

Natalia Jacobsen
Georgetown University

“Identity [iz] a d[ifi]cult question”: a variationist analysis of relationship between L1 features and ethnic/national identity

The goal of this paper is to investigate relationships between second language identity, second language proficiency, and phonological variation. Previous research by Sharma (2005), conducted on Indian English in the USA, reveals that second language proficiency, operationalized as education in English and the amount of current English language use, does not correlate with second language identity. My study attempts to further analyze the issue of proficiency in relation to second language identity and variation; however, proficiency is defined as the degree of foreign accent in English, i.e. the predominance or lack of L1 features.

This paper investigates the linguistic construction of ethnic or national identity among Russian immigrants (N=10) permanently residing in Washington DC. This paper employs both qualitative and quantitative methods. Participants filled out electronic questionnaires that were followed up by detailed in-person interviews; participants were also asked to read aloud the same English text, which was later rated by five native speakers of English on the degree of its “accentedness” on a scale from 1 to 7 (from extremely strong to no accent at all). Arithmetic means of each sample were treated as proficiency markers. Interview data were analyzed for patterns indicating a relationship between second language proficiency and identity. The VARBRUL analysis focused on the occurrences of [i] in [ɪ] contexts (N = 1061, $p < 0.05$). The phonological feature selected is traditionally difficult for native Russian speakers to acquire, and its acquisition signals a high degree of proficiency.

The qualitative analysis of the interview data and proficiency scores indicates that, in most cases, the degree of accent, i.e. L2 proficiency, correlates with second language self-identification: subjects with higher proficiency and less accent in English tend to identify themselves with the American culture and society to a greater degree than subjects with lower proficiency and greater accent. The VARBRUL analysis, focusing on the distribution of the raised [i] sound in [ɪ] contexts, also indicated that an interaction between self-identification and proficiency exists, and different positions on the spectrum of self-identification/proficiency are reflected with correspondingly salient factor weights of [i] occurrences in the VARBRUL analysis. More specifically, subjects with less accent identifying themselves as Russian-American used the correct [ɪ] variant more often (factor weight for [i] = 0.325), while subjects with more accent identifying themselves as only Russian had a greater preference for the [i] variant (factor weight = 0.693). Other key factors raising the possibility of [i] occurrence in [ɪ] contexts included stress (factor weight for the occurrence of [i] in stressed contexts = 0.670, as opposed to 0.334 in unstressed), preceding and following sounds (velar obstruents favoring the occurrence of [i]), and topic of discussion (the topic of language mixing causing the highest occurrence of [i] (0.593).

These results indicate that if proficiency is operationalized as accent, i.e. directly measurable linguistic performance, it is more likely to align along the spectrum of ethnic

identity than if proficiency is understood in terms of such not directly measurable factors as education or current language use (Sharma, 2005).

Reference cited

Sharma, D. (2005). Dialect Stabilization and Speaker Awareness In Non-Native Varieties of English. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 9(2), 194-224.