Sociolinguistic style and ’accentedness’ in non-native English speakers

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Sociolinguistic style has been in focus for much of the history of variationist sociolinguistics, beginning with Labov’s observation (1972, 1984) that style is best modeled as attention to speech. Other work has considered style as a function of ’audience design’ (Bell, 1984) and/or as an identity projection device (Eckert & Rickford, 2001). Much of what we know has been based on research on native speakers (NS), but recent work with non-native speakers (NNS) has connected projections of identity to a speaker’s degree of ’accentedness’ (Dolgova Jacobsen, 2008). Piller (2002), for example, discusses how L2 speakers can ”pass” as a NS in particular situations (e.g. communication with friends, service encounters). However, this work is based on NNS self-reports, so the extent of the linguistic variation entailed in ’passing’ as a NS is unclear, as is exactly how NNS use style-shifting as a form of sociolinguistic positioning.

This paper examines NNS style-shifting (9 German L1, 7 Korean L1 speakers; all L2 English) with a unique dataset of (i) audio and video recorded interviews with the investigator, at home and at work, about home life and work life respectively, (ii) self-recorded conversations with friends (e.g. at a party) and (iii) self-recorded service encounters (e.g. at a post office). The analytical focus is on the vowels of lexical sets FOOT, GOOSE, FACE and GOAT. I show that realisational variation in these vowels (based on acoustic measures of formant values), can be explained not only by speakers’ L2 competence but also by communication situation, conversation topic and the interlocutor’s identity. By explaining the variation in sociolinguistic terms, this paper brings the study of NNS into line with work on NS, and sheds new light on how NNS might use style-shifting as a form of identity projection and sociolinguistic positioning.

Keywords: accent, variation, second language.