

# The Effect of First Language on Spoken English Accents

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## Abstract:

This paper presents the effects of first language (L1) on the spoken English accents of non-native speakers. This paper analysed spoken English of native speakers from Spanish, French and Chinese through a review of past literature, focusing on phonological features, intonation patterns and overall intelligibility. The findings demonstrate that speakers' L1 has a major impact on how they pronounce English and that they maintain unique phonological traits in their spoken language. Furthermore, the accent was further impacted by dialectal differences within the L1 group, which resulted in unique intonation patterns that impacted listeners' assessments of intelligibility and fluency. These results highlight the intricate relationship between second language learning and the native language system, indicating that teachers should take L1 influence into account when creating lesson plans for English language learners. This study contributes to understanding accent formation and provides insights into language teaching and assessment practices.

**Keywords:** Accent; vowels; consonants; communication.

## 1. Introduction

A person's spoken English accent can be influenced by their native language or dialect. This is a complex phenomenon that has its roots in phonetics, phonology and language transfer. Learners of a second language often incorporate the phonological and phonemic patterns of their native language into their speech, which greatly influences their accent. This migration can be heard in English accent patterns, speech rhythms and intonation, and even the way vowels and consonants are pronounced. In addition to individual linguistic migration, the regional dialect of the parent language has a significant impact on the

accent of spoken English. It is frequently possible to transfer a dialect's distinct phonetic characteristics, stress patterns, and intonation contours to English speech. Speakers of northern English dialects may exhibit distinctive vowel features or intonation patterns, while speakers of southern American English dialects may 'shuffle' or use diphthongs in their English accents. The degree of transfer can also be influenced by the sociolinguistic context in which a person learns English, such as whether they reside in a region where English is widely or rarely spoken. Even after years of language exposure, bilingual speakers in areas where code-switching between lan-

guages or dialects is frequent may retain linguistic or dialectal features in their English speech. Since the retention of specific accent features can serve as a marker of regional or ethnic identity, phonological persistence often draws attention to the relationship between accent and linguistic identity. Thus, the phonological structure of the mother tongue and its distinctive dialectal differences have a significant impact on the development of an individual's English accent, resulting in a wide variety of English pronunciations across the globe.

2.The Effect of Different Language Accents on Spoken English

### **2.1 The Effect of Spanish Accent on Spoken English**

Accents are a normal aspect of language and reveal a speaker's linguistic and cultural origin. Spoken English with a Spanish accent can alter communication in a number of ways, including phonological, social, and perceptual. Understanding these effects can help us better understand linguistic diversity and the complexity of multilingual communication. The fundamental cause of the Spanish accent in English is the phonetic distinction between the two languages [1]. These include vowels, consonant substitution, and the importance of intonation and syllable emphasis. Spanish has five pure vowels (a, e, i, o, and u), but English has a more complex system. This may make it difficult to pronounce English vowels, which frequently leads to vowel distortion or reduction. For instance, mispronouncing the English terms "beat" and "bit" might result in confusion. Regarding consonants, Spanish does not contain certain English consonants [1]. For instance, the English "v" sound is often sounded as a "b," which causes confusion when two words like "very" and "berry" are spoken. This might cause terms like "very" and "berry" to become confused. Similarly, /t/ or /d/ can be used in place of the English "th" sounds (/θ/ and /ð/), which would cause "this" to be pronounced as "dis." Additionally, Spanish is a syllable-timed language, meaning that each syllable has the same amount of time, in contrast to English, which is a stress-timed language where certain syllables are longer and more important than others [1]. The pace and intonation of English spoken with a Spanish accent are affected by this distinction, which may change the phrase's intended emphasis or make it seem more repetitive.

Then, having a Spanish accent can have a significant social influence. Stereotyping, in which listeners assess speakers according to previous conceptions about their identities as Spanish speakers, can be exacerbated by a Spanish accent. Both positive and negative biases that

impact communication in general, employment chances, and social relationships may result from this [2]. A Spanish accent may be a symbol of cultural identification and a sense of community belonging for many bilingual people. Spanish accents may facilitate this practice by allowing speakers to enhance conversations and highlight their cultural background by incorporating Spanish words or expressions into English [2]. In situations where English is the dominant language, it may be used to both identify Spanish speakers as outsiders and foster bonds between them, a dichotomy that may give rise to complex emotions of pride and estrangement. Many bilinguals code-switch, changing their language depending on the situation [3].

Accents frequently have an impact on how well people communicate, and listeners who are not accustomed to hearing someone with a strong Spanish accent may find it difficult to understand them. Communication hurdles may result from this, requiring listeners to exert more effort to comprehend speakers or change the way they talk [3]. Additionally, a speaker's confidence may be affected by their Spanish accent, and some people may experience anxiety when speaking because they are uncomfortable with their accent, which may discourage them from conversing, especially in a formal or academic setting [4]. On the other hand, exposure to a range of dialects may improve listeners' ability to adapt and improve their listening comprehension, and regular interaction with speakers of different accents may improve comprehension and promote more inclusive communication methods [3].

### **2.2 The Effect of French Accent on Spoken English**

The "French accent" in spoken English is made up of the distinctive pronunciation patterns, syntactic constructions, and intonation that French speakers typically carry over from their mother tongue when they acquire English. This accent affects how people communicate, comprehend one another, and even how the listener views the speaker. The following sections will address the primary linguistic characteristics that are affected by the French accent and their wider implications for English communication [5]. French accents in English are frequently produced by applying French phonological principles to English. Phonology is the term used to describe a language's phonological system. The difficulty French speakers experience pronouncing English vowels, particularly those that are not prevalent in French, is one of the most noticeable impacts. English has more vowels than French, and this disparity leads to frequent misinterpretation or replacement of vowels. For example, French lacks the English distinction between short and long vowels (e.g., 'bit' vs 'beat'). Be-

cause of this, native English speakers may become confused while listening to French people pronounce some words incorrectly [5]. Nevertheless, French is a non-curl language, meaning that words often do not finish in a “r.” Particularly in rolled-vowel dialects like American or Irish English, French speakers may not be able to create the whole English “r” sound while speaking English, which might alter the meaning of the term or make the speech more difficult to hear. In terms of consonants, sounds like as ‘th’ (/θ/ and /ð/) in English are problematic for French speakers since they are not found in French. As a result, for /θ/, French speakers may substitute “s” or “z” or “d” for these sounds (for /ð/). For instance, “think” may be pronounced “sink,” while “this” could be pronounced “zis.” Miscommunication arises from this frequently. Miscommunication arises from this frequently [6].

The metrical systems of English and French differ, especially in how stress and intonation are handled. Speech rhythm is based on the elongation of unstressed syllables and the occurrence of stressed syllables at roughly regular intervals because English is a syllabic language. However, because French is a syllabic rhythmic language, meaning that each word takes roughly the same amount of time, it has a more regular tempo [6]. French speakers may use the syllabic rhythm of their original tongue when speaking English, which could come across as rigid or uninteresting to native English speakers. Additionally, it can lessen the clarity of meaning that native speakers anticipate from emphasised beat cues and alter the organic rhythm of English phrases [7]. Word stress is highly stressed in English, and it can drastically alter a word’s meaning (for example, “record” is employed as a verb while “record” is a noun). Because they are used to less changes in tension, French speakers may find it difficult to utilise stress appropriately in English, which might cause misunderstandings [7].

Accents, especially French accents, might influence a speaker’s perception by native English speakers in addition to linguistic correctness. Because of its cultural connotation of refinement or elegance, some individuals may find a French accent charming, while others may see it as a symptom of a foreign accent or trouble comprehending [8]. Research has shown that the accents of non-native speakers are often more difficult for native speakers to understand. This could be annoying in fast-paced communication scenarios, especially if the accent is rife with grammatical or phonetic errors. Like other foreign dialects, a French accent can lead to discrimination and stereotyping. For example, a French accent may conjure images of intellectualism, cuisine, or style, but it can also sometimes evoke negative connotations about linguistic proficiency or professionalism. Numerous French speakers who reside or work in English-speaking areas use techniques to less-

en the noticeable effect of their accent. To facilitate more seamless communication, they can enhance their English pronunciation and rhythm with accent removal courses, focused language exercises, and voice training [8].

### 2.3 The Effect of Chinese Accent on Spoken English

Chinese accents in spoken English are created when a person adapts phonological, grammatical, and other patterns from their mother tongue to a second language, much like other foreign accents. In this instance, the speaker’s English pronunciation and intonation are influenced by characteristics of Mandarin or other Chinese dialects. There are a few basic components that frequently define a Chinese accent and how it impacts English communication, while the specifics of an accent vary based on the speaker’s specific dialect of Chinese [9]. The phonetic differences between Mandarin Chinese and English account for a large number of the unique features of the Chinese accent. Because Mandarin has relatively little diversity in sound compared to English, speakers of Mandarin may have trouble producing some English phonemes that are lacking from Mandarin. Replacing consonants that are absent from English with consonants that exist in Mandarin is one of the most evident issues. Mandarin, for instance, lacks the English /θ/ and /ʃ/ sounds (‘th’ in ‘thought’ or ‘this’). Consequently, a speaker could substitute /s/ or /z/ for them, pronouncing “think” as “sink” and “this” as “zis,” which could cause miscommunication [10]. Unlike English words that always finish with a consonant, Mandarin words almost never end in a consonant, with the exception of a few nasal sounds. Chinese speakers could find it challenging to pronounce the last English consonants clearly. Words like “dog” or “big,” for instance, may become spoken words like “do” or “bi” when they lose their final /g/ sound [10].

Words that lack final consonants may be harder to understand and less noticeable in context. Mandarin frequently steers clear of the numerous English consonant clusters, such “str” in “street.” Therefore, Chinese speakers may simplify these consonant clusters by reducing or eliminating consonants. For instance, pronouncing the word “street” as “sreet” or “sitreet” might make it harder to understand, particularly when speaking quickly or casually. Additionally, Mandarin has fewer vowel pairs than English, making its vowel system easier. In English, there are several word pairings that are solely differentiated by vowel length (such as “ship” vs “sheep”). Confusingly, Chinese speakers might find it difficult to discern between these vowels and may group them into fewer categories. For instance, the similar pronunciation of “beat” and “bit”

may compromise intelligibility [9].

Because Mandarin is a tonal language, words can have different meanings depending on the pitch at which they are uttered. Conversely, English is an accented language where pitch is not employed to alter word meanings but rather to show emotional complexity or emphasis [9]. Because of this basic distinction, Chinese speakers may translate Mandarin's tonal patterns into English. Chinese speakers of English may have flat or even monotonous tones because they might not emphasize stress as easily as English speakers do. As a result, native English speakers may find their speech boring and, in certain cases, uninteresting [11]. When speaking English, using tones to differentiate meanings in Putonghua might result in strange tonal climbs and dips that listeners who know the language natively may find confusing. Unintentionally raising tones that aren't frequently used in English can cause Chinese speakers to transform statements into questions and vice versa. This could lead to a misinterpretation of the speaker's intention or emotions [11].

A Chinese accent in an English accent influences listeners' opinions of the speaker, just like any other foreign accent does. The listeners' acquaintance with Chinese speakers, their tolerance for non-native speech patterns, and the social context of the conversation are some of the variables that may affect these views. Studies have indicated that accents belonging to non-native speakers might hinder the understanding of speech, particularly when there are notable phonological discrepancies [11]. Strong Chinese accents can make it harder for native English speakers to comprehend what someone saying, especially when there are a lot of vowel or consonant replacements, mispronunciations, or intonation mismatches. Chinese accents can occasionally lead to misconceptions or societal bias [12]. Chinese speakers may occasionally be unfairly viewed as less proficient or competent in English, regardless of their actual level of proficiency. These stereotypes may affect how Chinese speakers are seen in social, intellectual, and professional contexts, perhaps resulting in issues with social exclusion or discrimination. Many Chinese people who use English for work or pleasure practice their pronunciation and intonation through voice training or language classes in order to reduce the influence of their accent. However, it's equally important to recognize that accents are a common and important part of linguistic diversity. Non-native accents, such as Chinese accents, are becoming recognized as one of the many lively and varied types of English spoken worldwide as English becomes more widely spoken [12].

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the influence of the first language on spoken English is multifaceted, affecting phonological features, social perceptions and communication effects. The presence of this accent can influence mutual understanding, speech patterns, and even how the listener perceives the speaker. For instance, the text mentions that native Spanish speakers may have trouble producing English vowels, particularly those that are absent from Spanish, so Spanish speakers may decide to pronounce one of their vowels, giving their speech a distinctive accent. Similarly, the text states that French speakers may use /s/ or /z/ in place of the English "th" sound because French does not have the phoneme. This is an example of negative transfer, in which learners deviate from the standard English accent because they are dependent on their phonological system.. In addition to specific sounds, these transfer patterns can be heard in prosodic or allophonic and intonational patterns, which can give the accent a distinctive rhythm. At the same time, features of Mandarin or other Chinese dialects can affect a speaker's English pronunciation and intonation. While the exact nature of a Chinese accent depends on the specific Chinese dialect spoken by the speaker, there are also key factors that typically influence this accent and its impact on English communication. Embracing linguistic diversity enriches communication and promotes more inclusive societies, highlighting the importance of understanding and appreciating different accents in our increasingly globalised world.

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