

Describing and Analysing Language

Autumn 2005

Sean Dowling

Variations Assessment

(word count: 2896)

Name of Module Leader: Dr Amos Paran

Name of Tutor: Prof Jan Blommaert

MA in Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages

Institute of Education, University of London

Month and Year of Submission: January 2006

Contents

1	Introduction	2
2	How AAT negatively and positively qualify particular forms of ‘accent’	2
3	The micro-indexicalities and macro-indexicalities being invoked	4
4	The implicit image of the ‘normal’ American world	5
5	Additional comments	6
	Notes	7
	Bibliography	8

“*Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.*”
Rudyard Kipling, “The Ballad of East and West”

Introduction

It can be argued that advances in information technology (IT) have been a major factor in the process of globalization. A prime example of this is the outsourcing of telesales and call-center work by companies in developed countries to those in developing ones: IT is enabling staff in a local setting to sell and support customers and clients in a transnational setting¹. As a result, one could argue that Kipling’s forecast has been proved wrong: in the international call-centre environment, “the twain” are indeed regularly meeting. But this meeting of East and West is not without its troubles. In a November 17, 2005 article appearing in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on the trials and tribulations of Indian call-centre workers, journalist Mike McPhate writes that “many Indian call-center workers say they regularly face particular abuse from Americans, whose tantrums are sometimes racist and often inspired by anger over outsourcing”. So clearly there is still a gap between East and West. Some resourceful internet-based companies have tried to bridge this gap by providing services (for a fistful of dollars) to non-Americans by which they can “learn how to speak with a standard American accent” (AAT Website). This short essay will focus on the services provided by one such company, American Accent Training (AAT), and 1) look at how AAT negatively and positively qualify particular forms of ‘accent’, 2) describe in detail the micro- and macro-indexicalities that are being invoked, and 3) try to describe the implicit image of the ‘normal’ American world as AAT would have us see it. Finally, some personal comments in relation to these questions will be added.

How AAT negatively and positively qualify particular forms of ‘accent’

According to the AAT website, “there are three main parts to an accent”: intonation (and stress), liaisons (word linking) and pronunciation. For non-native speakers of English to have a positively qualified accent, it is necessary for them to acquire a high degree of competence in these three areas. Conversely, poor intonation, liaisons and pronunciation would result in a negatively qualified accent. Of the three, AAT believe that intonation “is by far the most important”.

- 1. Intonation/Stress:** AAT define intonation as “the rise and fall of pitch in order to convey a range of meanings, emotions or situations, within the confines of standard grammar and fixed word order”. They believe that, “generally speaking, if English is not your first language, this is where you start running into difficulty”. Therefore, a positively qualified accent will use the correct rise and fall of pitch at the right time. AAT give some examples of non-native speakers who may have negatively qualified accents when speaking English: 1) native speakers of French and other Romance languages which stress the end of a sentence and then use word order to indicate an important change, and 2) native speakers of languages, such as Chinese, that have a pitch change that indicates different vocabulary words, and then superimpose further pitch change to alter meaning or emotion.

This difference in positively and negatively qualified intonation is shown in the before and after example of the Asian gentleman, Alvin, on the call-center page of the AAT website. His first attempt at the sentence “there was a time when people really had a way with words” featured very heavy stress on the words “time”, “really”, “way” and “words”, non-American

stress and intonation patterns according to AAT. However, “after less than one hour of instruction” Alvin was speaking more naturally with what AAT view as appropriate American stress and intonations patterns. AAT offer the view that “it’s hard to believe it’s even the same person”, thus emphasizing how they believe an accent can improve by just working on stress and intonation patterns.

- 2. Liaisons (linking):** AAT state that the “glue” of the sentence is an “underlying hum or drone” that stops only when punctuation is encountered. If you have this “hum”, AAT believe that it will contribute “a great deal toward making you sound like a native speaker” and on the way to a positively qualified accent. AAT state that this “hum” is created by connecting words and give examples of how certain word patterns are connected (see Table 1). By not connecting words in this manner, a person cannot produce the “hum”, thereby having an accent which is negatively qualified.

PATTERN		EXAMPLE
end of word	start of word	
consonant	vowel	My name <u>is</u> <u>Ann</u> . American <u>an</u> <u>acc</u> ent [my nay mi zæn] [amer'k' næksent]
consonant	consonant	I just <u>didn't</u> <u>get</u> <u>the</u> chance. I've been <u>late</u> <u>tw</u> ice. [I jussdidn't ge(t)the chance] [äivbin la(t)twice]
vowel	vowel	<u>Go</u> <u>a</u> way. <u>I</u> <u>a</u> lso need <u>the</u> <u>o</u> ther one. [go(w)away] [äi(y)] Iso need the(y)other one]
T, D, S or Z	Y	Can't <u>y</u> ou do it? What <u>d</u> id you do? <u>Ins</u> urance How's <u>s</u> your family? [Can <u>ch</u> oo do it?] [Wha <u>j</u> oo do?] [in <u>sh</u> urance] [How <u>zh</u> er family?]

Table 1: Word connection patterns of a positively qualified accent

- 3. Pronunciation:** AAT lists 6 areas of pronunciation that are important: the sounds [æ], [ä], and [uh] (schwa [ə]), the ‘American T’, the ‘American R’, the ‘American L’, ‘Tee Aitch’ ([th]) and the I and E sounds. Without proper pronunciation of these sounds, an accent will be negatively qualified. AAT give examples of native speakers of certain languages who may have problems with these sounds when speaking English. For example, in languages such as Korean, Japanese, Spanish, Italian, Greek, German and French the [r] is pronounced as a consonant whereas the ‘American R’ is pronounced more like a vowel. Speakers of these languages may have trouble with the ‘American R’. Similarly, the [l] at the end of words may cause difficulties. The ‘American L’ in this case is a long sound; however, languages such as Chinese and Spanish either don’t pronounce the final [l] or it is much shorter than the corresponding ‘American L’. A final example is that of the ‘Tee Aitch’ ([th]). In a negatively qualified accent, the unvoiced [th] would be more like a [s] or [t] sound and the voiced [th] would be more like a [z] or [d] sound.

The micro-indexicalities and macro-indexicalities being invoked

Indexicality is the property by which indexical (or contextual) meaning can be generated from the relationships between utterances and their context. These relationships reflect social and cultural norms. Slembrouck (1998-2005), on his website on discourse analysis, supports this definition by stating that “the property of indexicality can be argued to extend to much of linguistic communication - as language is full of examples which are ‘existentially connected’ to particular aspects of social and cultural context”. The essay now looks at the indexicalities, both micro- and macro-, being invoked by the AAT Website

1) Micro-indexicalities

These are generated at the level of the individual. In this section, the micro-indexicalities produced by two sets of speakers, one set positively qualified, the other negatively qualified, are analyzed.

Positively qualified speakers: These speakers appear in the news program featured on the AAT Website. There are three speakers: a female news presenter, probably in her twenties or thirties, and two male program guests, probably in their forties or fifties. It is clear that all three speakers are American and native speakers of English. Despite having slight variations in accent, all three are speaking with a standard American accent. Based on accent alone, it is hard to determine the social class of the speakers. However, as a news presenter’s job is quite high profile, it can be assumed that she is in a high social class. Similarly, one of the guests is a senator, putting him in a high social class as well. But their accents don’t sound “upper class” so it can be inferred that they were probably born into a middle-class background. Deriving indexicalities from the other guest is a little more complex. From the language he uses, it can be clearly seen that he opposes the government and big business on the issue in question. This, together with his accent, suggests a working-class background, but his education has enabled him to move into a middle-class environment. It’s not quite clear what his profession is, but he is probably some form of social activist. All three are clearly media professionals or have jobs that require working with the media. This is shown by the fact that, even though they are dealing with a quite complex issue, they can use language which shows their high level of education/intelligence while at the same time being comprehensible to the audience. It is noticeable that the politician speaks in a more laid-back manner than the social activist: this makes him appear considerate and reassuring, a father-like figure. On the other hand, the staccato speech of the social activist helps portray him as a person of action. But both images, the father-like figure and the ‘man of action’, are positive. So overall, the examples of the positively qualified speakers that AAT focus on exhibit very positive micro-indexicalities.

Negatively qualified speakers: AAT’s examples of negatively qualified speakers all appear on their call-centre training demonstration page. There are five speakers: three males and two females. As they are all saying the same standard practice phrase (“there was a time when people had a way with words”), it’s hard to identify exact micro-indexicalities. However, they are perhaps of different nationalities and it’s clear that English is not their native language. The fact that they wish to improve their English shows that they are motivated individuals (although this could be as a result of company pressure). And despite being call-centre employees (a low-paying occupation in many countries), they probably have a reasonable level of education and could well be middle-class professionals in their native countries. However, their social standing is much lower than that of the positively qualified speakers: they are younger, probably less educated and have inferior occupations. This is

paralleled by the type of utterances made by the speakers: the positively qualified ones have an opportunity to show their intelligence by discussing a complex issue whereas the negatively qualified speakers have no opportunity to do this. On the whole, the micro-indexicalities exhibited by the negatively-qualified speakers present a less positive image than those exhibited by the positively qualified speakers.

2) **Macro-indexicalities**

These are generated not on an individual level, but on the wider societal level. Let's take a closer look at Alvin. Why would a person like Alvin want to speak with a standard American accent? One of the most obvious reasons is acceptance into a particular *speech community*. Hymes (1992: 48) defines speech community as "essentially a matter of ways of speaking, and, one might say, an implicit theatre for communicative events of specific kinds". For Alvin, the implicit theatre is the marketplace and the communicative events are the sales pitches. In order to do his job successfully, Alvin must be accepted in the marketplace and to do this he feels that he must speak with a standard American accent. On a more general level, it is clear from the previous section that AAT's positively qualified speakers have a much higher social status than the negatively qualified speakers. It could be inferred from this that becoming a positively qualified speaker would help people move up the social ladder by providing opportunities for getting better jobs and accessing status symbols. This is the main macro-indexicality being invoked: speaking with a positively qualified accent ensures easier acceptance of an individual into a speech community that provides greater benefits. But why should Alvin have to speak with a positively qualified accent before being accepted into a particular speech community? It's clear from the *San Francisco Chronicle* article mentioned in the introduction that there is a lot of anger and mistrust between different sections of society. People with the better jobs and status symbols see others as a threat to their position in society and will therefore put up barriers, sometimes physical but more often mental, to protect their own world. One of these barriers is language and accent. So the macro-indexicality being invoked here is that our world consists of communities which put up (language) barriers in an attempt to stop people from less 'desirable' communities entering.

The implicit image of the 'normal' American world

On opening the AAT website, one is immediately confronted by the iconic figures of the Statue of Liberty, a symbol of freedom and democracy, and the Empire State Building, a symbol of technical advancement. These images create the impression of an America which is free and fair and technically advanced, ideals desirable in any society. But fabulous buildings and structures alone don't make a society; it's the people who live in it that are the most important contributors. The AAT website gives us examples of some 'normal' American people: a news presenter, a politician, a social activist, an educator/writer. By using these people as examples, AAT is creating an image of a 'normal' America as being a country of well-educated and well-to-do individuals. We see a society where there is no gender discrimination; women, such as the news presenter and the writer, can also become successful professionals. The topic of the news program, equal educational opportunities for all, shows an America that is socially aware and compassionate about the plight of the less fortunate members of society. The fact that the social activist is able to openly disagree with the government representative creates an image of a free and democratic society. This also shows America as being a relatively informal society, where normal citizens and members of government can share the same platform and address each other as equals. In fact, the news presenter allows the social activist to speak before the senator, despite the fact that the senator probably has a higher social standing. The examples of the

spoken English language used throughout the website also enforce this image of the 'normal' America as being informal. Spoken American English is portrayed as being much different from the written word. The AAT website informs us that 'normal' Americans connect words when they speak, thereby creating the impression of informality, almost laid-backness, when speaking. The news program has been selected to emphasize this. Despite it being a formal situation, the phonetic script of the program contents provided by AAT shows that all three highly-educated participants use standard connected speech patterns when speaking. The standard American English spoken in the news program also shows us one other thing: the supposed homogeneous nature of the 'normal' America. All three participants speak with a very similar accent and use a similar level of style and register, despite the fact they are of different genders, belong to different age groups and have different occupations. So, to summarise, the AAT website portrays a 'normal' America as a technically-advanced, democratic, homogeneous, informal society where people speak with similar accents, are treated as equals, are socially aware, have a have level of education and a corresponding high social standing. Who wouldn't want to be part of a world like this?

Additional Comments

But is America as ideal as the AAT website would like us to believe? Recent events have not painted such a rosy picture of the last remaining superpower. One such event was Hurricane Katrina. Not only did it tear apart the physical infrastructure of the southern United States, but, perhaps more significantly, it also exposed the reality of the deep rifts between rich and poor, educated and uneducated and those with and without adequate social security. The media was full of reports of a new "Third World" country appearing on the Gulf coast of America. However, in an article published in the *Los Angeles Times* (September 7, 2005), University of Virginia law professor, Rosa Brooks, castigated the media for only facing up to the problem now by saying that they have probably never "set foot in Washington's Anacostia district, or South Central Los Angeles, or the trailer parks of rural Arkansas", locations with large numbers of people where "conditions for poor Americans rival those in developing countries." She went on to say that "the Third World didn't sneak in along with Hurricane Katrina. It's been here all the time".

Even though Katrina may have tarnished the American dream, the country still unquestionable offers opportunities for a wide variety of people. But can non-Americans gain acceptance into this land of opportunity just by speaking with the standard American accent portrayed by AAT? Is sharing the language, standard American English, enough to gain acceptance into American society? AAT would have us believe that it is. But there is more to communicative competence than just mastering the grammatical output. In an essay discussing models of interaction and social life, Hymes (1972: 36) states that "rules of speaking are the ways in which speakers associate particular modes of speaking, topics or message forms, with particular settings or activities". And in an essay on speech communities, Gumperz (1972: 219) writes that "the verbal system can, through the minute refinement of its grammatical and semantic structure, be made to refer to a wide variety of objects and concepts". However, he continues by saying that "at the same time, verbal utterances are selected in accordance with socially recognized norms and expectations". So communicative competence is not only a matter of mastering the grammatical and semantic structure, but also of being aware of how to use the grammar and semantics correctly within specific social contexts. The AAT website is indeed attempting to teach non-Americans a form of Hymes' modes of speaking, topics or message forms and Gumperz's grammatical and semantic structure. However, I believe that its teaching is ultimately doomed to

failure as it is neglecting to teach the learners how to associate the above aspects of language with the particular settings or activities or social contexts that the language is to be used in. This is a point that we, as language teachers, should not dismiss lightly.

Notes

- 1** The website featured in this essay, that of American Accent Training (AAT), offers language training for face-to-face meetings as well as for use over the telephone. However, it appears to be aiming particularly at the call-center market so I have focused on this aspect in my essay.

Bibliography

American Accent Training Website

<http://www.americanaccent.com/index.html>

Brooks, R. (September 7, 2005)

“Our Homegrown Third World”, Los Angeles: Los Angeles Times

<http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0907-24.htm>

Gumperz, J. (1972)

“The Speech Community”,

In Pier Paolo Giglioli (ed.), *Language and Social Context*, pp. 219-231

Originally in *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, Macmillan, 1968, pp.381-6, London: Cox & Wyman Ltd.

Hymes, D.H. (1972)

“Models of Interaction of Language and Social Life”,

In John J. Gumperz & Dell Hymes (eds.), *Directions in Sociolinguistics, The Ethnography of Communication*, pp. 35-71

New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

Hymes, D.H. (1992)

“The concept of communicative competence revisited”,

In Martin Putz (ed.), *Thirty Years of Linguistic Evolution*, pp. 31-57

Amsterdam: John Benjaminis

Kipling, R. (1892)

“The Ballad of East and West”,

In *Barrack-Room Ballads and Other Verses*, 1892.

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Aegean/1457/poem3.htm>

McPhate, M. (November 17, 2005)

"Outsourcing outrage: Indian call-center workers suffer abuse",

San Francisco: San Francisco Chronicle

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/11/17/BUGB3FPGT01.DTL&type=tech>

Slembrouck, S. (1998-2005)

Website: *What is meant by "discourse analysis"?*,

<http://bank.rug.ac.be/da/da.htm#in>