WHICH ENGLISH PLEASES YOUR EAR? AN ATTITUDE STUDY ON ACCENTS IN TIMES OF ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA

QUE INGLÊS LHE SOA AGRADÁVEL? UM ESTUDO ATITUDINAL SOBRE SOTAQUES EM TEMPO DE INGLÊS COMO LÍNGUA FRANCA

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Abstract: From the second half of the 20th century, English has become the most widely spoken language for international communication in the world. It connects people with varied lingua-cultures who otherwise would not be able to communicate, functioning as a global lingua franca. Since the majority of the speakers are non-native, we need to ask ourselves why there are so many people struggling to sound native-like in English. About the repercussions of an accent, McNamara (2001) states that we not only evaluate people by how they speak, but we also evaluate their speech by our sociocultural connotations of the group they belong to. Reflecting on this issue, this is an attitude study on accents of English as lingua franca (ELF) interactions through the analyses of the answers to a questionnaire applied to students of English in Salvador (BA). The ponderations are based on paramount sociolinguistic themes like the "inherent value" granted to hegemonic varieties, as well as in the attempt to understand the participants' attitude toward accents of English in international settings. It aims, among other things, to raise the awareness of how much work still needs to be done in order to legitimize non-hegemonic Englishes.

Keywords: English as lingua franca; attitude studies; accents; sociocultural connotations.

Resumo: Desde a segunda metade do século XX, o inglês tem se tornado a língua mais falada para comunicação internacional no mundo. Ela conecta pessoas com língua-culturas variadas que, de outro modo, não teriam como se comunicar. Dessa forma, o idioma tem funcionado como uma língua franca global. Ao levarmos em consideração que a maioria dos falantes de inglês atualmente é formada de não-nativos, precisamos começar a questionar a razão de inúmeras pessoas se esforçarem tanto para soar como nativos. Sobre as repercussões de um sotaque, McNamara (2001) afirma que nós não só avaliamos as pessoas pela maneira como elas falam, mas avaliamos também sua fala pelas conotações socioculturais que damos aos grupos aos quais essas pessoas pertencem. Este estudo atitudinal de interações que constituem o uso de inglês como língua franca (ILF) propõe a reflexão sobre essa questão através da análise de respostas aos questionários aplicados a estudantes de inglês em Salvador (BA). As ponderações são baseadas em temas sociolinguísticos fundamentais como o "valor inerente" das variantes hegemônicas, assim como na tentativa de entender as atitudes dos participantes em relação a sotaques de inglês em contextos internacionais. O objetivo é, entre outros, a conscientização sobre quanto trabalho ainda precisa ser feito visando à valorização de ingleses não hegemônicos.

Palavras-chave: Inglês como língua franca; estudo atitudinal; sotaques; conotações socioculturais.

> *[Language] is not transmitted without being transformed. It does not travel well because it is fundamentally unstable. It is not well adapted to control because it is itself adaptable* (WIDDOWSON, 1997, p. 136).

INTRODUCTION

The concept or the acceptance of English as the most widely used language for international communication in today's world, to some, might already sound as obvious and therefore needless of further debate. However, acknowledging this phenomenon is just the beginning of a long and complex journey, for it represents a new paradigm with its own sociolinguistic implications that have been reflecting on research and teaching considerations.

Currently, the proportion of native (NS) to non-native speakers (NNS) of English has already reached at least 1 native to 4 non-native (CRYSTAL, 2003; SEIDLHOFER, 2011). This means, as stated by Crystal (2006, p. 425) that "one in four of the of the world's population are now capable of communicating to a useful level in English". Put in another way, "an inexorable trend in the use of global English is that fewer interactions now involve a native speaker" (GRADDOL, 2006, p. 87). Based on this, one can safely assume that in the contemporary global society English is used mostly as a lingua franca – the language that makes it possible for people of different mother tongues to communicate with each other (JENKINS, 2007; COGO; DEWEY, 2012).

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In such a scenario, one of the most pressing issues concerning the global spread of English is the achievement of full understanding of the legitimate power that all its users are to have over the language. The challenge, then, is not in recognizing the spread of English anymore, but realizing the far-reaching implications of having an amazingly diverse range of users and purposes. Investigators and scholars engaged in the research field that studies English as a Lingua Franca (henceforth ELF) have been dealing with those issues for over 15 years now, with related topics being discussed at least since Jenkins's publication of the book *The Phonology of English as an International Language*, in 2000, and the article *Closing a conceptual gap: the case for a description of English as a Lingua Franca* by Seidlhofer, in the *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, in 2001.

Although ELF has been increasingly debated in workshops, seminars, conferences, etc., in both national and international settings, the general population, and also many linguists, applied linguists, and teachers of English worldwide, have not given much thought to understanding the current status of this phenomenon, and the many and important implications to classroom practice. The native speaker as the "number one" (and to many, the only) legitimate reference is still common choice in English classes around the world, although such a posture solely ignores the much higher probability of encounters which involve non-native speakers of different linguacultural backgrounds, or the fact that, as Beneke (1991, p. 54 as cited in SEIDLHOFER, 2011, p. 2) states, "80 percent of all communication involving the use of English as a second or foreign language does not involve any native speakers".

When speaking a second or foreign language, naturally, the ultimate goal the person wants to reach is to understand and be understood by his/her interlocutor. But intelligibility, as Jenkins (2007) asserts, is not a one-way traffic, for both interlocutors are engaged in an interaction, and both must make the necessary effort to guarantee that they understand each other. Besides, as posited out by Smith (1992), there are different levels of intelligibility, and in order to communicate efficiently one needs to be sensitive to the other interlocutor's lingua-culture background. What someone says by speaking or writing usually conveys meanings that may vary in their actual references, as words are a mere representation of things, and this is likely to differ from person to person. That is the reason why, when English is being used as a lingua franca, a skilled communicator of a variety of the language in question is

that person who is capable of accommodating other ways of speaking (JENKINS, 2007, p. 238), processing not only the lexical item itself, but what that word or expression means to the person using it.

Even today, different, unfamiliar, and, to many, 'heavy' accents are normally taken as examples of funny or bad pronunciation, faulty traces of an interlanguage[2] or even a prime example of fossilization[3] both in and out of the classroom environment. Although such prejudiced attitudes would be expected to be tackled during the learning process, it is in the classroom that they seem to be either overlooked or, in many situations, reinforced. In fact, the so-called "international" textbooks on the market have been presenting "foreign" accents of English in a way that they might be stimulating and solidifying prejudice instead (MATSUDA, 2002, p. 438). In such coursebooks, non-native accents are indeed present, but normally the given speakers are portrayed as using "accented" standardized structures while interacting with a native speaker, which makes it impossible *not* to compare those realizations to that same standard. That kind of representation is forceful and unrealistic, as accent is only one feature of the language that characterizes the origins and life journey of a speaker. It means to say that for a more 'life-like' approach to language, an accent should, above all, be valued, respected, and portrayed together with recurrent local structures, expressions, vocabulary, etc., as that would better exemplify the richness of a great and diverse repertoire common to global bilingual speakers of English.

Having said that, the aim of this article is to discuss the findings of a research work I conducted in 2012, and propose some reflection over an issue that has always been extremely important in the area of English Language Teaching (ELT), but solemnly taken as peripheral. Based on an attitudinal study about reactions to certain English accents by a group of non-specialists, fresh and spontaneous traces of accent hierarchy in the participants' community were uncovered in the analysis (JENKINS, 2007). Therefore, this brief work described here is to be taken as a small contribution to raise some type of awareness in students, teachers, teacher educators, among other stakeholders. The following section will briefly elaborate on topics central to the discussion.

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[2] The concept of *Interlanguage* has been around for decades in ELT, and it usually refers to the language produced by someone who is in the process of learning a new/second language.

[3] *Fossilization* is also a term that has been used throughout the years by Second Language Acquisition research, and it has been conceived as the phenomenon that reveals a recurrent mistake in someone's performance and very difficult or almost impossible to be changed.

ATTITUDE TOWARDS ACCENTS AND ELT

One of the justifications that support and defend the reinforcement of the ubiquitous native model is the fear that making space for different varieties of English could cause those new Englishes to "grow apart". Purists of the English language argue that if English is not taught following the traditional "proper" pronunciation, that is, General American (GA/US) and Received Pronunciation (RP/UK), Englishes around the world are doomed to become unintelligible to one another. Needless to say that, based on such assumptions, English varieties can become more independent and deviate a great deal from that still hegemonic native speaker model. By saying so, the 'protectors', or the 'gatekeepers' of the English language, as Kachru (1997) would name them, among other things, are overlooking the fact that not even all native speakers understand one another. This type of variations in pronunciation has never been flagged as a serious problem for mutual intelligibility, but until today, they constitute social barriers that are supposed to be brought down by education, not reinforced.

The reason for that might be that there are many more examples of successful adjustments/accommodation than situations in which speakers of different varieties could not understand each other. The United Kingdom, for instance, is a prime example of such a reality. The Englishes spoken in England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland are considerably divergent, but English speakers in that particular country are rather used to accommodating to other ways of communicating this diverse language, even though, for the layperson, they basically use the same 'monolithic' language. Of course, I am not saying this is a pacific and well-resolved scenario as, needless to say, none of this happens without some level of conflict and power disputes. Still, people manage to come and go with their own Englishes. And, as far as I know, each one is very proud of his/her *linguacultural* background and history.

As researches have demonstrated (GARRET, 2010; LAMBERT, 1967; EDWARD, 1982), the preference of a certain variety of English is usually not based on linguistic reasons, but in connotations attached to the country or people represented by it. If one states he/she likes a certain accent better than another, especially when they can understand both, it becomes clear that the choice is not based on phonetic or phonological aspects. There is always the social power relationship element in the background that a lot of the academic literature seems prefer to leave aside in its discussions as a peripheral issue. But

this is not so in the real world. Actually, the native accent still stands out (and will always) as having some type of "inherent value" in most ranking questionnaires (TRUDGILL; GILES, 1978).

The fact "people [usually] express definite and consistent attitudes towards speakers who use particular styles of speaking" (GILES; BILLING, 2004, p. 188) is very clearly demonstrated in the segregation of non-hegemonic realizations of language. Nonetheless, languages and language features *do not* have inherent qualities of pleasantness or unpleasantness, or can be described as better or worse, but that is exactly why researching people's attitudes towards languages, in this case, different accents of English, is relevant (EDWARDS, 1982, p. 21 as cited in JENKINS, 2007, p. 69). Once the sociocultural prejudice behind negative language attitudes is made known to people as linguistically unfounded, those who use the varieties being discriminated against, potentially, will know the problem is not in their linguistic differences, but in factors concerning who holds power.

The accent *is* the most powerful factor to provoke a response to speech styles. Therefore, it has also "the strongest influence on (language-based) attitudes" (JENKINS, 2007, p. 78). Whether we are fully aware or not, everybody makes assessment of other people using language cues, and frequently place them in social categories according to how they speak (MCNAMARA; WAGNER, 2001). Within an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) scope of accents and interactions, even among non-native speakers, or among nonstandard varieties, the difference in acceptability can still be great.

As mentioned above, language is never disconnected from social power, and it is based on random linguistic and sociopolitical criteria that standard accents were established and consolidated throughout the centuries. In the case of a global language like English, just being associated with a native speaker group is a commodity that many want to possess. For this reason, they tend to judge negatively those among themselves who prefer to keep features of their L1 in their English accents. This kind of judgment, or even self-judgment, shows how the dichotomy of "good" or "bad" English still remains hand-in-hand with comparisons of how native-like one person sounds. The most unconscious decision to blindly imitate a native speaker seems to be much more about becoming part of a "respected" group and spreading the respect for that same speech style. Unless, of course, it is an informed decision case, in which a speaker opts for minimizing conflicts when moving to an inner circle country.

That would characterize a personal stand in the face of a migration case with its own peculiar relational difficulties and sociocultural challenges.

When it comes to the opinion of English teachers about English as an International Language (EIL) or English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) in the classroom, some argue that allowing varieties or variations of pronunciation that are not mainstream (GA or RP) will result in unprepared students for the world outside the classroom. Apparently, learners' 'alternative' pronunciations might impede communication in the future, instead of facilitating it. And following that cue, many teachers (who certainly carry their own accent) still reward students who (attempt or struggle) to lose or erase their L1 accent (LIPPI-GREEN, 1997) by assigning them better grades on oral tests and praising them in class. Having good (clear) pronunciation is a must when speaking any language, but losing your L1 accent on purpose should not be a goal of any learning process, unless, it is again an informed choice made by the learner. Doing so also represents giving in to putting aside a relevant aspect of a person's identity, as the accent speaks not only of one's geographical origins, but also of his/her life trajectory. A speaker's sociolinguistic history encompasses more than only where he/she learned English; on the contrary, it is a complex combination of his/her life experiences, such as where he/she comes from, current and previous places of residency, people he/she has interacted with, as well as other types of linguacultural features.

Professionals of the field, namely linguists, applied linguists, teachers of English, and teacher educators, among others, once aware of the status of English use in the world, should actively raise awareness of their students to crucial sociopolitical issues involved in learning a widely used international language. That means, English learners must know that they do not need to give up who they are, Brazilians, for example, in order to feel like they are more of world citizens, or to be valued as such. In our specific context, Brazilian speakers of English should not be afraid or feel embarrassed for having their nationality recognized through their accents. Instead, they should find pride in knowing how to be themselves, while communicating in the language that connects the world of the 21st century.

On the other hand, if a student decides to sound more similar to a specific variety other than his/her own L1 influenced, this person's choice should be totally respected. Above all, teachers of English should keep in mind their task is to provide students with the opportunities and tools they might

need in order to make informed decisions concerning their accents and other nuances of the new language they are learning. People have different goals in life and might need to learn a specific variety of a foreign language for personal or professional reasons. Therefore, it is not up to the teacher to restrict the exposure of students to this or that variety, or curb the learner's intentions.

In practice, what cannot be ignored in English teaching today is the differentiation between models and targets. As teachers, it is still valid to use hegemonic *models* as the basis of classroom practice, especially considering the fact the bulk of English teaching materials are mainly US/UK conceived and produced. However, it is paramount to emphasize that, nowadays, for a great majority of classroom practice all over the world, the target is international intelligibility, which means our students need to learn how to express themselves clearly, not necessarily doing it by mimicking a pre-given variety or just memorizing and repeating what is the book. This way, exposing students to as many different English accents as possible tends to improve their ability to understand different possible pronunciation patterns, as well as different ways of expressing thoughts.

With this brief discussion in mind and the need for more and more investigation on such issues, I now move onto the methodological aspects of this specific research work in the section which follows.

DISCUSSING METHODOLOGY

As previously mentioned, this is a research study about attitudes to accents. For the data collection of the investigation, some aspects of the perceptual dialectology method – a branch of *Folk Linguistics*[4] that belongs to the field of social psychology – was found adequate and used in the analyses. From the overt opinions of the participants expressed in words concerning varieties of English from different origins, we can get to their attitudes towards those varieties as well as their attitude towards themselves as English speakers.

In order to generate the data, a questionnaire was elaborated for the ranking of the accents and a nationality recognition test (see Appendix I). As for input, audio segments with interviews of English speakers of six different nationalities speaking spontaneously with their natural accents were selected. It

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[4]   In brief words, we can define *Folk Linguistics* as the study of speakers' opinions and beliefs about language, language varieties, and language usage.

is important to mention that all the interviews happened through the English language in which all interlocutors (interviewers and interviewees) were speakers of different mother tongues, therefore characterizing such occurrences ELF interactions.

Six audio segments were presented, so they comprise the source of input for the research study. They were short interviews with movie stars (about their latest films), edited to last only 28 to 31 seconds each, joined together, and posted on the website *Youtube.com* to facilitate posterior access. They were all from different countries, selected to represent each of the *World Englishes* concentric circles, that is, inner circle, outer circle, and the expanding circle, having two speakers from each circle (KACHRU, 1985). So, from the inner circle, we had speakers from the United States and Britain; outer circle, South Africa and India, and expanding circle, Mexico and Brazil.

To answer the questionnaire, I selected students from five English schools[5] in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. The Brazilian speakers of English chosen were at the upper-intermediate, advanced, or post-advanced levels. The English proficiency levels of these learners were pre-determined in order to not interfere negatively in the results.

The questionnaire was composed of three questions, each with a specific purpose. In the first question, participants were supposed to listen to the audio segments and, without knowing the geographic origin of the speakers, rank the accents using numbers to indicate their preferences (1 for the *most favorite* and 6 for the *least favorite*). The objective of this question was to find out what students' opinions were when related only to the actual accent. For this reason, it was much more likely that in Question 1 the evaluation would be more language-oriented, which means intelligibility would probably be the most relevant aspect to be taken into consideration. Therefore, to ensure the validity of the data, in the second question, participants were supposed to guess the nationality of the speakers, so that we would know how much of the first question could have already reflected some sociocultural connotation.

In the third question, the answers, expectedly, were supposed to be more revealing. At this point, participants were provided with the information on the geographical origin of each speaker in the audio segments before they were asked to rank all the accents again. However, besides ranking the accents once

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[5] Language institutes in Salvador and at NUPEL, UFBA's Permanent Language Extension Program.

more, participants were given the opportunity to justify their choices selecting from the options provided[6], one or more concepts that would explain their preferences, or in case none of options really described what they thought, they could use their own words to express their opinions and reactions. All this information was compiled into tables in order to systematize and therefore facilitate the analyses of the results. Finally, the goal of the analyses was to get to know the attitudes of the participants towards the accents in the input through the ranking and their justifications. The section to come discusses the findings.

WHICH ACCENT PLEASES THE EAR?

The aforementioned questionnaire was applied to 43 students of English. However, 8 students answered part of the questionnaire incorrectly, having their answers therefore discarded. Thus, the number of questionnaires analyzed was 35. When looking at the results, it is important to keep in mind that the lowest numbers stand for the favorite accents, as they were ranked 1 to 6 according to the participants' preferences, writing 1 for the best and 6 for the worst, multiplied by the number of criteria (4) as it was explained previously.

In the *first question*, the nationality of the speakers or any other additional information had not been provided yet. The American accent of English, with 90 points, was considered the 'best accent', followed closely by the Brazilian accent with 95 points. These initial results can be attributed to the fact English most schools and language institutes in Salvador usually use American textbooks and consume a lot of American cultural products, such as music, films, sports, TV shows, as well as many programs that come to them through cable channels. The Brazilian accent came as the second favorite, which might be considered natural given the fact the participants were all Brazilian speakers of English who practice their English with other Brazilians in class. In her ELF research on accents, Jenkins (2007) posits that for teachers participating in her Lingua Franca workshop, which was one of the phases of the investigation, 'best' meant intelligible; in the case of the American and Brazilian accents for participants in my study, intelligible was equated with 'familiar'. The Mexican was 3rd with 126 points, the South African got 164 points, the Indian 162 points,

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6   Options available in the questionnaire: *pleasant* or *unpleasant*, *correct* or *incorrect*, *acceptable* or *unacceptable internationally*, and *familiar* or *unfamiliar*.

and the British, though a native accent, was the last one in the preference of the participants, receiving 176 points.

For the *second question*, participants were supposed to listen to the audio segments again and guess the nationality of the speakers. Because of the level of familiarity, the Brazilian accent of English was expected to be the first in the number of correct guesses. Instead, it was the last. Apparently, my participants did not have their expectations of a Brazilian accent of English depicted by the Brazilian speaker in the audio segment. The Mexican and South African accents were more easily recognized than both native varieties (British and American). The South African accent, for instance, is rarely (if ever) represented in textbooks. On the other hand, they might have guessed it right by elimination of the more familiar options. The Indian accent ranked an intermediary position. The conclusion so far is that such data do not invalidate the analyses drawn from the results of the first question, once none of the accents were guessed correctly over 50% of the times.

As for the *third question*, participants were provided with the nationalities of the speakers in the audio segments (American, British, Indian, South African, Mexican, and Brazilian). By unveiling this information, I intended to activate the preconceptions hearers could have against or in favor of the groups represented by those accents, and then check if those preconceptions interfered or not in their evaluation. The accent ranking done in this question shows that the American accent was, by far, the most favorite of participants, with 74 points. The Brazilian accent came in second with 107 points, which represents a considerable distance to the first. The next ones, Mexican and British, came to a tie, both with 127 points. The last ones in preference were very much despised in comparison to the majority, almost side-by-side, the South African accent with 147 points, and the Indian one with 153 points. Though the Mexican and British ranking results were sort of unexpected, they could definitely be taken as positive if looked at from an ELF perspective. I say that because the Mexican accent had been ranked higher than the British in the first question, but they were considered equals according to the results of the third question.

The sociocultural connotations are evoked as participants find out about the origin of the speakers. Then, they devalue the Brazilian accent, and it ends up being very far from the favorite one in the second ranking. However, the fact the Brazilian accent still kept its 2nd position might mean that the participants, who are Brazilian speakers of English, were somehow proud of the accent of the

speaker who represented them. We can also notice that the Indian and African accents continued being ranked close to each other in preference.

As widely known, both the Indian and South African are accents of English from countries that belong to Kachru's outer circle, and therefore, represent indigenized/nativized varieties of English. In those countries, the speakers of English tend to be much bolder in keeping traces of their identities in their way of speaking, which sometimes results in even broader non-standard accents than the ones from the expanding circle countries. These speakers from the British ex-colonies fight for the legitimacy of their variety of English as one that must be seen as a variety in its own right, not as being an eternal interlanguage or a "baby English" that never reaches maturity. Since Brazilian speakers of English in this study think that the best accent is the American accent, they are also very unlikely to appreciate indigenized English accents.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: CATEGORY ANALYSIS

In this section, I discuss participants' personal comments on the audio input. This is when the overt opinions of the students were expressed by means of the words provided in the questionnaire, and it is also where we can start uncovering their attitudes in more details. It is important to notice that these justifications were selected in the *third question* of the questionnaire when the accents were presented along with speakers' nationalities. The justification categories were: *acceptability*, *correctness*, *pleasantness*, and *familiarity*. For instance, they could select the positive adjective "acceptable" or the negative "unacceptable".

Results of the first category, *acceptability*, showed the American accent as being the 'most acceptable', followed by the Brazilian one. All the other accents were considered 'unacceptable' after the contrasting calculation of the results, varying only on how unacceptable they were in relation to each other.

Having the American accent as the most acceptable among the other accents goes in accordance with the general ranking done before in Questions 1 and 3, since the American accent came twice in first position. In addition, the position of the Brazilian accent also confirms the previous ranks as it comes second in acceptability. It is unclear, though, why the Mexican and British accents ended up not being considered 'acceptable'. Such a clue may reveal a need for further studies involving attitudes towards English being used as a

lingua franca. Uncovering the criteria laypeople activate to evaluate an accent as acceptable or not would provide researchers and teachers with important information on conceptions to work on in order to deconstruct unfounded prejudice coming from the general public.

As for *correctness*, the second category, just as expected, results bring the British accent from the list of 'unacceptable' accents to the list of the 'correct' ones. It is still far behind the American and Brazilian accents, though. Apparently, the weight of the metaphysical correctness in the "Queen's English" makes the difference in these respondents' minds. The Brazilian accent was considered second best by a very small difference when compared to 'acceptability'. In the 'correctness' justification item, though, it comes second but with a much considerable distance. What does that mean? Why is not the highly acceptable accent also highly rated as correct? We cannot forget that selecting the justifications provided was optional. Participants only selected these categories when they wanted to relate those concepts to the accents they were ranking. That means to say that if the Brazilian accent did not get many 'correct' marks, then that idea of correctness is probably not usually related to it in the participants' minds.

In addition, the decrease of points of the Brazilian accent between the 'acceptability' and the 'correctness' results might have been due to the usual inferiority complex non-native speakers of English present in researches done in attitude studies (JENKINS, 2007), especially when it comes to the idea of correctness that laypeople carry with them their whole lives. As we all know, the colonial mentality (MIGNOLO, 2010) of eternal deficit is predominant, which is probably a reflex of the frustration over the unreachable. Still much desired, the native-like target English schools set and sell is an aim that can easily be seen in many popular methods and assessment tools.

Moving on the next category, *pleasantness*, results placed the Mexican accent, for the first time, amongst the ones rated positively. Respondents thought the Mexican accent to be 'pleasant' when compared to the others. If one takes this new information into consideration, he/she may conclude that, for these participants, 'acceptability' and 'correctness' can be unrelated to 'pleasantness' and vice-versa. Another example of that disparity is in the fact the British accent was rated as 'very unpleasant', close to the South African and Indian ones, both considered the least pleasant. The other ones in this category,

Brazilian and American were ranked similarly to the previous criteria, which means the American was 1ˢᵗ and the Brazilian 2ⁿᵈ on the positive side.

When it came to *familiarity*, the fourth category, results revealed that the first characteristic that stands out in this graph is that the Brazilian accent sample was considered the most familiar accent of English by the participants. Here, the American accent got the 2ⁿᵈ place, the British, the 3ʳᵈ, the Mexican was 4ᵗʰ, followed by the South African and the Indian as the least familiar ones.

One of the things that this data makes us reflect upon is how long these students have been exposed to a Brazilian accent of English, and in contrast, how long they have been exposed to native accents of English. Are they aware of this fact? How does it make them feel? Such questions would be productive in another research to bring interesting data to the field of attitudinal studies. Another reason why the students might have rated the Brazilian accent as the most familiar is because the speaker of this accent, needless to say, is physically (geographically) closer to them, and that, for sure, might mean greater familiarity.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: WRITTEN JUSTIFICATIONS

The written justifications in the answers to the questionnaire are of great value to this research. Since the writing of those was also optional, they are very likely to bring out explanations of what the participants felt strongly about in such a matter. The fact these comments were written with words from the repertoire of the respondents, also provides us with interesting and rich raw material for detailed analysis. For this study, it was my choice to consider both the justification themselves and whether they mean a positive or negative attitude based on the ranking number they were written for. The justifications were organized according to the origin of the speakers/accents.

The first responses to be discussed were those concerning the *Indian accent*. It was obvious that participants were not very positive toward that specific accent. This could be spotted already in the first question of the questionnaire. In this section which deals with students' personal opinions, the first justification was given by someone who thought that "more stop in the speech", for example, was something that made the Indian speaker's accent worse than all the others, since it was given as an explanation of a number 6

position in the rank. Many people do think that the faster one speaks, the more skillful this person is in that language.

The next justification is especially intriguing. It says "acceptable, but I don't like it". What does it mean to be acceptable to someone who ranked this accent as the worst on the list? Apparently, to this participant, being acceptable is not a good enough characteristic to elevate it to the level of 'likes'. Instead, it seems to be tolerated among the others. Unfortunately, the toleration policy reflects much of the politically correct posture predominant in many societies, which does not grant real respect and value to any of the 'tolerated' groups.

Moving on, the next one is this provocative justification, which says "acceptable, plain, simple, boring". As we can easily visualize, these are words that fit the category of adjectives to describe a *person* rather than a number 4 ranked accent. This is just a very much overt example of how accents and people judgment overlap, even if unconsciously. How could an accent in itself be boring, simple, or plain? Though it can surely be acceptable, as proposed in the previous justifications, the other characteristics seem unsuitable to evaluate an accent, since they have a very personal people-like tone.

The justification on the *Mexican accent*, placed in second position, was rather positive. The informant said, "she speaks with a good English", and then he/she ranked this accent as his/her second favorite. Though it also counts as a positive attitude toward an expanding circle accent, we are left with questions about what this specific participant believes a "good English" is (or should be). Someone's English can be of a good quality for so many reasons, like "good, intelligible, pleasant pronunciation", "good/high level of fluency", "good, sophisticated, known vocabulary", to name a few. Therefore, "good" here is somewhat vague, but it definitely emerges as a positive judgment.

The last justification written to explain another second place ranking of the Mexican accent was "calm and listened", which we can assume the person meant "calm and clear". Again, the first adjective was probably attributed to the speaker and not to the accent, but balanced in that sense with the concept of clarity (intelligibility).

The *British accent*, on the other hand, was considered "very fast and confusing", which continued to be taken as negative, but concerning the speech speed rate, if we compare the British and the Indian accent justifications, we could see an interesting contradiction. The British accent was rated negatively for 'speaking too fast', while the Indian accent was rated negatively for

'speaking too slowly'. Those comments denote a probable difference in the criteria of evaluation for native and non-native accents.

The second justification partially confirms what has been said about different criteria for evaluating native and non-native accents. The British accent was the only accent actually compared to the American one. As the justification tells, "the sound is different from Americans". We can almost hear the frustration and the judgment in the participant's words. He/she probably expected the native varieties to sound more similar. The fact the British accent was perceived as different from the most admired and familiar, the American accent, made the participant think of it as the worst of all the accents in the audio segments. This opinion was expressed through the number 6 ranking given by this respondent to the British accent.

In the justifications about the *South African accent* ranking, we can see another example of the common "acceptable, but..", which characterizes another attempt to be politically correct while the respondent makes sure we also know what his/her opinion of that accent really is. What comes after the "but" this time is also rather interesting. The participant called this accent "weird", which may be interpreted here as 'strange' ('acceptable but weird'). The fact it is considered strange, takes us back to the familiarity evaluation of this accent in the provided justifications, which tells us it was considered the second least familiar to the participants, only less unfamiliar than the Indian.

One second justification in the South African table is "slangs", which was supposed to explain the ranking of this accent for the 3rd place. The word chosen by the participant is rather surprising, since the South African speaker in the sample segment does not use any expression or word that can be categorized as a slang expression or utterances, for example, in non-standard English. Nevertheless, there is indeed a "twang" in the way he speaks that might have made the participant who wrote this justification assume he was using slang expressions.

The final justification of the table brings a very positive attitude towards the South African accent, which, I assume, was meant to explain why this participant ranked this accent the first in his/her preference. The participant said, "the vowels are familiar to me. They have the sound of an African language, at least in my imaginary." For this person then, familiarity with certain sounds made this accent the best among the others.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the 21st century, the English language is spoken by a majority of non-native speakers, who use it mostly as a lingua franca in international settings and interactions. Though non-native speakers (NNS) represent a 4 to 1 majority, they think of themselves as having an inferior English solely because they are not part of the so-called native speaker (NS) group. This myth has been propagated and reinforced over the years and still represents the self-evaluation of many expanding circle speakers of English.

There are many "entities" responsible for the maintenance of the *status quo* of the attitude toward NNS varieties of English. Some of those entities are easily identifiable as the textbook industry, language purists (represented more strongly by some linguists and grammarians), and the not-so-obvious group of uninformed teachers of English. Teachers that are not exactly aware of the current status of English and tend to "preach" that the NS model represents the unquestionable model to be followed in ELT. They also justify such a premise with extremely fragile arguments concerning a supposed risk of break in intelligibility.

According to the brief research study presented here, the strength of *nativespeakerism* still remains in the midst of the students finishing their English courses in Salvador (of course, in many other contexts too). The results confirmed that the American variety of English is the most popular among the participants of this work. This particular accent, so close and familiar to us due to mass media and other representations and influences of the American cultural industry, was ranked first in both ranking questions and rated with the highest positive points for correctness, pleasantness, and acceptability, three of the categories assigned in the research. The only results that placed the American accent behind the Brazilian one, for instance, was the familiarity rating, for obvious reasons.

The relatively surprising results were those that involved the British accent, tough. As explained, it was considered the worst in the preference of the participants in the first question, when the nationalities of the speakers had not been revealed yet. It is reasonable to affirm that it was an unexpected response because the students, although more familiar with the American variety of English, usually claim to like the British better for its open vowels and clearly pronounced [t] and [d] consonant sounds. By analyzing the results of the second question, it was noticeable that the British accent, once labeled, rose to

the third position with the exact same number of points as the Mexican accent, which was already third in the first question rank. Therefore, not knowing the origin of the accent made a considerable difference in the reaction towards the British accent, which means that it is very likely to have been pushed upwards in the rank due to extra-linguistic factors.

Another relevant conclusion the study helped me to get to was that the Mexican accent was ranked higher than expected for its pleasantness and familiarity despite its non-nativeness. Those justifications were probably originated from the familiarity Brazilians have with Spanish, and to the rather clear pronunciation of the speaker in the audio segment. On the other hand, the Indian and South African nativized accents were mostly rated negatively, which was interpreted to be a consequence of the unfamiliarity of the participants with speakers from those countries. Thus, it is easy to see the coherence such a conclusion brings up since these are Englishes that simply "do not exist" to the international textbook industry, as previously noted by Siqueira (2012). So, Brazilians students who basically consume international textbooks and watch Hollywood movies have little or no exposure to these accents and many others from all corners of the world.

As for the ranking part concerning the Brazilian accent, results showed that participants seemed to be more proud of it than expected, rated right after the American accent in both ranking questions. It was in the written justifications, though, that the negative attitudes towards being recognized as a Brazilian through the accent emerged. I was also faced with an opinion that turned the Brazilian accent in the audio into an exception. According to one of the participants, the accent was so good that one would barely be able to tell the speaker was Brazilian only by the accent. It is important to register such a statement because, in the written justifications, most comments about the Brazilian accent were negative. This, in reality, makes us reflect about how truthful the ranking answers were. For one reason or another, there will always be a small possibility which may lead us into thinking that the participants wanted to be perceived as "politically correct" by often giving the Brazilian accent the second best position.

Finally, as depicted in the text, the study presented theorization on ELF, and through empirical data, attempted to discuss and reflect on the status and value of non-native varieties of English attributed by a small part of the community of English speakers/students in Salvador, Brazil. Given the

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intriguing results, it is more than important to consider and recommend more in-depth studies on attitude towards accents of English, especially aiming to investigate the criteria laypeople use to judge and label those accents.

For now, those of us who understand that every English variety should be seen as legitimate can take a stand by raising the awareness of teachers, students, teacher educators, and other professionals involved in the process of teaching and learning English to a more democratic and understanding of what indeed means to acquire a global lingua franca. This way, in the future, there can be more users of the language who are not afraid of making it theirs. As Nault (2006) would contend, the future is to grant us with more and more users *reshaping* instead of *parroting* English, or as it still happens in many contexts, naïvely imitating those speakers considered the legitimate custodians of the language. An international language, by nature, does not need custodians; an international language is to be free, in all senses.

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APPENDIX 1 – THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Date: _____

Level: upper intermediate ( )   advanced ( )   conversation class ( )

Age group: 13-18 ( )   19-26 ( )   27-40 ( )   41-65 ( )

Which English pleases you?
An attitude study on accents in times of English as a Lingua Franca

By Juliana Souza

1. Listen to these segments, and rank your preference of accents writing the numbers 1-6. Number <u>1</u> for the one you like <u>most</u> and <u>6</u> for the one like <u>least</u>.

1st Speaker's Accent ( )	
2nd Speaker's Accent ( )	
3rd Speaker's Accent ( )	
4th Speaker's Accent ( )	
5th Speaker's Accent ( )	
6th Speaker's Accent ( )	

2. Listen again, and guess the speakers' nationalities.

1st Speaker's Accent	2nd Speaker's Accent
( ) South African ( ) Brazilian ( ) American ( ) Indian	( ) American ( ) Indian ( ) Mexican ( ) British
3rd Speaker's Accent	4th Speaker's Accent
( ) Brazilian ( ) British ( ) American ( ) Indian	( ) South African ( ) Brazilian ( ) British ( ) Mexican
5th Speaker's Accent	6th Speaker's Accent
( ) British ( ) American ( ) Brazilian ( ) South African	( ) South African ( ) British ( ) Brazilian ( ) Mexican

...to be continued

3. Listen again, rank the accents (1, 2, 3...) and mark with an X your justification. You can write another justification with your own words.

1st) The INDIAN speaker – (   ) Because it sounds...

( ) correct	( ) incorrect
( ) pleasant	( ) unpleasant
( ) familiar	( ) unfamiliar
( ) acceptable internationally	( ) unacceptable internationally
( ) other:	

2nd) The MEXICAN speaker – (   ) Because it sounds...

( ) correct	( ) incorrect
( ) pleasant	( ) unpleasant
( ) familiar	( ) unfamiliar
( ) acceptable internationally	( ) unacceptable internationally
( ) other:	

3rd) The BRITISH speaker – (   ) Because it sounds...

( ) correct	( ) incorrect
( ) pleasant	( ) unpleasant
( ) familiar	( ) unfamiliar
( ) acceptable internationally	( ) unacceptable internationally
( ) other:	

4th) The SOUTH AFRICAN speaker – (   ) Because it sounds...

( ) correct	( ) incorrect
( ) pleasant	( ) unpleasant
( ) familiar	( ) unfamiliar
( ) acceptable internationally	( ) unacceptable internationally
( ) other:	

5th) The AMERICAN speaker – (   ) Because it sounds...

( ) correct	( ) incorrect
( ) pleasant	( ) unpleasant
( ) familiar	( ) unfamiliar
( ) acceptable internationally	( ) unacceptable internationally
( ) other:	

6th) The BRAZILIAN speaker – (   ) Because it sounds...

( ) correct	( ) incorrect
( ) pleasant	( ) unpleasant
( ) familiar	( ) unfamiliar
( ) acceptable internationally	( ) unacceptable internationally
( ) other:	

Thanks a lot!

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