standardi-ideologiaan, yksikielisyyden ideologiaan, nationalismiin, ja Yhdysvaltain kilpailuhenkiseen työkulttuuriin, jota globalisaatio on osaltaan ollut luomassa. Tällaiset representaatiot paitsi ylläpitävät vanhoja ideologioita, ovat myös omalta osaltaan luomassa maailmaa, jossa monikielisyys ja monikulttuurisuus nähdään haittana, ei rikkautena.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

Accent reduction is popular practice among ESL speakers in the United States of America. It is marketed for foreign professionals in any field that involves communication: doctors, lawyers, actors, professors, telecommunicators. The internet provides a good platform for marketing the courses, and the spread of English across the globe creates more eligible customers every day. The need for such practice is born under pressure from several factors.

Accent reduction, or accent modification, is in itself not a new phenomenon. When we learn new languages, we must always, in a way, learn a new way of speaking. Some languages require different sounds from what we're used to, and some are spoken with a different pitch. As babies, we learn only the sounds which are relevant to our mother tongue(s) (Lippi-Green 1997: 46). As adults, it may be useful to learn new ways of speaking to help our learning of a new language.

When learning a new language, we are not only modifying our voices, but our personas, to match the target language community. We learn new customs, idioms, cultures. We wish to be understood when communicating with other speakers, which is why we practice not only spelling, but pronunciation as well. We are encouraged to listen to speakers of the target language, to immerse ourselves in it, to repeat words and mimic speech. What makes (un)learning an accent so different from these other steps we take in our learning process?

First of all, it is stated on most websites that sell accent reduction courses that complete accent elimination is impossible. Furthermore, although it has been proven that accent modification *can* be done to a certain extent (Lippi-Green 1997: 50), the question remains whether it *should* be done. One of the reasons why non-native speakers are driven to these courses is the everyday accent discrimination that they face in the U.S. Accent can be used as a reason by an employer to deny a job application from an otherwise qualified candidate. Systematic discrimination like this is making non-native speakers feel that their accent stands in the way of success. But is it they who should change, or the system?

To participate in an accent reduction course often requires considerable investment of both time and money. In addition, there often are specific requirements (such as a particular TOEFL score) for customers who want to participate. The courses are aimed at wealthy, foreign professionals, who speak fluent English otherwise, but are bothered by their accent. The target group is narrow, restricted to a marginal number of the L2 speakers living in the

U.S. Yet, the number of websites offering these types of courses is quite staggering, and those in charge of organizing them range from one-person-operations to multinational companies and top universities.

In this thesis, I study the websites of 40 institutions which offer workshops or courses in accent reduction. Although the names of the courses might vary, the websites chosen for this study all promise similar results: the proficiency in the ideal accent, often referred to as Standard American English, as well as the eradication of (some features of) the existing accent.

After the successful completion of a course, the client is promised varying benefits, all stemming from the newly acquired ideal accent. Claims such as *increased employee productivity* (example from source website (3), URL can be found in the appendix) and *increased potential for professional advancement* (5) are common and take into account the clients' professional wishes. On the other hand, *enhanced interpersonal interaction* (5) and *feeling confident in social gatherings* (22) are claims more closely linked to personal relations. All this is promised as a result of learning the standard, the ideal, *the accent without an accent* (2), something that is in fact an abstraction (Lippi-Green 1997: 53).

What these websites promise their client is not only an accent. It is the whole package, all the qualities indexically connected to the idea of "American English". *Feeling confident* is not an ideal linked only to people who speak American English; however, through constant exposure to media that breed news anchors, businessmen, bankers, movie stars, heroes, models, and idols, most of whom speak a particular type of English - one starts to believe that the variety they speak has something to do with their confidence and success.

The indexical relations, such as *confidence*, linked to these accents are maintained by dominant language ideologies, and at the same time, language ideologies are being constantly constructed by indexical relations (Mäntynen et al. 2012: 327). On each accent reduction website, several ideologies about accents are maintained and renegotiated. Ideological choices include making certain accents appear more prestigious than others, or making the speakers of one accent seem dumber than the speakers of others. By examining these choices made on the websites, ideologies behind them are made visible.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Language ideology

It is often cited that the study of language ideologies began with a presentation by Michael Silverstein in 1979. He stated that

ideologies about language, or linguistic ideologies, are any sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use (Silverstein 1979:193).

Since then, thousands of researchers have contributed to the field of language ideology, basing their studies on the example set by Silverstein, but adding their own definitions. The concept of language ideology has been discussed and shaped by each researcher in their turn. Irvine (1989) described linguistic ideology as a cultural mediating factor, which carries with it everything linked to linguistic relationships - including the load of moral and political interests. In line with what can be seen in Irvine's definition, many researchers agree that a key point when discussing any ideologies is that they always serve the interests of someone (Woolard 1998: 6). Moreover, ideologies can be seen as being in the service of those already in power or those struggling to grasp it (Woolard 1998:7). Therefore, while language ideologies are not always directly connected to political ideologies, neither should be assumed to have no agenda.

Although language ideologies are abstract and collective by nature, they are realized and shaped in the everyday. This gives the researcher a chance to look at local, micro-level practices and apply their findings to the wider sociocultural frame (Mäntynen et al. 2012). Language ideologies are often studied within the frames of linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics, both fields in which the actual, routine, local language use is given a great deal of emphasis.

Silverstein (2003: 202), a linguistic anthropologist, states that being "ideological" means views emerging in micro-contexts and forming into essentializations of the phenomenon, meaning that an ideological perception is always more absolute than the indexical relation in which it is grounded. The ideological core of a thing (or person) presents itself as true, "natural" essence, related to all individual representations of the particular thing, universally (Silverstein 2003: 202-203). What Silverstein calls essentialization, Irvine and Gal (2000: 37) name iconisation, a process in which the indexical relation between a linguistic feature and a

social quality becomes an iconic representation, or an essence, of the speaker. For example, throughout accent reduction websites, Standard American English is presented as a form of speech which is spoken by all educated Americans, when in fact there are many different dialects in the U.S. Standard American English is iconised and represented as an inherent quality of all the Americans, instead of the few that actually speak it.

In addition to iconisation, Irvine and Gal name two other semiotic processes through which language ideologies are constructed. One of these is fractal recursivity: it is the process where an opposition is copied to another level, with different actors. Unlike an analogy, fractal recursivity can only be partial, but the partial relationship can be recreated indefinitely and projected onto new planes. (Irvine and Gal 2000: 38-39.) Let us take the example of an upper-class woman living in Wandsworth, London as our example. For a typical American, her accent would probably just be called “British”, as that is how such an accent sounds to them. However, the closer we get, the more accurate these labels of “otherness” become: someone from the northern parts of England would call her accent a Southern accent, or perhaps a London accent. Someone from London would call it a West London accent, and her working-class neighbor might call it a posh accent. The closer the accent is to one’s own, the more accurate the labels for the others become, projecting the relationships onto smaller and smaller planes.

The third semiotic process, erasure, refers to instances when a feature is ignored or covered up, because it does not fit the ideological scheme. Because a language ideology represents itself as an ultimate truth, elements that do not fit its system are erased, either by denying their existence, or in very extreme cases, removing them. (Irvine and Gal 2000: 38-39.) An example of erasure in my data is the way the listener’s role in comprehension is not mentioned in order to convince the client that accent is the only obstacle to successful communication.

Building on Silverstein’s (2003) description of the indexical order, Penelope Eckert (2008) has proposed the term *indexical field* (2008). She argues that

the meanings of variables are not precise or fixed but rather constitute a field of potential meanings – an *indexical field*, or constellation of ideologically related meanings, any one of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable (Eckert 2008:454).

Eckert (2008) has illustrated the concept of the indexical field by studying a single sound in speech, /t/ release in American English. By combining the results of previous studies related to this variable, she found that at least three seemingly unrelated social groups, nerd girls, school teachers, and gay divas, commonly used the hyperarticulated released /t/. Upon closer inspection, she found several permanent qualities and even more passing stances, all of which could be linked to this one variable. All these meanings together played part in the construction of the indexical field for the use of hyperarticulated /t/ release. (Eckert 2008: 467-469.)

The process in which speaker qualities, such as nerdiness or gayness, become associated with certain type of speech, is called *enregisterment* (Agha 2005). To Agha, *registers* are social performances which can index a range of characters, and are recognizable to a certain range of people (2005: 40). Accents, then, are a part of registers, although a register can include other things as well, such as special vocabulary. In addition, the linguistic signs associated with a register are often accompanied by other, non-linguistic signs. In a written register such as print advertisement, pictures are associated with the linguistic signs. In oral registers, non-linguistic signs are often such that they appear in face-to-face communication, such as combining a greeting with a certain type of handshake, or displaying kinship by wearing your hat backwards. (Agha 2007: 180.)

Through enregisterment, a register such as Received Pronunciation, the so-called Standard English variant in the context of Britain, can become a marker of status and prestige. Received Pronunciation (RP) and Standard American English are both supra-local accents, meaning that rather than indexing a person's place of origin, both of these registers are more linked to class and education, and are in fact used to hide one's original, regional accent. (Agha 2003: 231-233.) It can also be argued that very few, if any, people actually speak RP (Agha 2003: 234) or Standard American English (Lippi-Green 1997) as their home language.

From Agha's point of view, Standard American English is a highly specified register, useful in some situations but not in others. He reminds us that some people consider Standard English as the baseline, the non-accent, and not a register at all. The reason for this is that Standard English is promoted in institutions which link it to several entitlements and ideals, as well as use it as a normative criterion against which all other uses of language is compared. (Agha 2007: 147.)

Agha also points out some useful characteristics for the register phenomena:

- (a) No fluent speaker of a language commands more than a few of its registers.
- (b) Most speakers can recognize more registers than they speak.
- (c) An individual's register range permits entry into a range of social practices.
- (d) Registers are linked to distinct spheres of activity by judgements of appropriateness.
- (e) Some registers are 'more equal' than others. They are institutionally formulated as baseline norms, relative to which other registers appear deviant or defective.

(Agha 2007: 147)

Considering accents, all of these characteristics apply. They ring especially true when thinking about the relationship between a prestigious accent and a less prestigious one.

2.2 Accent and accent reduction

Moyer (2013: 11) defines accent as

a set of dynamic segmental and suprasegmental habits that convey linguistic meaning along with social and situational affiliation.

This definition takes into account the dynamic nature of accents: under certain circumstances, they can change. Accents change all the time in fact, or at least the features that are associated with certain accents.

In the sociolinguistic tradition, it is useful to take a step back from the mechanical description and consider accent as a product of enregisterment, which can index many different personae based on speaker and audience (Rodriguez 2018: 19). An accent with the same segmental and suprasegmental features may carry different meanings to different people in different contexts.

What is especially intriguing about accents is that at the same time, they are recognizable to listeners, while no two people speak in identical ways. (Moyer 2013: 10.) Accents are linked to fluency, which in turn links to authenticity and nativeness (Moyer 2013: 2). However, accents are also a part of identity, reflecting the speaker's individual style and even social group. Therefore, accents function on many different levels at the same time, indexing speakers, places and groups, and representing associated qualities (Cavanaugh 2005:128).

However individual we might be as language learners, our goal is to be able to speak in a pattern that fits the language community. As Labov (2014:10) puts it,

What I, as a language learner, want to learn is not “my English” or even “your English” but the English language in general.

We all wish to be understood as well as be part of a group, and one of the ways to achieve that is through accent.

The effect of L2 accents on understandability has been studied extensively by Derwing and Munro (1997, 2009, 2011). They separate listeners’ perception of accents into three categories: *accentedness*, *comprehensibility* and *intelligibility*. *Accentedness* has to do with how different the pattern of accented speech sounds compared to local speech.

Comprehensibility indicates the listener’s own opinion on how easily they can understand the accented speech. Lastly, *intelligibility* measures how much the listener has actually understood. The two first categories are judged by the listener, while the last is measured by exercises. While there is some correlation between accentedness and comprehensibility, (listeners judge heavier accents as more difficult to understand), it is still possible for heavily accented speech to be 100% intelligible. (Derwing & Munro 2009: 477-479.)

Furthermore, many listener qualities, such as educational training (Kremenchugsky 2012) and cultural bias (Neuliep & Speten-Hansen 2013) have been found to affect the process of understanding. It is therefore not always up to the speaker to make sure they are understood. This is rarely taken into consideration, and the burden of communication is placed entirely on the speaker.

While Derwing and Munro (2009) see pronunciation training for L2 speakers as a generally positive thing, they warn against some accent reduction programs, calling them “charlatanism and quackery”. Some pronunciation advice found online, such as “avoiding nasal sounds, speaking slowly, and speaking all the letters in a word” can be extremely unhelpful. In fact, the comprehensibility of a person’s speech can actually diminish following such advice. (Derwing & Munro 2009: 483.)

Untrustworthy accent reduction or modification courses may sometimes be difficult to distinguish from reliable and professional pronunciation training. Thomson (2014) found that the terms *accent reduction* and *accent modification* were mostly used by speech language pathologists in clinical settings, as well as entrepreneurs using questionable methods. The word accent has gained popularity in the last few years, making it appealing to entrepreneurs looking for profit. English teachers, on the other hand, preferred the term *pronunciation*

instruction. This was not necessarily a guarantee for a quality program though, as not all English teachers have the training to work as pronunciation instructors either. (Thomson 2014: 178-179.)

Instead of accent reduction, Derwing and Munro suggest simple pronunciation training, which could be included in general L2 training. What they deem especially important is that pronunciation training should be conducted by a qualified teacher, and that people should not be hoaxed with false claims. (Derwing & Munro 2009: 483.)

2.3 A sociolinguistic view on accent reduction

Accent reduction has been researched fairly little from the point of view of sociolinguistics. In most cases it has been awarded a mere paragraph in an accent-related book. Studies focusing on the mechanical aspects of the process of accent modification, on the other hand, are numerous.

One exception to the void of accent reduction research comes from L2 pronunciation scholars Tracey Derwing and Murray Munro, who in their 2015 book on pronunciation essentials dedicated an entire chapter to accent reduction and modification. In this chapter, they expressed their concern for the growing industry and the lack of regulation of the expertise of the providers. In 2015, Derwing and Munro report, the search term “accent reduction” returned over 472,000 hits and “accent modification” 6,700 hits; today the numbers are 485,000 and 73,700. The growth has all but stopped. Furthermore, many of the same false claims that were reported by Derwing and Munro, such as promising “over 70% reduction in critical speech errors”, are still circulated throughout the websites, suggesting that the quality of instruction has not improved either. (Derwing & Munro 2015: 158, 161)

Another example of a study focusing on accent reduction can be found in a book about pronunciation myths. Thomson (2014) compared top websites for accent reduction, accent modification, and pronunciation instruction courses, trying to map out the differences in program content, educational background of the program provider, and cost of the program. He found that both accent reduction and accent modification programs were often taught by unqualified teachers, and were marketed using false claims. Like Derwing and Munro, Thomson also emphasises the importance of providing ethical language program-based

pronunciation instruction in language classrooms, not health care facilities, as a way to counter some of the less ethical private practices. (Thomson 2014: 178-179.)

Jan Blommaert's research paper called *A market of accents* (2009) is another example of a study where the ethics of the practice of accent reduction are placed at the center of the study. In this article, Blommaert accurately notes that the "market" of accent reduction courses draws on orders of indexicality including images of personal and professional success and failure. The package sold on accent reduction websites has not changed in the past ten years:

American accent, personal happiness and self-confidence, smooth and efficient communication with Americans, job satisfaction, business opportunities and money: this is the package sold by these dot-com businesses. (Blommaert 2009: 252)

Blommaert suggests that these websites are spreading a rather transparent, predictable philosophy about language, which makes use of images of globalization as realized in corporate culture and individual spatial and social mobility (Blommaert 2009: 256). The customers are convinced that the only possibility for an upward career and social trajectory in the U.S comes through learning the American accent, a neutral, effective tool of communication, which allows them to be seen for who they really are. This, Blommaert concludes, is the combination of indexicals which American accent courses promise will lead to success.

2.4 Previous research on accents and ideology

As well as accent reduction as practice, the present study is concerned with the connection between accent and ideology. The connection between language ideologies and accents in the United States have been studied extensively by Rosina Lippi-Green (1994, 1997). Her focus has been on the various forms of accent discrimination that speakers with non-standard accents face daily in the U.S. She argues that a contributing factor in the widely accepted discrimination is Standard language ideology, which spreads through the American schools, media, entertainment industry, the corporate sector, and even the legal system. Her research shows that the constant exposure to this ideology throughout their lives has made the American people disturbingly accepting of accent-based discrimination. Additionally, this ideology has made them oblivious to the fact that spoken language is inherently variable, and that a national standard for American English is merely an illusion (1994: 170-171).

Research on dialects in the U.S has been conducted by Barbara Johnstone (2015). Her research on Pittsburghese, the dialect spoken in Pittsburgh, shows that many different indexical values can be assigned to a dialect simultaneously. Johnstone and Baumgardt (2004) found that even Pittsburghers themselves had contrasting opinions about their dialect. On the one hand, keeping with the Standard language ideology, Pittsburghese was evaluated as non-standard, sounding uneducated and embarrassing. On the other hand, the same people sometimes described the dialect as positively local, assigning it with qualities such as friendliness and solidarity.

People often misjudge even their own accents. Niedzielski (2010) asked Michigan residents to identify vowels that they heard in the speech of a Michigan speaker. Interestingly, almost none of the respondents picked the actual vowels produced, but instead chose the one that was considered the most “standard”. Michigan is part of the area most often connected with speakers of Standard American English. Even though the residents heard a speaker utter something else, their own speaker identities as Standard English speakers affected their decision to choose the standard variable. This is evidence of the ideological process of erasure: the Michigan residents, who believed their accents to be standard, filtered out the actual feature that they heard, because it did not fit their belief.

Language ideologies linked to dialects have been studied in other countries and contexts as well. Rodriguez (2018) studied how Japanese dialects were described in a YouTube comment section. His results showed that the status of dialects is debated openly on the online platform, and that the evaluations of dialect are closely linked to the socio-political status of the speaker. His results resonated with the Standard language ideology, as non-standard varieties were often mocked and their speakers met with hostile comments.

Rymes et al. (2017) use a methodology they call *citizen sociolinguistics* to study language variation online. Instead of focusing on mapping the different varieties people use online, their approach focuses on *metalinguistic commentary*, e.g. people talking about language and voicing their opinions on what they consider “good” or “bad” language. Different ideologies about language are especially visible in metalinguistic comments, since people often explicitly state their beliefs about what’s correct or incorrect, beautiful or ugly, native or non-native, all of which are related to ideology. What is interesting about the citizen sociolinguistics methodology is that it focuses on descriptions of language from “the people”,

not from linguists, leading to information about the actual beliefs about language that people (claim to) have.

2.5 Language ideologies and policies in the United States

Language ideologies and policies related to L2 speakers in the United States have been studied in several different contexts: bilingual education (Ovando 2003), formal language policies (Wiley 2000), and court cases (Haviland 2003). Language policies are official statements, documents or laws issued by the government to encourage the use of certain languages and discourage the use of others. These official recommendations can be explicit, like the French Toubon law, which mandates the use of the French language in all government publications, all advertisements, all workplaces and some other contexts. Language policies can also be less explicit: for example, the government can produce official documents in certain minority languages but not others.

As Wiley (2000: 69) points out, we must take a look at *informal* language practices as well as formal ones in order to see the whole picture, because “unofficial moral pressure” can be just as effective in affecting the public as formal policies. Wiley also notes that language ideologies link to other ideologies concerning race, class and religion.

Pointing out the most widely accepted, dominant language ideology currently in the United States is challenging. Lippi-Green (1997) suggests that Standard English ideology is such a big part in American lives that it travels with them from the cradle to the grave. Wiley (2000) argues that the monolingual ideology is affecting the lives of all the bilingual people living in the U.S. Schmidt (2000) is convinced that a combination of individualism, nationalism, and English hegemony facilitates the deployment of assimilationist language policies in the U.S. Worryingly, the assimilation strategies may be working. Commonly, a majority of second-generation immigrants are bilingual in their parental language, but in third-generation immigrants, the number drops to almost zero (Veltman 1990).

Looking at U.S. history in regards to official language policies and the unofficial treatment of linguistic minorities can provide the key to understanding the present ideological climate. Official language policies often reflect the dominant language ideologies, which in turn link to ideologies about race and class. Schmidt (2009: 142) notes that this frequent “conflation of race, class and language” has largely replaced public racial discourse, which has lost its

credibility in the U.S. The Spanish language, for example, has become associated with lower-class jobs, bad (bilingual) neighborhoods and criminal activities. To escape this association in their daily lives, many Latinos seek to erase the traces of their home language, by avoiding speaking Spanish in public, and even reducing their accents. (Schmidt 2009: 142-143.)

Blommaert and Verschueren (1998) suggest that in Europe, the ideology of a linguistically homogeneous nation is deeply rooted in both media and official policies. While multilingualism on the individual level may be encouraged, multilingualism on a societal level is viewed as an issue, since it breaks the “natural” homogeneity of the nation (Blommaert & Verschueren 1998: 207).

Also according to Ricento (2009), the history of languages in the U.S. is closely connected with the creation of the American national identity. He argues that “authentic” Americanness was moulded based on the minority of white, Protestant English-speakers that was present in the nation at the time of its birth, erasing other groups from the template (Ricento 2009: 113). Furthermore, any divergence from this mould is seen as a threat to national unity.

Schmidt (2009: 143) also suggests that there is a link between English monolingualism and U.S. nationalism. He also notes that because the liberal individualistic culture in the U.S. places so much responsibility on the individual to make his own luck, any attempt to protect minority languages on a state level is seen as un-American (Schmidt 2009: 147).

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research aim & questions

The aim of this study is to find out what kinds of ideological representations of accents are present on accent reduction websites. The representations construct and convey ideological meanings, which either support or contest existing beliefs about accents. In addition, I want to tie my findings to the broader social, political and ideological contexts in order to better understand the discourses surrounding foreign accents in the U.S.

1. What kinds of ideological representations of accents can be identified on accent reduction websites based in the United States?
2. How do these representations tie into the wider socio-political discourses surrounding non-standard accents in the United States?

The answer to the first question is entirely determined by my data, the actual micro-instances of language use that can be identified on accent reduction websites. Textual representations of accents are the main focus of this study because they account for most of the explicit representations of accents in my data set. In addition, elements in other modes, such as pictures, are briefly visited in the analysis. Representations of both the ideal accent and the non-ideal, reduce-worthy accents are described and analysed. For the second question, several sources have to be cited to paint a comprehensive picture of the macro-level discourses which tie into the practice of accent reduction. This will help me understand the reasons why accents are presented the way they are on these websites, and what it means for the people living in the U.S.

According to Blommaert & Verschueren (1998), to study ideologies is to study the implicit meanings in texts. Because any author of a text cannot be truly explicit in expressing what they want to say, they must always rely on some shared beliefs or assumptions between them and their audience. As a result of this, interpreting a text requires knowledge of certain subjects, or a “common frame of reference”, which is implicitly present in text. This common, unspoken knowledge, is what ideology is all about. Because of the nature of ideology, conclusions cannot be made from individual examples, but rather from continuous occurrences or the constant lack of particular views. (Blommaert & Verschueren 1998: 191.)

Because my goal is to get a general sense of the online accent reduction market as a whole as well as study the related ideologies, I am not concentrating on one or two websites only, but instead, I will be describing the patterns I notice in the representation of accents throughout the 40 websites that I have chosen as my data. Examples that best illustrate the range of representations on the websites are chosen to represent each pattern. Any important or interesting anomalies regarding the representation of accents that occur in the data are brought up in the analysis as well, because they contribute to the overall picture suggested by the accent reduction websites.

3.2 Data selection and collection

My data consists of 40 American websites for accent reduction courses. I chose websites as my data because they are readily available, and because they include plenty of description of the phenomenon that I wish to study. I chose only American websites for my study, although the phenomenon of accent reduction does exist in other countries as well. This decision was the fact that a clear majority of the most popular websites were American. In addition, having a consistent data set helps me place my findings from each website in the same ideological frame.

I chose the 40 websites based on popularity: I used several different combinations of keywords to search for accent reduction courses, and then picked out the results on the first few pages. This way, I narrowed my data down to the websites which would be the first ones to come up for members of the public using the same keywords. The number of clicks that a website receives, or the CTR (click-through rate) of a website goes down dramatically even after the first search result page. In September 2018, the CTR of the first search result page (on desktop, the first 10 results) accounted for more than 73% of all clicks (Advanced Web Ranking 2018). This means that it is quite unlikely that the search results past the first few pages will be seen by anyone. Therefore, I decided to limit my data to websites found on search result pages 1-3.

I started out by searching websites based on 5 different keyword combination searches (*'accent modification course'*, *'accent reduction course'*, *'accent reduction classes'*, *'accent modification classes'*, *'university accent reduction'*). Including the words "course" and "classes" eliminated any websites which focused on explaining the phenomenon, and made

the search more focused on the companies and universities which provided actual courses. Because the first searches brought out mostly commercial companies, and I knew that accent reduction courses also existed in universities, I deliberately focused on them with the last keyword combination. Excluding duplicate websites right away, I came up with a list of 55 unique websites. I then eliminated 10 websites, because they linked to companies or universities outside the U.S. Further, I eliminated 2 more websites, because they were intended for professional ESL teachers or accent coaches wishing to improve their accent reduction teaching. One website I excluded because it offered training for research assistants interested in accent research. I further eliminated 2 websites, because they were providers of online course platforms, and not actually providers of the actual courses. Both of these websites returned over 40 results with the keyword combination '*accent reduction*'. Because the websites were not the providers, but rather just hosts for these courses, and hence not responsible for the course descriptions, I decided to exclude them both.

From each website, I chose the page or pages most closely linked to accent reduction courses. On some websites, the most relevant was the front page; on others, a separate page describing the accent reduction course. I looked for common features on each website to determine which page was most relevant for my study. If I discovered that the information I was seeking was scattered on several pages, and that each of them could contribute equally to my study, I opted to include all those pages. However, on some websites, the same information was repeated on several pages, in which case the extra pages did not considerably contribute to my study and were not included. In most cases, there was only one page in total within each website dealing with accent reduction.

After identifying my data set using the methods described above, I collected my data. Because I decided to ignore most of the multimodal elements on the websites and focus on text, I was able to use a simple technique of copying text combined with a few screenshots. I began by copying text from the chosen web pages to a single document. I copied only text, leaving pictures and other multimodal elements out, and, if necessary, simplifying the text layout for clarity. In the case of one website, highlighting text was not possible: in that case, I simply typed the text from that website to my document. I did not necessarily copy all the text on a page. In fact, because my goal was to find descriptions of accents, I decided to leave out any contact information, descriptions about specific people (like the teachers) and practical course details. Mainly, I left out detailed information about attending the courses,

such as the times, dates and prices for the courses. After copying the text from each page, I took a screenshot of that page, just in case any of the websites would change or be removed.

As is the case with most studies conducted on website data, this study represents a snapshot in which only some of the dynamic qualities of the World Wide Web have been captured.

While I have collected and saved my data carefully, I cannot stop the original websites from changing or disappearing, and thus it will be impossible for another researcher to replicate the study. I will, however, try to ensure the validity and relevance of my findings in the best ways I can, by providing at least the name of each website I reference in my study, in the hopes that they will still be available at the time I am ready to publish.

3.2.1 Ethical issues relating to the data

Because my data consist of websites, my main ethical concern was about the copyright laws protecting them. Course websites can be considered public data, and they normally do not include any private or personal information. Because of this, I did not have to worry about the privacy laws, such as the new EU GDPR statute, which concern personal information,.

However, any creation that contains any sort of original expression by the author is protected by copyright law, regardless of whether the author remembers to add a © symbol to it.

Websites are included in the realm of copyrighted material, and to plagiarise them is no different from plagiarising a book. Therefore, I had to find out what laws govern the use of copyrighted material that originates in the U.S, and if it would be possible for me to conduct my research under those laws. In addition, because I am conducting my research in Finland, and thus my thesis will be published in Finland, I also had to make sure that my thesis abides by the Finnish copyright law.

Thankfully, the United States Copyright Office is online nowadays, so my answer was readily available for me at their website (<https://www.copyright.gov/>). By article 107, Limitations on exclusive rights: Fair use, I concluded that my research falls under the category of fair use. This I concluded, because my research abides by the four factors of fair use presented by the copyright office.

Firstly, the purpose of my study is strictly nonprofit, and conducted for educational purposes. Secondly, the nature of the copyrighted work is public, and includes no personal data

whatsoever. Thirdly, the amount of material I use from each copyrighted work, i.e. each website, is not large compared to the amount of material available on each website. The copyrighted material also does not make up most of my thesis, and is only used in small samples. Finally, the effect of me using examples from the websites in my thesis on the potential market value of the websites can be assumed to be minimal.

My thesis is not intended to single out or criticise any one website, but it is instead a description of the accent reduction phenomenon as a whole. Each website is represented by a number in my analysis section, and a list of the corresponding websites is included in the appendix. I made the choice of not trying to anonymize the websites, because I needed to show exact examples of the discourse in order to conduct an accurate analysis. Because of the exact wording of the examples, a simple online search would have revealed which website each example was retrieved from. Therefore, I decided to include the names of each website that I used in my analysis, so that the readers could see the websites themselves, and thus challenge or verify my claims.

Including the names of the websites in the thesis also had to be done because of the Finnish copyright law. Article 22 of the law (Copyright Act 1961/404, 22 §) states that using citations from a published work is allowed in an appropriate manner and in the length that is necessary for the purpose. When citing, the source must always be mentioned. Thus, I have provided the source website for each of my examples in the Appendix.

3.3 Methods of analysis

My main method of analysis is discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is a useful framework for studying semiotic events, such as written or spoken language use, in context. Fairclough defines discourse as: “a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning” (1992a: 64). Discourse analysis, then, is the analysis of the meanings embedded in human communication.

Discourse analysis forces us to think about texts in context: how no text is born in a vacuum, but is influenced by several actors and factors. Because language ideology affects each decision made in the production of discourse, it can be visible on each level of the final product. Therefore, an inclusive method of analysis is required when studying ideological

representations. As a basis for my discourse analysis, I have employed the following heuristic proposed by Barbara Johnstone (2017):

- Discourse is shaped by linguistic structure, and discourse shapes linguistic structure.
- Discourse is shaped by prior discourse, and discourse shapes the possibilities for future discourse.
- Discourse is shaped by its media, and it shapes the possibilities of its media.
- Discourse is shaped by participants, and discourse shapes participants.
- Discourse is shaped by people's purposes, and discourse shapes possible purposes.
- Discourse is shaped by the world, and discourse shapes the world.

(Johnstone 2017: 8; rearranged by me)

Johnstone's heuristic is especially useful for my study, because in order to find out what kinds of language ideologies are maintained and negotiated through discourse, each of the six ways in which discourse is shaped need to be considered. Ideological choices are made on each of these stages in the production and distribution of discourse. Even the receiver, the consumer of discourse, makes choices about what kind of discourse to spend their time on, and what to make of the discourse they consume. Each of these steps involves language ideological processes, conscious or unconscious.

These six procedures have helped me do a comprehensive analysis, taking into account all the factors that affect how accents are represented on the websites. Although a heuristic like this does not need to be followed in a particular order, each of the steps is important to make in order to make the most of a data set. Because my data set is quite large, consisting of forty websites, I have not employed this heuristic on each website individually. Rather, I have looked at my data set as a whole, and used each step in the heuristic one at a time to go through the entire data set to detect any recurring patterns in the representation of accents.

From these patterns of representation, a picture of the common themes in my data has emerged. However, bearing the scope of this study in mind, it was necessary to take the analysis a step further, and instead of simply describing the patterns in the discourse on the websites, I have tried to substantiate my findings by investigating what kinds of language ideologies are recycled and renegotiated on the websites. My approach has not been overly critical, in that my research questions allowed for objective and neutral observation of the data. However, I did find it necessary to make some critical remarks about the practice of

accent reduction and allow myself to express my concerns about the subject. After all, I hope others are critical about what they read on these websites, too.

The first step of the heuristic that I have chosen to take in my thesis is studying the **linguistic structure** of the discourse. This step is about studying the structural conventions in discourse, and how they influence texts (Johnstone 2017: 102). Some structural elements we can study include words and phrases and their organisation into sentences, juxtaposition, and cohesion. In my data set, the choice of personifying terms and descriptive terminology, process words, and juxtaposition are all meaningful parts of the linguistic structure which contribute to the ideological representation of accents. Sometimes it is difficult to determine whether a linguistic structure is used because it is grammatically conventional, or because it is borrowed from previous texts. (Johnstone 2017: 102-103.) Therefore, the first and second steps of my analysis are closely connected.

Next, as a continuation of the first step, I look at the **intertextuality and interdiscursivity** of the discourse. All texts are influenced not only by prior grammar, but by prior texts and prior discourse in the form of words and phrases, structure, style, text-types and narratives. We depend on this continuance to help us interpret the texts we encounter: different things can be expected from poetry, textbooks and legal documents. Even a text that is considered to be new and innovative, like websites were in the beginning of the 21st century, must borrow from previous texts, which is why the first websites looked a lot like print advertisements. (Johnstone 2017: 179.) Now that websites are an established medium, whole new genres of discourse have been born, though still borrowing from the past: weblogs resemble diaries or newspaper columns, shopping is placed in shopping carts even in online stores, and information in wikis is so believable because it borrows from expert discourse.

The third step is the relationship of discourse and its **Medium**. Discourse is shaped by and shapes its medium in at least four ways. The first is form: discourse can be more complex, have more words, or have more structure based on which medium it is presented through. The second is processing: discourse in certain media is easier to interpret, for example, a picture is often used to enhance the message of a written piece of discourse. Thirdly, different media facilitate different kinds of relationships. Some media, like discussion forums, are more geared towards collaboration and connecting with peers, while others, like written manuals, are designed to give information one-sidedly. An online support manual, then, would fall somewhere in between these two examples, enabling collaboration through

comments, yet having moderators as the higher authority, accepting the most relevant information. Finally, different media facilitate different kinds of knowledge construction: a temporary medium, such as an Instagram story, might encourage fast action over deep reflection. Accurately describing abstract concepts is easier in spoken language than in images. (Johnstone 2017: 221.)

Fourthly, I turn my attention to the **participants**. At least two participants are always implicated in discourse, the text-producer and the text-consumer. However, there are other ways that discourse shapes and is shaped by participants, too. For example, an expert in a field often has access to different media, and thus the chance to express their opinion, which is often accepted by the public due to the status of the expert. Had the expert not been so highly valued in the society, she or he might not even had access to the medium in the first place. Thus, it is the beliefs of the entire discourse community, not only the text-producer and text-consumer, that influence how a text is received. (Johnstone 2017: 145.)

The fifth step is studying the **purpose** of the discourse. Purpose is closely linked with persuasion, as persuasive means are often used in discourse to get the message across, thus reaching the purpose of the discourse. Rhetorical means, fleeting analogies, and logical arguments can all be used to persuade the reader into believing what they read. However, how discourse is interpreted is not always obvious: just like an advertising campaign can be a hit or miss, any text can fail to get their message across by using discourse strategies which do not fit the situation. (Johnstone 2017: 88-92.)

Finally, I turn my attention to how the discourse is linked with **the surrounding world**. This final step is about connecting my data to the wider socio-political context. That includes looking at possible reasons why this type of data exists in the first place, and what types of societal factors have contributed to its existence. It also includes looking at the role of language in the society in question, and the sets of beliefs about language, e.g. language ideologies, which are the most prominent in the society in question (Johnstone 2017: 37).

In doing this analysis, and drawing conclusions from my data, I will have to be careful of making broad generalisations. My data set is not uniform in regards to the representation of accents, and neither is the wide selection of accent reduction websites available online, which means that my findings will not construct a comprehensive picture of all the ideologies surrounding accent reduction. Neither can I reliably predict the intentions that the creators of these websites have had while creating them: no matter how much we know about the social

context of discourse, we cannot say with certainty what the intention of the author was, and how it will be interpreted by the audience. Humans, even though constrained by the social forces surrounding them, can still always make individual decisions on what to say, regardless of the situation.

What this discourse analysis can tell us, then, is how these micro-level actors (the producers of the accent reduction websites in question) have decided to construct their argument, and how that resonates with the macro-level practices. By examining the rhetorical means that have been chosen to communicate the arguments, we can point out the ways in which they are made to sound like the truth. We can also find out which ideologies are leveraged, and what is left out to create a stronger message.

4 ANALYSIS

In the following section I will employ Johnstone's heuristic to my data set, considering each of the six analytic steps. The analysis is structured according to the heuristic: each section is used to discuss one aspect of the discourse that is my data. Ideologies about language can be visible on each level of discourse, which is why it is so important to study the data from all six angles.

The six analytic steps or sections of analysis are labelled as follows: **Linguistic structure, intertextuality and interdiscursivity, media, participants, purpose, and the surrounding world**. In each section, any relevant patterns from the data are described, along with any interesting anomalies. In addition to this, outside sources are deployed when necessary to contextualise the findings. All findings have been lifted from the data because they somehow contribute to the message of an ideology about accents. Data examples are in the form of text, figures, or pictures, and they are labelled numerically. After presenting each example, the related ideology is described. Similar ideologies can be represented on different levels of discourse, which can mean that the findings recur.

After the analysis section, the findings will be summarized and discussed in the discussion section.

4.1 Linguistic structure

I will begin by analysing the linguistic structure of my data. Firstly, I will concentrate on the word choices made when referring to different accents on the websites. These personifying terms (i.e. names for objects and phenomena) and adjectives chosen to represent the accents are not chosen at random: they indexically link the items they describe with positive or negative qualities.

After describing the terminology linked to the accents themselves, I will take a look at how the process of accent reduction is described. Which verb is chosen to represent the process that students undergo on these accent courses is extremely important in constructing the image of accent reduction as a practice.

Finally, the juxtaposition of linguistic elements will be discussed. Juxtaposition is the placement of linguistic elements within texts into familiar constructions. By studying which

elements are placed closely together in texts, we can draw conclusions about how their relationship may be interpreted by the reader.

Personifying terms

The word cloud in Figure 1 represents some of the most common terms used to describe the target accent on accent reduction course websites. A personifying term is a name for an object or concept: each time a concept is referred to, a decision must be made in terms of what to call it. Sometimes just a pronoun is used, and sometimes the concept can be described through adjectives. Often the simplest way to capture the essence of a concept is to use an established personifying term, which is recognizable to as many people as possible. Studying which personifying terms are chosen for the target accent on accent reduction websites can tell us a lot about the ideologies linked to the “ideal” accent taught on the courses. Like Agha (2007: 195) reminds us, personifying terms are not neutral descriptors: indexical meanings linked to the described phenomena are carried with them.



Figure 1: Word cloud of adjectives and personifying terms for the target accent on accent reduction websites

The word cloud includes all the personifying terms used to denote the target accent on the accent reduction websites in my data (except for *American (English) accent*, which was by

far the most common, and in my opinion, also the most objective choice), in a size relative to their occurrence: the bigger the font, the more times that term showed up in the data. In order of the number of occurrences, the most commonly used personifying terms were *Standard American English*, *Mainstream (English / American)*, *North American English*, *General American English*, *broadcaster English* and *neutral American English*. Some other ways of describing the target accent included *effective communication*, *clear English*, and *accent without an accent*. In addition, several adjectives were linked to the target accent: *correct*, *proper*, *educated*, *natural*, *relaxed*, *fluid*, *smooth*, *non-regional*, and *listener-friendly*.

The term *Standard American English* is one of the most common personifying terms used across the websites. The existence of a uniform “Standard English” has been systematically refuted by researchers in the field of sociolinguistics. Lippi-Green (1997: 53) calls it “the standard language myth”, and for Watts and Bex (1999: 5) it is

..quite clear that notions of “Standard English” vary from country to country, and not merely in the ways in which such a variety is described but also in the prestige in which it is held and the functions it has developed to perform.

According to standard language ideology, there is a way to speak a language which is better, purer, more prestigious, more neutral, and more understandable than others. This is referred to as the standard. In reality, regardless of which country we are in, no one actually speaks standard language, because spoken language is always somehow imperfect, whether by influence of accent, dialect or sociolect. Even those who think they speak the standard variety, who in the United States would be people living somewhere in the Midwest, rarely actually speak it (Niedzielski 2010).

In fact, standard language ideology is one of the reasons why the target language is described as *neutral American English*, *clear English*, *effective communication*, or *accent without an accent* on the accent reduction websites. The American accent is presented as the default, the unmarked variety, the neutral communication tool which will not attract negative attention. This terminology is linked with the idea that a country benefits from having just one official language, and that anyone who lives in that country should assimilate linguistically. This so called “monolingual ideal” and the terminology linked with it will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4.5.

American English is far from uniform. Despite a common misconception, dialect differences are not disappearing. In fact, the differences in regional dialects in America grow bigger each day. (Labov 2012: 4-5.) In addition to this, speakers shift their styles according to their relationship with the listener, the wider social context, and the topic (Labov 1969: 13). In fact, although Standard American English is advertised on the accent reduction websites as the most effective and clear communication, it would actually be quite ineffective to always speak in perfect sentences, to not use any abbreviations, and to refuse to switch styles in between conversations. That is to say, it is normal to switch registers between different communication situations.

In spite of this, most of the personifying terms used for the target accent point to a hypothetical generic American English. Perhaps for a global market it is smart to not be too specific, i.e. focus on *New York English* or *Minnesota English*, although these personifying terms would actually be a lot more informative than, for example, *North American English*. (I mean, why would you add tens of Canadian accents into the pool as well?). Probably, by calling the target accent *mainstream* or *general* or *standard*, these companies and universities wish to emphasize that this accent will be understood in all of North America. Of course, we cannot be sure how the target accent is actually taught on these individual courses, and whether the idea of a *standard* or *mainstream* accent is the same on all of them. What we can say is that these with these word choices the accent reduction providers suggest that a national standard exists in America and that people should attempt to reach it, thus promoting the idolization of national monolingualism.

Describing the ideal accent

In addition to personifying terms, the American accent is described with a plethora of positive adjectives across the websites. Figure 1 includes the most popular ones: *neutral*, *non-regional*, *natural*, *effective*, *clear*, *relaxed*, *fluid*, *smooth*, *listener-friendly*, *educated*, *correct* and *proper*. The most common adjectives connected with the American accent on the websites can tell us a bit more about the imagined qualities linked to the ideal accent: what is it that people want to sound like? What are the qualities that are respected in a speaker? Why is the American accent supposedly better than any other?

First of all, the ideal tool for communication is seen as *neutral, natural* and *non-regional*. After all, many foreigners and even natives head to accent reduction courses because they want to hide the traces of their origin from their speech after experiencing accent bias in their daily lives. On accent reduction websites, having a neutral accent that is not connected with any specific region or country is presented as a positive factor in working life. Nonnative speakers of English are presented as having a disadvantage in the work market, even though multilingualism and multiculturalism could be presented as beneficial.

Second of all, the ideal tool for communication is *effective, clear, relaxed, fluid, smooth* and *listener-friendly*. To speak effectively, so to get one's message through with as little effort as possible, is a good goal for communication. Speaking clearly is a part of it, as well as being listener-friendly – speaking with an appropriate volume, making sure the listener understands what you say, and being polite. All of these things are important qualities in a good speaker. However, all of these qualities can also be achieved by someone with a strong accent. This fact is left out on accent reduction websites, as these qualities are only connected with the ideal American accent.

The way comprehensibility is emphasized on nearly all of the accent reduction websites points to the fact that many people seek their services because they have trouble being understood. A nonnative accent is viewed as a barrier standing in the way of successful communication, as a hurdle that the listener has to struggle to clear. In reality, heavily accented speech can still be perfectly understandable (Derwing & Munro 2009), and successful comprehension depends on the listener as well as the speaker.

Third of all, the ideal communication tool is *educated, correct* and *proper*. In fact, particularly educated speech, with complex sentences and special vocabulary, would not be the most proper for every situation. Neither would hypercorrect, literal language use, which in some situations can be interpreted as indifferent or arrogant. As a matter of fact, aiming for correctness in spoken language is not a sensible goal, since it is a much more dynamic kind of language than written language, and the rules are more fluid.

The process

The phrase *accent reduction* exists in my data 85 times, and the phrase *accent modification* 35 times. They are the most common phrases used to describe accent courses offered for

foreign speakers in the United States. There are also several other phrases which refer to the process of changing the speaker's accent more towards the American standard.

(1) Modify or Neutralize Your Native Accent (13)

(2) Companies can save thousands of dollars yearly by eliminating the effects of poor communication. (2)

(3) These elective clinical services are designed to assist individuals in changing their accents/dialects to Standard American English. (23)

As seen in examples 1 and 2, *neutralize* and *eliminate* are verbs used alongside *modify* and *reduce*. In example 3, the relatively neutral term *change* is used when referring to the process the students undergo on the course. Comparing these five words, we notice that they range from changing your accent very little to removing it completely:

slight change *modify* >> *reduce* >> *change* >> *neutralize* >> *eliminate* complete removal

Figure 2: Range of terminology

In a way, the most popular terms, *modify* and *reduce*, are the least radical. Even though none of the terms can be described as neutral, there is a noticeable difference in meaning on the scale.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2019), a common meaning for the verb *modify* would be to make slight changes or to improve something. For example, one can modify their views or their style. *Reduce*, on the other hand, means to make smaller in amount, degree or size. For example, one can reduce waste by recycling or reduce the size of a file by zipping it. Ironically, however, reduce can also mean to bring something to a worse condition, as in the phrases “they were reduced to begging” and “the church was reduced to rubble”. (Oxford English Dictionary 2019.) “Reducing one’s accent to an American one”, would thus mean making your accent worse.

Change is placed in the middle of my scale, not necessarily because of its neutrality, but because of the versatility of its use. One can change clothes, change the baby, change trains, change gears, and go to the bank to get change. Then again, the meaning of the word is quite

fixed. When one is asked to change their accent, it is not specified whether it should be for the better or for the worse. However, it does imply more of a complete change, from one state to another, whereas *modify* can mean just a little change. (Oxford English Dictionary 2019.)

Neutralize is a rarer verb on accent websites as well as in the English language in general. It could have been chosen just for the alliteration in the phrase *neutralize your native accent*. Also, as mentioned in the previous section, the American accent is often called *neutral* on accent reduction websites, and to neutralize something can indeed mean to make it neutral (by applying the opposite effect). However, neutralize also carries much more negative connotations, mainly linked to war discourse. A bomb can be neutralized, or disarmed. Cities can be neutralized, or destroyed. Groups of hostiles can be neutralized, or killed. (Oxford English Dictionary 2019.) Certainly, to use such drastic measures against an accent seems excessive at best.

At the end of the range is the most drastic measure of all: *eliminate*. It must be noted that only a few websites used this word to refer to their course content. Eliminate means to completely get rid of something or someone (Oxford English Dictionary 2019). Indeed, it is a word which is often used in the context of political murders. To eliminate something in that context is to remove it, because it obstructs your path to power. In this view, accents are seen as mere obstacles standing in the way of good communication.

What these verbs tell us about the ideologies linked to accents is that accent is seen as something that is modifiable or changeable, that can be reduced a little bit, and that can even be neutralized or eliminated completely. For words like *neutralize* and *eliminate* to even occur on these websites, accent has to be viewed as something extremely undesirable, which stands in the way of success. Accordingly, the most commonly used phrase *accent reduction* points towards removing parts of the original accent before learning a better one. This distorted view of how accents work contributes to the ideology of accents as communication barriers.

Juxtaposition

Another linguistic element worth looking at is juxtaposition. This can be done by parallelism, either by using a repeated syntactic pattern, or simply by placing linguistic items close

together. When items are juxtaposed closely together in texts, the reader is invited to think about the connection between the items. (Johnstone 2014: 102.)

(4) Difficulties with pronunciation (consonant and vowel production), sentence intonation, implied meanings, cultural pragmatics and comprehension are typical areas targeted. (37)

(5) Reducing your accent isn't really about "reduction". It's actually learning the Standard American English Accent to refine your pronunciation and get closer to the posture and cadence you hear from native speakers. (1)

In the examples above we see two descriptions about the topics covered on accent reduction courses. In the first example, *pronunciation*, *sentence intonation*, *implied meanings*, *cultural pragmatics* and *comprehension* are mentioned parallelly, as equally important topic areas on a typical accent reduction course. Similarly, in the second example, the goals of the course are juxtaposed: *to refine your pronunciation* and *get closer to the posture and cadence you hear from native speakers*.

Looking at these parallel items more closely, we notice that these items are not equally important sectors in teaching pronunciation. In fact, some of them have nothing to do with pronunciation training. The fact that things like *implied meanings*, *cultural pragmatics* and *posture and cadence* are taught on these courses means that the course providers believe their customers do not know these things already. The fact that a person has not yet gotten rid of their accent must mean that there is a gap in their knowledge, and that is why they still have an accent.

This supports the ideology that people with accents are somehow dumber or less skilled than native speakers. Having an accent is not an indicator of a person's language skills, nor their knowledge of cultural pragmatics. Speaking with an American accent should not require anything more than simple, mechanical pronunciation training.

Native speakers, on the other hand, are presented as experts of the English language: they speak with *posture and cadence*, and do not need any help with understanding *implied meanings*. Of course, there are many different accents in America, as well as many different kinds of speakers. Presenting all of them as better speakers than those speaking with non-native accents contributes to the ideology of native speakers as the experts and gatekeepers of their language.

4.2 Intertextuality and interdiscursivity

Intertextuality and interdiscursivity are significant factors in creating meanings in discourse. Without the help of intertextuality, texts would be impossible to interpret. We rely on the information we have about past texts when deciphering the message in new texts.

Intertextuality is when a text makes use of another text through explicit textual features, such as citations. Interdiscursivity, then, refers to how a text makes use of existing textual conventions, such as genres, discourses, and styles. (Wu 2011: 97.)

The first part of my analysis in this section focuses on medical discourse. On many of the accent reduction websites, especially those run by universities, medical discourse is evoked through structural and linguistic conventions.

The second part concentrates on expert discourse. There are various ways to present information to make it more believable. In some cases, it may be beneficial to present a statement as if it were an obvious fact, something that is known to all Americans, for example. Sometimes an unknown expert or study is cited, but no source is provided to verify the claim. And very often, even in everyday speech, the passive voice is used. The passive voice hides the actor, making it difficult to know who exactly thinks or acts in a sentence. All these ways of presenting information tie into expert discourse, which is often evoked to make text more believable in the eyes of the reader.

Medical discourse

Firstly, accent reduction websites borrow elements from medical discourse. This might be done to validate the service by surrounding it with other medical services and adding some expert terminology. Using the kind of medical terminology that has been used for a long time in other, more established medical services, gives the reader the impression that accent reduction courses are equally established and trustworthy.

(6) The Wendell Johnson Speech and Hearing Clinic offers diagnostic and therapy services for Accent Modification (also called Accent Reduction). (23)

When it comes to American universities, accent reduction courses are often offered at clinics, like *The Wendell Johnson Speech and Hearing Clinic* in example 6. Teaching accent reduction in a clinical environment instead of a language classroom connects it with the

medical environment. Furthermore, accent modification is called *diagnostic and therapy services* on more than one website. Neither of these words is used in any other kind of discourse but medical, firmly placing the accent reduction service in the midst of other medical services.

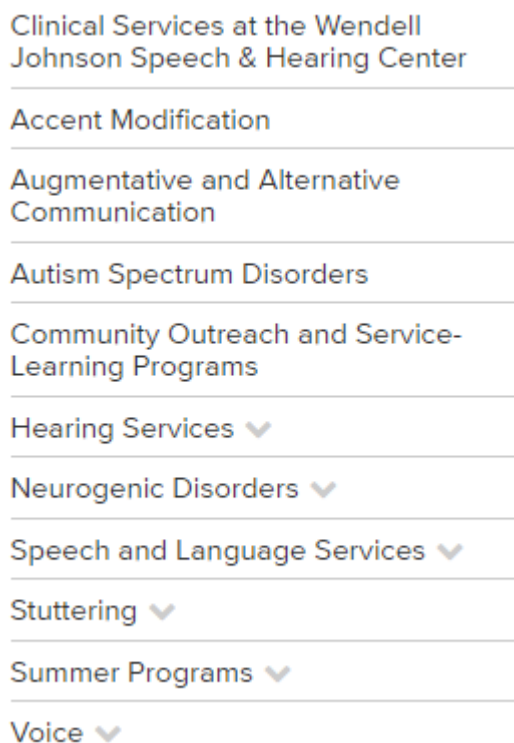


Figure 3: List of disorders (29)

One of the key ways of presenting information on websites are lists. They are necessary to enable movement between different sections on the website, and to arrange information logically. The list in Figure 3 exemplifies the types of disorders that accent reduction or modification is grouped with in the university context. American universities often have separate schools, dedicated to specific areas of research and teaching in their respective fields. In the case of Figure 3, clinical services in addition to teaching are offered at the center.

The fact that accent reduction is placed under a label like *clinical services* connects it with medical discourse. Placing an accent course in a list with some relatively serious speech and communication disorders strengthens this discourse, and places accent in the same category as them. In the example, *Accent modification* is placed in a list of services with *Neurogenic*

Disorders, Autism Spectrum Disorders and *Stuttering*, suggesting that all of them belong to the same category.

Furthermore, because these items on the list are placed on a completely equal level under the same label, it gives the impression that they are all equally serious communication disorders. As we can see, one item on the list is *Speech and Language services*, and clicking this item would open up another list of services. We can only wonder why *Accent Modification* is not placed under this label, but is rather listed with these rather serious disorders, under the label *clinical services*. In any case, its current placement makes accent seem like a relatively serious disorder.

(7) Our team of licensed speech pathologists and certified instructors have extensive experience in accent reduction training and communication disorder remediation along with professional backgrounds in music, acting and writing. (1)

The medical discourse is further evoked by terminology: in Example 7 we see the term *licenced speech pathologist* being used for the instructors on the course, and *communication disorder remediation* for their expertise. Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) rather than language teachers are indeed often the ones teaching the courses in the university environment. While they do have expertise in dealing with different speech-related disorders, there is no guarantee that someone with a degree in speech-language pathology would be qualified as a teacher of pronunciation. The expertise of SLPs lies in *communication disorder remediation*, and they are teaching accent reduction alongside their other *clinical services* in medical facilities. In this environment, it is very difficult to not see accent as another disorder among the rest.

Expert discourse

Many facts on accent reduction websites are backed up by referring to an unspecified source of authority. This is a measure often used in expert discourse. (Johnstone 2014: 105.)

Unspecified sources of authority are utilized in both examples below.

(8) A Standard American Accent is characterized by a “neutral” quality. It’s sometimes called the accent without an accent. It’s often associated with the speech of news broadcasters and to many ears sounds “mainstream” and well-educated. (2)

(9) It's a fact: like it or not, people are judged by the way they speak. This is especially true for fluent non-native speakers of English living in the United States. Research has confirmed that native English speakers have greater expectations for native-like pronunciation when interacting with highly fluent foreigners. (17)

In example 8, passive phrases like *It's sometimes called*, *It's often associated*, and *to many ears sounds* all hide the actor of the sentences from the audience. In the first two cases, the reader is led to assume that an unknown expert has claimed these things, while in the last case, the expertise is passed on to the unspecified *people* to whom the accent sounds *mainstream* and *well-educated*. In both cases, these unknown expert voices are presented as liable sources for the information presented.

Example 9 employs the same strategy. No actor or proof is presented for the claims that *people are judged by the way they speak* and that *it is especially true for fluent non-native speakers of English living in the United States*. Instead of supplying some sort of evidence for the claims, they are preceded by the phrases *It's a fact: like it or not*. The reader is supposed to leave the statements uncontested, because they are apparently so self-evident that they can be preceded by such words.

In example 9, the phrase *Research has confirmed...* is also used to refer to an unspecified source of authority. No source is cited for the information given, so the reader is given no chance to check the facts supplied by this research. The fact provided is conveniently vague. It goes as follows: *Research has confirmed that native English speakers have greater expectations for native-like pronunciation when interacting with highly fluent foreigners*. The phrase *greater expectations* is used, by a then-clause does not follow. Therefore we do not know who these foreigners are being compared to. Certainly the expectations should be higher for fluent English-speaking foreigners than those foreigners, who have just started learning English? And surely the expectations are lower for fluent foreigners than they are for native speakers?

Example 9 does not really give any new information to the reader, but it is presented in a way that might easily be misconstrued. One way it might be interpreted is that native speakers require fluent foreigners to speak native-like English, when in fact we have no idea, what the point of comparison has been in this study. The fact that the source has been left out is a conscious choice made by the website creator to obscure the nature of this study.

4.3 Medium

The choice of medium is the third focal point in my analysis. By choosing one medium over the other, certain aspects of discourse are emphasised, and certain aspects are diluted.

Different media enables different kinds of discourse to be better understood, and different processes of creation to be utilized.

The first aspect I will focus on in this section is the use of images in the portrayal of students and teachers on accent reduction websites. This aspect is largely affected by the media, because the website as a medium allows for the combination of the written medium with other media of delivery to emphasize the message.

The second part of this section of analysis I have devoted to creative (and less creative) uses of the website as a medium. In general, the multimodal possibilities of a website are scarcely utilized on accent reduction websites. However, some examples of the more creative uses are discussed, along with some reflection on so many of the websites rely on traditional media, when the website would allow for so much more.

Portraying students and teachers

- Does being asked to repeat yourself sound like *Squeaky Chalk on a Blackboard*?
- Sick to your stomach about being fired or unemployed.
- Complaints about your accent?
- When trying to understand American speech, is it like a bad internet connection?
- Humiliated or withdrawn in social situations because of your hesitation to speak?
- Seen as less intelligent?
- Tired of not being understood?



Frustrated at not being understood on the phone?

Figure 4: Message emphasized (11)

Accent reduction websites make use of the possibilities of a website as a medium in their marketing. Visual images are often used to strengthen the written message. In the example above (8), a list of questions is combined with a picture to send a clear message to the customers: if you answer “yes” to any of these questions, or identify yourself in the picture, this course is for you.



Student clinician working with a client on a voice exercise.

Figure 5: Student and teacher (39)

The images across many of the websites follow a pattern. Teachers (they might be identifiable due to wearing a lab coat, for example) are portrayed as white European-looking people. Students, then, are portrayed as more ethnically diverse. In fact, it is more common that the images of students portray Asian- or Indian-looking people than white people.

The fact that images portraying teachers include only white people, contributes to the ideology that only white (monolingual) Americans may be experts of the English language. In reality, people of all ethnicities can be experts of the English language, and teach pronunciation to L2 speakers. It could be also viewed as a benefit for a pronunciation teacher to have a multilingual background, because the listener's familiarity with an accent affects how well they understand speech in that accent (Derwing & Munro 2009: 486). The more accents a pronunciation teacher is familiar with, the better they understand different clients and their needs.

These images also contribute to an ideology about the hierarchy of different accents: although Standard American English may be the ideal, some other accents are also acceptable in the

U.S. A French accent, for example, might be considered charming - an Italian accent might be considered an important part of cultural heritage. On the other hand, some accents, like the Spanish accent, carry negative connotations and are linked to bad neighborhoods and criminal activity (Schmidt 2009: 142-143).

In general, European accents are more highly valued in the U.S than non-European ones. This consensus about the hierarchy of accents can be explained by the ideology of Anglo-Saxon superiority, which has existed in the U.S since the birth of the nation (Ricento 2000: 112-113). This is also related to how accent can be used a proxy for race: at a time when racial hierarchisation of people is no longer publicly accepted, language has replaced it in public discourse. Instead of blaming race for the higher crime rate of people with low economic status, people can now blame language. Accents and code-mixing as well as multilingualism in general become signs of immorality and laziness. And all this is okay to point out in public, even though the language ties directly into racial and ethnic groups. (Schmidt 2009: 142-143.)

Creative (and not so creative) utilization of media

There are also other, more creative uses of the medium. Becker accent reduction (6) offers their clients a free pronunciation podcast. LanguageOn (11) has an Instagram and a blog. Several websites offer free videos to get started with the accent reduction process straight away. Different complementary products to the courses are advertised, such as free online consultations, interactive software and learning materials.

The website as a medium is extremely versatile. However, in general, the possibilities are scarcely utilized on accent reduction websites. For example, comment sections were absent from all the sites, and no other forms of collaborative content creation were present either. Instead, nearly half of the websites included a section called *Testimonials* or *Success stories*, which included clients' written appraisals of the course.



International Race Car Driver

"On the personal front, speaking eloquently and with a 'neutral' accent has always been an important aspiration for me. On the professional front, conveying a clear and persuasive message has become a must in my role where I am frequently interacting with the media and representing brands. Lisa delivered on both fronts. Among the various speech coaches with whom I have worked, Lisa stands out. She is worldly and has refined taste, having lived in many countries around the globe. Her sessions are entertaining, and the results are realized without having to undertake tedious homework."

— STEVEN GOLDSTEIN,
OFFICIAL FERRARI RACING PILOT

Figure 6: Testimonial (24)

Figure 5 shows a prime example of a client testimonial. As can be seen, the testimonial is very carefully put together, including a description of the client's personal and professional goals and overwhelming praise for the instructor and her teaching methods. Such is the format for most of the testimonial pages: criticism is rarely included in the messages. That is the difference between choosing a medium like controlled testimonials over a comment section; even if carefully modified, comment sections are volatile, and every now and then negative feedback might pop up.

Information on the accent reduction websites is mostly presented through the written medium. As mentioned, few websites make use of the possibility of embedding sound or video on the website, for example through Youtube videos. Course content is described in writing, and often in professional terminology.

(10) Learn the importance of: pausing, stress, linking, pitch (32)

(11) Topics include clear articulation, voice use and projection, improved presentation style, and speaking rate. (28)

Some of this expert terminology is difficult to understand for even native speakers of English. Having examples of these areas of pronunciation on video, for example, would give a more explicit picture of the course content. Representing it this way, however, does add a certain appeal to the course. If a potential client were to read these descriptions, and realize that they do not understand half the course content, they might be tempted to enroll on the course and see what their speech has been missing. Through this kind of representation, English is made to look like a difficult language that requires expert knowledge to master. The course providers are presented as the experts of this difficult language.

4.4 Participants

The fourth section of my analysis focuses on participants in the discourse. The various relationships that are present in discourse are an integral part of the meaning-making of texts.

Firstly, I will concentrate on the most traditional relationship in discourse: the relationship between the text-producer and the text-consumer. The relationship between the participants can be seen pronouns, for example.

Secondly, I will discuss the relationship between the native speakers and non-native speakers of English as it is reflected on accent reduction websites. This relationship is at the center of the discourse on many of the websites, as meanings are constructed through the opposition between these participants.

Text-producers and text-consumers

One type of relationship that discourse always reflects is between the text-producer and the text-consumer. The text-producer must think of their audience when creating the text, while the text-consumer might interpret a text differently depending on the producer. In the case of accent reduction websites, the text-producer is trying to sell a product, and the text-consumer is a potential buyer.

Another way to look at these roles is that the text-consumer is someone looking for information about accent reduction courses, and the text-producer is trying to provide that information. Because I collected my data by using keywords like '*accent reduction course*' on Google, it is safe to say that someone looking for information on the courses would end up on the same websites as I did. Therefore the text-consumer might not have an intention to buy the product in the first place. However, it is the goal of the text-producer to try and sell the product anyway. This can be done by providing certain type of information and leaving out other things.

(12) We will work with you to assess your needs and match you with a qualified instructor. (21)

(13) Everyone has an accent. It reflects our culture, ourselves, and is a source of pride. Sometimes we may want to modify our accents because of our jobs or because people in our everyday lives might not understand what we say. (39)

In both of the examples above, pronouns are used to represent the positions of the discourse participants: the producer and the consumer. In the first example, through the use of the pronouns and the confidence in the phrase *we will work with you*, the reader is assured of the text-producer's role as the expert. There is no question as to who gives the service and who receives it.

In the second example, the pronouns *our* and *we* are used to create a sense of kinship between the text-producer and text-consumer. By stating *Everyone has an accent* in the beginning, and then continuing to use the pronouns *our* and *we*, instead of *your* and *you*, the text-producers aligns themselves with the reader. This way, the final sentence of the example can be interpreted as a gentle suggestion backed up by the text-producers own experiences with their accent. Had the pronouns *you* and *your* been used in the same sentence, it would have come out more like a direct request to the reader.

Example 13 presents an interesting anomaly in the data in how it describes accents. Accents are presented as a part of culture and a source of pride. Then again, right after this description, accent is presented as a disadvantage in working life, as well as a barrier to communication. The combination of these statements makes it seem like the text-producer is saying: "Everyone has an accent, but some are better than others. Yours may be a part of your culture, but if you want to make it in working life, you should hide it."

Native speakers and non-native speakers

Another relationship which the discourse on accent reduction websites reflects is that of the native and non-native speaker of English. Native speakers are presented as experts of their language, while non-native speakers are presented as learners or students. Furthermore, the English language is presented as a difficult language to learn, which elevates the native speakers who are able to speak it perfectly. Presenting English as a difficult language is a clever marketing tactic, since it creates a world in which people need extra help with their English pronunciation, thus creating the need for accent courses.

(14) You will learn to recognize and produce the subtle distinctions that exist in the English sound system. You will also be taught the "tricks" of pronunciation which all educated Americans use when speaking in social conversation. (7)

(15) Due to the complexities of English pronunciation, it is sometimes the case that individuals have tremendous expertise but are unable to convey it in ways required for leading teams, consulting with clients, or even delivering exceptional healthcare. These examples demonstrate the unequivocal benefits of accent reduction. (1)

Both of the examples above make claims about pronunciation that make it sound more difficult than it is. The first example presents all educated Americans as a uniform group, all of whom know the “*tricks*” of pronouncing good English, when in fact the dialects in America are various and involve no special tricks compared to any other language. Also referenced are the *subtle distinctions* in the English sound system. By presenting the English sound system as complex, the website creators are ensuring the client of the need for special accent courses. After all, if English were a simple language to pronounce, there would be no need for courses that focus only in accents.

In example 15, it is claimed that not pronouncing English properly might affect someone’s qualification for *leading teams, consulting with clients* and *delivering exceptional healthcare*, when in fact all of these things can be done successfully in various accents. Once again, the *complexities of English pronunciation* are referenced, ensuring the client that special means are needed to learn it.

(16) In order to lose your accent, you must first become aware of all the sounds of English. For example, there are five vowels in the Latin alphabet- A, E, I, O and U. However, there are fifteen vowels sounds in English! You are probably already aware of some but not all of them. (...) The correct pronunciation of sounds and words will become a part of you. This is known as “muscle memory.” (7)

Example 16 above demonstrates the kind of teacher-student discourse used on the website which positions the reader as a student, or even a schoolchild. Some language choices which are associated with educational discourse include imperatives (*you must first become aware of all the sounds of English*), expressions of confidence in the evidence one has for one’s claims (*You are probably already aware of some but not all of them*) and various sorts of simplification (*A, E, I, O and U; This is known as “muscle memory”*).

All these choices together promote the ideology of the accented speaker as dumber than the native speaker. Because these courses are mainly marketed for the foreign speakers of English, the discourse on these websites is directed at them. The fact that such simple,

explanatory, teacher-like language is used, means that the text-consumer is assumed to need such language in order to understand. Even though it is actually people who are fluent in the English language that are wanted on these courses, overly simplified language is used on the websites. The stereotype of the accented person as dumber than the non-accented one is persistent, although having an accent has nothing to do with a person's English skills, or other skills for that matter.

4.5 Purpose

The obvious purpose of an accent reduction website is to sell a product: the thing that is for sale is either a physical or an online course, at the end of which a person should have acquired an accent different to the one they began with. Because the product itself, the accent, is not physical, ways of describing it vary from site to site.

Some websites are more concentrated in describing the personal gains which can be achieved through the course, while others describe in detail the benefits a company might gain for sending their employees on the course. Some course websites are focused on describing the disadvantages of having an accent. The purpose of all of these measures is to convince the reader that the course is worth taking, that it will make a real difference in the life of the client, that their money will be well spent if they choose this particular course.

Some ways in which the purpose can be reached is presenting some facts and leaving out others. By carefully choosing what information to provide on the websites, the producers enhance their chances that the client will be interested. The information can also be presented in intriguing ways, such as telling a story or making it sound more fun.

Burden of communication

Irvine and Gal (2000: 38-39) introduce the concept of erasure: to bolster the message of an ideology, competing views are erased; that is, left unsaid, unwritten, unrepresented. The producer of a text must inevitably make a decision, not only what to include, but what to leave out. This decision is always driven by ideologies, conscious or unconscious.

(17) A recent study shows that a typical non-native English speaker with a strong foreign accent loses about 25 percent of his time and effectiveness because of faulty speech. (3)

Many things are left unsaid on accent reduction websites. Because the goal is to sell a specific accent, other accents are presented as a communication barrier. As we can see above, the fact that a person with a heavy accent can still be perfectly understandable is erased, and accented speech is described as “faulty speech”. A study is mentioned, but not cited, making it difficult to check whether this claim holds true. Choosing to mention this study, yet

choosing to leave out any further information about it are both ideological choices, supporting the ideology that native-like speech is the correct way of speaking.

(18) We work on reducing areas of pronunciation that affect comprehension; that is, areas that make it difficult for native speakers to understand you. (9)

(19) ...training and keys to speaking English more accurately and smoothly so that native speakers can more easily follow what you want to say. (32)

As can be seen in examples 18 and 19 above, one of the goals of accent reduction is to accommodate the accent to the needs of the native speaker. This objective is cited on many of the accent reduction websites in one form or another. Although more than a fifth of Americans speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau 2017), the aim of the accent reduction programs is mainly to serve the needs of those whose first language is English.

To say that the goal of the course is to adjust to the needs of the native speaker contributes to the division between the native speakers and the non-native speakers that is emphasised in several ways across accent reduction websites. The native speakers are the ones who do not have to assimilate: if they do not understand accented speech, it is not their fault, because English is their language and the only language they shall ever need living in the United States. The non-native speakers are considered to be the outsiders (even though the U.S. has been home to speakers of many languages since its birth), and it is up to them to assimilate.

Although some mention of improving the comprehensibility of the client's speech is often presented as a validation for these courses, the websites rarely offer any proof that a foreign accent directly affects the process of understanding. It is treated as common knowledge that speaking with a foreign accent affects how well the message is understood, yet no evidence to support this claim is present.

Listener responsibility is also rarely taken into account: the fact that comprehensibility has as much to do with the listener than the speaker is almost always erased. Communicaid (13) offers a rare exception to this rule: a course called *Accent Reduction and Recognition*. Similarly, Accents International (1) offers a separate workshop called *Inclusive Listening: Tuning Your Ear to Accents*TM. These courses are designed specifically for those who come into contact with foreign accents often, for example through their work. Considering that both the listener's attitude and their familiarity with an accent play a role in comprehension

(Derwing & Munro 2009: 486), these listening courses can be said to impact communication at least as much as an accent reduction course might.

Monolingualism as the ideal

Something that is also left out on accent reduction websites is any mention of multilingualism, although the target group of these courses, ESL speakers, are multilingual by default. The American accent is presented as the only one worth studying.

(20) ...our team of trained accent reduction coaches teach you to speak in a neutral American English accent (also known as “broadcaster English”, which is most commonly used in business English conversations) (3)

(21) We will teach you Standard American English. It is spoken by approximately 50% of the population in this country, and is one most commonly heard on TV and radio. (5)

In example 20, the target language of the course is described as *a neutral American English accent*, as well as “*broadcaster English*”, which is most commonly used in business English conversations. This terminology is chosen to convince the reader that the accent they will learn on the course will be useful in many situations.

The term *broadcaster English* refers to newsreaders, who generally speak in a regionally unmarked variety, do not use any colloquial language, and pay special attention to correct grammar. As such, *broadcaster English* is more of a register (Agha 2005: 40) than an accent, with its own, hypercorrect grammar and neutral terminology. To speak such a variety in everyday life is not something that even newsreaders do, and certainly not people in the business world either. They have their own registers, with their own vocabulary and rules for small talk. Efficiency is often what is stressed in business conversations, in which case extreme obedience of grammar rules when speaking, for example, would be a negative characteristic to uphold.

In example 21, it is claimed that *Standard American English is spoken by 50% of the population* in the United States. This fact is undeniably wrong, which is probably why no source is provided for the statement. For one, it is extremely difficult to tell who actually speaks the abstraction sometimes called Standard American English, or Mainstream American English, or General American English, since it lacks distinct regional markers, and

is in fact defined by its lack of them. Kortmann & Schneider (2004: 262) state the following about “General American”:

No historical justification for this term exists, and neither do present circumstances support its use... [I]t implies that there is some exemplary state of American English from which other varieties deviate. On the contrary, [it] can best be characterized as what is left over after speakers suppress the regional and social features that have risen to salience and become noticeable.

Throughout the data, questionable claims about the American accent are made. Accent is presented as the key to solving personal and professional problems. Erased are all the other communication barriers that might exist: the only thing that stands in the way of pristine communication is the non-native accent. Even though studies prove that many listener qualities, such as educational training (Kremenchugsky 2012) and cultural bias (Neuliep & Speten-Hansen 2013) affect the process of understanding, the burden of communication is based entirely on the speaker. After all, pointing out that accent does *not* always stand in the way of comprehension would be counterproductive for someone trying to sell an accent reduction service.

4.6 The surrounding world

In this final section of the analysis, I turn my attention to the conditions under which accent reduction thrives.

First, I look at the history of foreign accents and the practice of accent reduction in the U.S. It cannot be said with certainty who the first person or enterprise was to use the phrase “accent reduction”. Because accent reduction is so closely tied with pronunciation training, some form of the practice has existed a long time before the first use of the phrase. However, by looking at the most common method used on courses that focus on accent reduction, we can make assumptions about the time the practice started to gain ground.

The final part of my analysis concerns the socio-political factors that enable the popularity of accent reduction in the U.S. In the background section, I briefly discussed official language policies and dominant language ideologies in the U.S; my analysis concludes with the unofficial standards of working life. All these factors of life in America play a part in why so many people are drawn to accent reduction, in the hopes that it leads them to a better life.

History of foreign accents in the U.S

The United States of America has been a multilingual country since its birth. Already in 1776, a number of European language minorities, such as speakers of German, Dutch and French, were a part of the population in the first 13 states. In addition, there were masses of indigenous people living in the country, whose languages were even more numerous. (Schmidt 2009: 132-133.)

Through conquest and immigration, the following century saw the U.S add even more people with different languages to its population mix. The largest of the language groups were, and continue to be, Spanish-speakers. The first large waves of Spanish-speakers were added to the population of the U.S through the annexation of Mexican territories in the 1840s, and a while later, in 1898, the annexation of Puerto Rico. Tens of thousands more Mexicans crossed the border after the unsettling times of the Mexican revolution in 1910, and in the following years, masses of Mexican workers kept crossing over to the U.S. (Schmidt 2009: 133.)

In 2017, more than a 21% of the people living in America reported to speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). Out of them, 13% were Spanish speakers. This means that a huge amount of people in America speak English with different accents. In fact, to claim that almost every person in America (at least those living in metropolitan city areas) meet people speaking with foreign accents every day, would not be an overstatement. The American people have come into contact with foreign accents on such a regular basis since the very beginning of their history that it is astonishing to think they would let accents come in the way of their everyday communications. However, a market for accent reduction courses currently exists not because communication is significantly affected by accents, but because it is significantly affected by ideologies.

There is no reliable data on how long accent reduction courses have existed. The most popular method cited on accent reduction websites, the Compton P-ESL (Pronouncing English as a Second Language) Program, was created in the 1970s. This can be viewed as the starting point for accent modification courses especially targeting ESL speakers. Of course, pronunciation courses must have existed even before that, for example for actors and public speakers. However, the Compton P-ESL was one of the first methods that was created specifically for ESL speakers.

In the 1970s, the fourth wave of immigration to the U.S. had just begun, with increasing numbers migrating from Latin America and Asia. In fact, a number of these immigrants came from post-colonial countries, in a way returning to the “motherland”. In addition, thanks to the Immigration Act of 1965 limiting the entry of working-class labor migrants, a large part of the immigration flow of the late 1900s consisted of highly skilled immigrants, such as corporate managers, scientists and international students. (Gabaccia 2012: 179.)

So a large number of highly skilled, prosperous people, who came from post-colonial countries, and thus already knew English, entered the U.S. labor market. A number of eligible candidates for accent reduction had arrived in the United States. But what eventually happened that made them want to change their accents?

Liberal individualism and English hegemony

Several accent reduction websites allude to the competitiveness in today's working life. It is used as a reason for the existence of these courses: the competitive working life requires people to speak perfect, neutral English, which is why these courses are training people to meet those standards. Accent is viewed as an obstacle in this competitive environment, and to get rid of it is to improve one's chances of employment.

(22) In today's competitive environment, a noticeable accent can sometimes affect the way you are perceived and prevent you from realising your full potential. Colleagues and clients may find they misunderstand you or need to ask you to repeat yourself. Accent reduction will improve the way you are perceived and how effectively you communicate. (9)

(23) Sessions can include refining spoken English skills for interviews, meetings, presentations, and teleconferences to improve communication and meet the performance standards required in today's academic and professional settings. (32)

The examples above portray accent reduction as the key to solving personal and professional issues. The first two sentences illustrate possible situations, as can be seen in the use of modal verbs and phrases "can sometimes" and "may". These example situations are a very common technique used on the accent reduction websites to attract clients. Suggestions are made about the situations a client might face because of their accent. Accent reduction is then presented as the solution to these unfortunate situations.

Both examples 22 and 23 refer to the contemporary standards of working life., and the possibility of social advancement through accent modification. Websites for accent reduction courses can be viewed as a side product of globalization: before the increased mobility of people in the world, the extensive spread of the English language, and the extreme connective possibilities of the internet, there simply would not have been a market for a service like this. Furthermore, as the English language has spread over the globe, the standards have gotten higher: it is no longer enough to know the language, but a specific accent is required.

On accent reduction websites, the claims about the competitiveness of working life are presented as something widely known, and English communication is presented as a natural part of working life. Schmidt (2009) argues that the liberal individualistic culture which has been dominant throughout U.S. history enables both of these ideas: working life as a

competition and English language as the obvious language of working life. In order to explain his claim, Schmidt introduces two key beliefs in liberal individualism.

Firstly, there is a limit to the supply of goods available in the world, such as money, fame, and power, and this leads to a never-ending competition for those goods which results in some people winning and some losing. This competition is fair as long as everyone has a chance to participate, even if people might come to the competition with different limitations. (Schmidt 2009: 139.)

Secondly, everyone is responsible for their own luck. So if a person has had a chance to participate in the race for the goods, and failed at achieving their goal, they are expected to accept the blame and move on to the next race. To blame the surrounding society, for example, is pointless, as a liberal individualist believes that everyone in the race started from the same position. Additionally, Schmidt argues that the English language has established its footing in the U.S. so strongly that it has become “common sense” that a person cannot make it in America without fluency in the English language.

So, Schmidt proposes that the reason why so many people in the U.S. accept the English hegemony blindly and accept the ways in which the society has been structured to support it, is liberal individualistic culture. Life is viewed as one big race in which fluency in English is one of the keys to victory, and that trying to change that fact would be fighting against the individual freedom of the people. The right to participate in this race, the right to compete with others for the limited amount of goods, is the same for everyone regardless of background, and trying to change that (by supporting minority languages on a state level, for example) would be considered cheating in the race. (Schmidt 2009: 139-141.)

I propose that this liberal individualism is also one of the reasons why accent reduction is such a big phenomenon in precisely the U.S. Across accent reduction websites, the burden of communication is placed on the ESL speaker, as if their accents were the only thing standing in the way of perfect communication. Foreign accents are presented as nothing more than charming niceties, readily replaced with a more effective form of communication, the American accent.

Because of the continuous race to for the commodities, and the responsibility each person has for their own luck, people are willing to invest time and money to learn an accent that might grant them a head start in the competition against other aspiring candidates. What they don't

necessarily understand is that while the English hegemony continues to exist in the United States of America, they might always be starting the race one step behind.

5 DISCUSSION

The aim of my study has been to find out what kinds of ideological representations of accents are present on accent reduction websites. These representations construct and convey ideological meanings, which either support or contest existing beliefs about accents. The following research questions were designed to help me reach this goal:

1. What kinds of ideological representations of accents can be identified on accent reduction websites based in the United States?
2. How do these representations tie into the wider socio-political discourses surrounding non-standard accents in the United States?

Employing a heuristic model for discourse analysis proposed by Barbara Johnstone (2017), I analysed my data from six different aspects: linguistic structure, intertextuality and interdiscursivity, medium, participants, purpose, and the surrounding world. These six ways in which meaning is embedded in discourse each revealed something new about how accents were represented on accent reduction websites.

My investigation revealed several ideological representations of both the ideal American accent and the reduce-worthy non-standard accents. In addition, I wished to connect these findings with the wider ideological discourses surrounding foreign accents in the U.S. Literature on the subject revealed several discourses that could be connected with my findings. Next, I discuss my findings in relation to previous research, after which I present the implications and applications of this study.

Findings in relation to previous research

Standard English ideology, or in this case, the ideology of a Standard American English, was visible in the terminology used on the websites. Rather than describing Standard American English as one possible register of communication, it was presented as the ideal way of speaking in all situations. The standard accent was linked with adjectives such as *proper*, *neutral*, *correct* and *natural*. Describing the standard with these words contributes to the

belief that there is one correct way of speaking English, and any deviations from it should be erased.

Furthermore, it was claimed on accent reduction websites that Standard American English is commonly spoken in the U.S, when in fact it is very difficult to point out how many people speak such a variety. As Labov (2012: 4-5) has demonstrated, differences in regional dialects in America are growing bigger. In spite of this, the many dialects spoken in the U.S were often not mentioned at all, presenting the Americans as a linguistically homogeneous group. All native speakers were presented as experts of the English language, speaking with *posture and cadence*.

The English language, especially in terms of pronunciation, was presented as difficult, requiring special tricks to master. This was done by using difficult terminology to refer to simple things, as well as stating questionable facts about the nature of the English language. Native speakers were presented as the experts of this difficult language, elevating them further.

By teaching other subjects than pronunciation on an accent reduction course, such as *implied meanings* and *cultural pragmatics*, the course providers were implying that non-native speakers do not know them. This contributed to the ideological representation of the accented person as dumb or unskilled. This representation of the accented person as unskilled could also be seen in how a lot of the information on the websites was presented as if from a teacher to a schoolchild.

The listener's role in communication was erased on most of the websites, putting all the pressure of a communicative understanding on the speaker. Several studies have found that comprehensibility is affected by listener qualities, such as educational training (Kremenchugsky 2012), familiarity with an accent (Derwing & Munro 2009:486), and cultural bias (Neuliep & Speten-Hansen 2013). Because the listener's role was left out entirely, comprehensibility seemed like a one-way street. Non-standard accents were described as communication barriers, while communication with a standard accent was described as *clear, effective* and *listener-friendly*.

Rather than putting emphasis on learning a new accent, verbs such as *reduce, neutralize* and *eliminate* were chosen to describe the process of an accent course. This contributed to the view of non-standard accents as barriers in the way of effective communication. Erasing the

listener's role in comprehension as well as the fact that heavy accents can be completely understandable, the burden of communication was placed entirely on the speaker. It was presented as self-evident that a foreign accent would be a disturbance to comprehension, even though this is not always the case (Derwing & Munro 2009: 477-479). A few websites did, however, take the listener's role into account, and offered accent recognition courses as well as accent reduction ones. These websites provided a more accurate, two-way view on comprehension.

In U.S universities, accent reduction was often taught at speech and hearing clinics, and the course was grouped together with other *clinical services*, such as treatment for *Neurogenic Disorders* and *Autism Spectrum Disorders*. Placing the accent reduction course among services which cater to serious communication disorders evoked a medical discourse. The medical discourse was strengthened by word choices such as *licenced speech pathologists*, *communication disorder remediation* and *diagnostic and therapy services*. Through these choices, accent was presented as a serious communication disorder.

Throughout the data set, monolingualism was presented as the ideal. This was visible in the way that the neutrality and non-regionality of an accent were idolized on the websites. In addition, multilingualism and multiculturalism were erased from the discourse, since they would have not contributed to the ideology of monolingual superiority. Having a non-standard accent was presented as a negative factor in working life, and the benefits of multilingualism were not mentioned.

On a larger scale, the practice of accent reduction can be seen to connect with some key beliefs in the American society. Firstly, the processes of globalization have created large masses of eligible clients for the accent reduction businesses. Secondly, the prevailing English hegemony in the American society and the belief that everyone should be assimilated into it has acted as a fuel for a practice like accent reduction. Thirdly, the liberal individualistic culture of the U.S. has convinced these global clients that taking up accent reduction is worth it, because it will aid them in the fierce competition that the American corporate life is.

Implications and applications

Like Blommaert (2009: 256) pointed out in his article on the American accent market, something that still holds true ten years later, is that the ideological views projected on accent websites are notably uniform. Yes, there are exceptions, like the few websites offering accent recognition courses, but the bulk of these websites is asserting a unitary view on accents: the superiority of the American accent compared to all others.

Some descriptions of the American accent across the websites included words like proper and correct. Emphasizing correctness in language use is something that is done in schools, which might lead people into thinking that the language they learned to speak at school is the only correct way to use that language. Keeping in mind registers (Agha 2005) though, each person uses language in several different ways, with their family, with their friends, at work or at school. One language variety for all contexts is simply not enough. Therefore, no one language variety can be the proper variety for all situations.

Moreover, as well as the correctness, also the neutrality of the American accent is mentioned more than once. The same effect applies here: people think that their own accent is somehow more neutral than other accents because they cannot spot their own accent markers. Even the term “accent without an accent” was used on accent reduction websites, referring to the imaginary standard of American English. Of course, no accent is neutral, socially or regionally. Each accent is a reflection of where a person acquired the language in question. To some people, it might index a place, but for others, also class, ethnicity, or religion. The only thing it tells us for certain, though, is which accent influenced the speaker most at the time they learned the language.

An instance in the American media which is representative of ideologies regarding accent reduction was covered by the media company Inside Higher Ed in their online publication (Flaherty 2014). A laboratory in Tennessee added a voluntary Southern accent reduction class to their employee course table in addition to their regular accent reduction classes which targeted non-native speakers. The email they sent to thousands of staff members read:

In this course you will learn to recognize the pronunciation and grammar differences that make your speech sound Southern, and learn what to do so you can neutralize it through a technique called code-switching (Flaherty 2014).

An outrage by the staff soon followed. The defense from the lab was that a staff member had requested this course, and that the intention was not to single out any specific accent, but to offer a chance for professional development to all members of their staff. However, the damage had been done: some of the employees had been offended by the wording in the email, and the entire premise of the course. As expected, the course was quickly discontinued, and the anger of the Southern employees of the lab subsided.

This example is quite accurate in displaying the American mindset when it comes to accents. Some accents hold cultural value. Namely, the American dialects and some European accents are good enough to preserve. They might come in handy when it comes to historical reenactments. All other accents, on the other hand, are a hindrance to communication, and therefore lower the employability of the speaker. These are the premises in which a practice like accent reduction thrives.

As suggested by Mäntynen et al. (2012: 337), the importance of a language ideological study is closely related to changes in society. The current global atmosphere can be seen as quite polarized: in the US and South America, as well as many European countries, people are increasingly divided between the political left and right. Because of the increasing role of immigration in this divide, language ideologies play a big part in the debate at the world stages. After all, language ideology can work both as a connecting and a dividing force.

In the global context, the importance of debunking old myths about language and taking a critical look at new language-related phenomena is more important than ever. Although language ideologies can be used to strengthen borders, they can also be deployed to unify people. Nationalist ideologies have traditionally seen an ideal society as monolingual (Blommaert & Verschueren 1998), and old beliefs are slow to change. However, a new normal of superdiversity and global multilingualism has emerged to fight the monolingual ideal (Blommaert 2013).

In general, this study has contributed to the study of language ideologies by providing a description of a relatively new phenomenon which has been scarcely researched. As Blommaert (2009: 257) states, “it is in small-scale, niched phenomena such as the ones considered here that we see real language”. By studying a phenomenon as carefully crafted as these accent reduction courses, we can learn about the wider social context in which they were created - our current globalized, yet polarized world.

6 CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to find out what kinds of ideological representations of accents are present on accent reduction websites. This was done by analysing the discourse found on the websites from the six different angles that make discourse unique: **Linguistic structure, Intertextuality and interdiscursivity, Media, Participants, Purpose, and The surrounding world**. Furthermore, the aim of the study was to place these findings in the wider socio-political context, or find out how they fit in the ideological tradition of the U.S. This was accomplished by researching formal U.S language policies, the history of foreign accents in the U.S, and the American corporate culture.

Accent in general was presented as something worth reducing or removing: as a barrier to communication, and as a disadvantage in working life. On some websites, accent was presented as a communication disorder, worth treating in a clinical environment. The process was described with words such as *reduce*, *neutralize* and *eliminate*, once again presenting the accent as a barrier worth destroying.

According to accent reduction websites, some accents were okay to have: especially American accents, and after that, some European accents. The ideal accent was described as an almost perfect form of communication: effective, clear, and beautiful. The ideal communication tool was also described to be neutral, and non-regional, showing no signs of the speaker's origin.

The English language was presented as a difficult language. Particularly English pronunciation was portrayed as something that involved special tricks to learn. Because English was presented as such a difficult language, native speakers were presented as experts: their language skills were elevated on the websites, while multilingualism was not given any value. Accented speakers, on the other hand, were presented as unskilled and naive.

There was, however, some variation among the websites. For example, two of the websites offered courses in *listening* to certain accents as well as speaking with a certain accent. Most websites did not, placing the burden of comprehension entirely on the speaker. All the websites also erased the fact that heavily accented speech can still be perfectly understandable.

In the wider context, the findings tied into the concepts of Standard language ideology, liberal individualism, nationalism, and romanticizing monolingualism. The competitive culture of the corporate life in the U.S also played a part in enabling accent reduction practices.

Accent reduction as a practice has not been widely researched within the field of sociolinguistics. I hope that by conducting this study, I have contributed to this gap in the research, and helped future researchers who wish to study this phenomenon in detail. I do believe that accent reduction is not going away, and the online search results seem to report an upward tendency.

Further objects for research about the accent reduction business would be the clients of these courses. Their insights as to why they chose to partake in accent reduction, as well as their experiences from the courses themselves might further explain the need for this sort of instruction. Another topic of interest might be the instructors, and how they view accent: do the ideologies of the surrounding society affect their teaching at all, and what are the differences in instruction when it comes to SLPs and English teachers?

There is still plenty of research to do online in the world of accent reduction, too. Some interesting case studies could be done on the accent reduction websites that crossed my plate when conducting this overview of the field. It might be interesting to take a look at the course content as well, since most websites offer courses completely online. Finally, other countries have their own accent reduction markets to research, although I am not certain about how much of this practice happens in other languages than English. If it does, language differences would offer an interesting viewpoint. In any case, more research into the practice of accent reduction is needed, so that we may better understand the implications of its existence in our modern world.

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APPENDIX

WEBSITES USED IN ANALYSIS

1. Accents International <https://www.lessaccent.com/>
2. AccentsOff <https://accentsoff.com/>
3. Accurate English <http://www.accurateenglish.com/accent-reduction-classes/>
4. ALTA Language Services <https://www.altalang.com/language-training/accentreduction/>
5. Arizona Language Center <https://arizonalanguagecenter.com/language-classes/accent-reduction-pronunciation/>
6. Arizona Language Institute <http://www.arizonalanguageinstitute.com/american-english-pronunciation-accent-reduction.html>
7. Becker Accent Reduction <https://beckeraccentreduction.com/>
8. Bellevue College <https://www.bellevuecollege.edu/classes/All/ELIUP/068>
9. CCLS Houston <http://cclshouston.com/foreign-language/accent-reduction>
10. Clayton State University <http://www.clayton.edu/ce/accent>
11. ClearEnglishSpeech <https://www.clearenglishspeech.com/>
12. Columbia University, Teachers College <https://www.tc.columbia.edu/mysak/clinical-services/accent-modification-program/>
13. Communicaid <https://www.communicaid.com/communication-skills/accent-reduction-and-recognition/>
14. Emory University <https://ece.emory.edu/catalogDetail.php?CatalogID=55>
15. Fairview Health Services <https://www.fairview.org/services/accent-modification-program>
16. Florida International University, English Language Institute <https://eli.fiu.edu/programs/community-outreach-program/accent-reduction-classes/>
17. LanguageOn <https://languageonschools.com/our-courses/accent-reduction-classes/>
18. Northeastern University, Bouvé College of Health Sciences <https://bouve.northeastern.edu/csd/clinic/accent-and-communication-training-act/>
19. Northern Arizona University <https://nau.edu/chhs/csd/clinic/accent-modification/>
20. Northwestern University <https://nucasll.northwestern.edu/speech-language-pathology/accent-modification-professional-speaking>
21. PACE University <https://www.pace.edu/eli/efp/accent-reduction>

22. PronunciationPro https://www.pronunciationpro.com/accent-reduction-training/?keyword=%2Baccent%20%2Bclasses&matchtype=b&adposition=1t1&device=c&creative=281278982560&placement=&gclid=Cj0KCQjw3KzdBRDWARIsAIJ8TMS8iu3B49Nr18Z69GhBgzUv7UuV28-ojkZJqueo5MsX_xsp7fkKis4aAm33EALw_wcB
23. San Diego State University, Speech-Language Clinic <https://slhs.sdsu.edu/speech-language-clinic/services/available-services/accent/>
24. Speech and Accent Academy <http://www.speechandaccentacademy.com/accent-reduction/kovens/>
25. Stanford Continuing Studies https://continuingstudies.stanford.edu/courses/professional-and-personal-development/accent-reduction-for-non-native-speakers-of-english/20181_COM-39-A
26. Successfully Speaking <http://successfully-speaking.com/accent-modification/>
27. Texas State University <http://www.health.txstate.edu/slhclinic/clinical-services/speech-and-language/accent-modification.html>
28. The Ohio State University <https://sphs.osu.edu/clinic/speech-language-services/accent-reduction>
29. The University of Iowa <https://clas.uiowa.edu/comsci/clinical-services/accent-modification>
30. The University of Michigan, Mary. A. Rackham Institute <https://mari.umich.edu/tag/accent-reduction/>
31. Towson University <https://www.towson.edu/academics/international/englishlanguagecenter/programs/accent.html>
32. University of California San Diego, Extension <https://extension.ucsd.edu/courses-and-programs/esl-accent-modification>
33. University of California, Los Angeles, Extension <https://www.uclaextension.edu/business-management/leadership-management/course/speaking-clarity-accent-reduction-workshop-speech>
34. University of Central Florida <https://healthprofessions.ucf.edu/cdclinic/comprehensive-evaluation/accent-reduction/>
35. University of Missouri, School of Health Professions <https://healthprofessions.missouri.edu/communication-science-and-disorders/clinics-and-service/accent-modification-and-pronunciation-program/>
36. University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Continuing Education <http://continuingeducation.unlv.edu/catalog/accent-reduction>
37. University of Pittsburgh <http://www.otolaryngology.pitt.edu/centers-excellence/foreign-accent-modification-program>

38. University of San Diego, Professional and Continuing Education
<https://pce.sandiego.edu/public/category/courseCategoryCertificateProfile.do%3Bjsessionid=66F91CA9523DC23278B652D9C06F9BB8?method=load&certificateId=28845>
39. University of Wisconsin-Madison <https://csd.wisc.edu/clinic/speech-language-services/accent-modification-reduction/>
40. Vireo Accent Reduction <http://www.vireoaccentreduction.com/>