Identifying a foreign accent in an unfamiliar language and the influence of listener characteristics on foreign accent ratings

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This study compared the degree of perceived accent ratings of two listener groups (native Finnish listeners, FLs, and native Turkish listeners, TLs) evaluating Finnish spontaneous speech samples spoken by native speakers (NSs) and nonnative speakers (NNSs) of Finnish. The purpose was to explore the effect of the listeners’ background, in terms gender, age, foreign accent experience, frequency of contact with immigrants and familiarity with the target language spoken on accent ratings. The 71 speakers were 31 NSs of Finnish and 40 NNSs of Turkish origin. The 71 listeners gave ratings on a scale of one (no foreign accent) to nine (very strong foreign accent). With the exception of the listeners’ familiarity with the target language Finnish, none of the listeners’ background characteristics affected the ratings. The results suggest that familiarity with the target language plays a much bigger role in accent detection than familiarity with the accent language, and that in the absence of any familiarity with the target language it is very challenging to detect foreignness. The study’s findings make several noteworthy contributions to accent detection literature. Bond et al. (2003)’s, Major’s (2007) and Weber and Pöllmann’s (2010) suggestion that detecting nonnativeness in the speech of nonnative speakers might be possible with language-independent, general markers of nonnativeness might be true. TLs said that they paid attention to carefulness and speech rate although the foreign accent ratings they assigned showed that they were unsuccesfull in basing their judgments correctly. However, this finding does not rule out the possibility that such general markers of nonnativeness exist. Second, contrary to Major’s (2007) suggestion that valid foreign accent judgments can be reliably assigned by nonnative listeners unfamiliar with the language spoken (L2) this study’s findings showed clearly that native speaker identification seems to be possible for native listeners familiar with the language spoken.

Keywords: listener characteristics, accent detection, perceived foreign accent.