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I don't have an accent: folk approaches to dialectology

Résumé

Cet article s'intéresse aux approches profanes et discours épilinguistiques sur deux variétés d'anglais parlées en Écosse et aux États-Unis, grâce à un corpus fait de vidéos virales téléversées sur *YouTube*, *The Accent Tag Challenge*. Après avoir comparé l'étude originale à la version allégée proposée aux internautes dans un premier temps, je m'attacherai à montrer les problèmes d'appellations de certains concepts, ainsi que les effets provoqués chez les informateurs (surprise, gloses épilinguistiques...) dans la seconde section de cet article. La troisième partie analyse le discours profane sur les accents et parlers et les imaginaires linguistiques mis en jeu dans les commentaires, qu'ils soient sur les vidéos ou en réponse à celles-ci.

Abstract

In this paper, I explore the portrait drawn of several speech communities (African American Vernacular and Scots) by their members in a series of videos called *Accent Tag*. These are an adaptation of Bert Vaux's *Dialect Survey* (2002), which only dealt with American accents and pronunciations. First, I compare Vaux's observations on the same items to the content of the *Accent Tag* corpus, a reduced version which still retains phonological and lexicological questions. In the second section, I examine issues linked to the non-directed answers: naming and effects created in informants (surprise and epilinguistic utterances). The third part deals with folk discourse on accents, and highlights *linguistic imaginaries* in asides, be they within the videos or in the comments section.

Introduction

This paper deals with new uses—subversive uses, even—of academic studies on accents. These are reinvested and made to evolve thanks to Internet users. Namely, Bert Vaux's dialectological studies which he instigated online, readily available on maps provided by Scott Golder.

This paper tackles their spiritual children, that is the memetic use of this work used by vloggers. They describe their own accents in what they have called the *Accent Tag*. This subject is quite novel, as it aims at showing how metadiscourse on one's accent is still a burning issue for Internet users. Dialect geography and the regional borders between isoglosses have interested linguists since the end of the 19th century and new field methods have allowed the preservation of phonological and lexical discrepancies.

The differences between one of these linguistic atlases drawn by B. Vaux for Harvard and its evolution is the first object of this paper. The American-only study has been revised and cut down to fit a viral video format. The type of initial queries and

the various stages of development, from a full-fledged study to an easily reproduced set of questions in a linguistic game are the focus of the first section.

The comparison between the answers provided to Vaux and those of the Accent Tag Challenge will be the main point of the second section. Some of the videos confirm the results of the study, but its spreading to non-American native speakers provoke new effects. Some words are strongly associated with northern regions of the United States, and others clearly show a dichotomy between Americans and non-American respondents to the Accent Tag. The issue of naming everyday realities (remote controllers or beverages) creates problems within linguistic communities, and the judgmental nature of the answers provided will be an interesting stepping stone to evoke the third point of this study.

It focuses on the prescriptive nature of most of these videos, and, more precisely, on the perception of accents. Most users make epi- or metalinguistic comments on their accent or on how others speak. The affective value of these judgments, as well as the comparison with the reception of their videos by YouTube users provide an interesting field for perceptual studies.

1. Accent Tag and linguistic atlases

I will first tackle the interplay between the Accent Tag and its academic, scientific predecessor, Harvard's map of dialects made by Bert Vaux. After a careful examination of this initiative, I will move on to the Accent Tag's exploitation of this initial work, and see how vloggers have adapted his work to their digital needs.

1.1 Vaux's base work

B. Vaux is a dialect specialist who designed a study of North American English that was to be answered online for Harvard. He conducted the Dialect Survey¹ in 2002, based on previous works elaborated in 1999, and gathered data from 30,788 respondents, who were presented different versions of the survey. For each question, there are about 10,000 answers, giving a fairly accurate view on linguistic discrepancies between the regions, although the proportion of informants per state is not always on scale with the actual population of the US. The three most populous states, according to the 2016 census (California, with 12.15% of the US population, Texas, 8.62% and Florida, 6.38%) are slightly underrepresented, respectively with 9.29%, 4.71% and 3.01% of respondents. The most represented states are New York (9.96%), California and Michigan (6.70%). The least populous states are quite proportionately represented. They are Wyoming (0.15% of respondents), South Dakota (0.26%) and Arkansas (0.30%). This may be explained by the fact Vaux also asked his students to fill in the survey, along with its online version.

The full survey contains 122 items, with either a phonetic or a lexicological aim. Most of the phonological tasks target phonemes using comparison: does the initial digraph in "aunt" sound like "ah" [ɑ] or <au> in "caught" [ɔ]; is it homophonous with "ant" [æ] or even "ain't" [eɪ]?

¹ Available at the address: <http://dialect.redlog.net/>. Last access: 11/20/17.

Some address the number of syllables in words (question 4, “caramel”) or connected speech processes, such as a potential palatalization before the first vowel in “coupon” (question 7). Lexicological tasks were more diverse and consisted in selecting one of several items (question 41, “Do you use ‘spigot’ or ‘spicket’ to refer to a faucet or tap that water comes out of?”), answering closed questions (item 87, “Do you use the term ‘bear claw’ for a kind of pastry?”), giving definitions (question 95, “What is ‘the City’?”) and filling sentences in (question 49, “I ____ her lifeless body from the pool.”). Grammatical features were also assessed, such as double modals. Here, examples were provided (“I might could do that” and “I used to could do that”) to check their acceptability and see which combinations were licensed.

The format of the questionnaire is less than ideal for a dialectological study, particularly for the phonological variants. But in a relatively short amount of time Vaux and Golder were able to amass sizable data from around the country, without requiring an army of researchers making field recordings.” The results of the Dialect Survey piqued the Internet’s interest, especially when J. Katz designed new heat maps to display lexical features of US English. These, in turn, were included in a piece on the Business Insider, dramatically entitled “22 Maps That Show How Americans Speak English Totally Differently From Each Other” (Hickey, 2013).

This linguistic map of the United States was only a stepping stone for another ongoing project, the “Cambridge Online Survey of World Englishes” Vaux now runs with M. L. Jøhndal.

Bert Vaux writes on his personal website: “In 2011 or so, people started posting on youtube [sic] videos of themselves performing their answers to some of the questions on my old Harvard Dialect Survey. This Internet phenomenon normally goes under the name ‘(Regional) Dialect Meme,’ ‘Accent Tag,’ or ‘(Tumblr) Accent Challenge.’” Vaux collected these videos on his site. Some of these will be the subject of the next subsection, which will deal with the transformations of the Dialect Survey into the Accent Tag.

1.2 Accent Tag Challenge

The Accent Tag Challenge was introduced on the microblogging platform Tumblr, and the first instance of such a challenge can be found in a video dating back from the 5th of January 2011. This phenomenon spread to YouTube, whose most prolific users have created and tagged others in their videos, hence furthering the reach of the Accent Tag. The evolution between the Tumblr and the YouTube version of the questionnaire concern the website itself (i.e. “what is your username?”), not the parts taken from the Dialect survey. There are about 400,000 videos of the Accent Tag on YouTube. The most popular video, featuring a British and an American girl, has more than 1.1 million views: oppositions of accents (which will be addressed in the third section of this paper) and pretend dialectal battles are very widespread. Most of the vloggers who have completed the challenge are female: as an indication, out of the 100 most viewed videos on YouTube, there are only 17 male respondents; three of which are with a female participant.

The Accent Tag is much less comprehensive than the Dialect Survey, but it still offers many insights on both lexical and phonetic differences between regions,

particularly as it is not limited to American (or British) informants. Within the ten most popular videos only, Australian, Malaysian and even Swedish and French people have answered the English questionnaire, making it potentially interesting for linguists specialized in EFL.

The original Dialect Survey was considerably shortened to fit an acceptable length (about five minutes), but some videos run for twice, or even three times as long. The 122 questions have been replaced by a word list composed of about thirty words and ten core questions (with optional variations and extra questions, such as an explanation on the variety of English spoken by the informants, on the pseudonym they use online...). The list below compiles the most frequently asked items in the Accent Tag. When they were part of Vaux's study, the phoneme under scrutiny is italicized.

<i>Aunt</i>	Water	Avenue
<i>Roof</i>	Sure	Alabama
<i>Route</i>	Data	<i>Lawyer</i>
Wash	Ruin	Coupon
Oil	<i>Crayon</i>	<i>Mayonnaise</i>
Theater	Pecan	Syrup
Iron	Both	<i>Pajamas</i>
Salmon	Again	Caught
Caramel	Probably	Aluminum
Fire	New Orleans	Spitting image

Word list by the Accent Tag.

More than half of these words (eighteen out of thirty) were not on Vaux's list. This shows what is interesting to Internet users, and how they would test pronunciation in lieu of a phonologist. Some words have very different realizations from one region to the other, such as New Orleans, and syllabic reductions can arise in "caramel" and in "probably." Some of the words were used for other goals, such as "caramel" and "coupon," as already noted; "pecan" was only present to test its stress pattern (01 ou 10). The unsupervised productions of the Youtubers create an interesting effect, as they can comment on what they are asked to say, as will be examined in the third subsection of this section, and analyzed in detail in part 2 of this paper.

As for the lexical questions, they remained fairly consistent with the Dialect Survey, and were subjected to much less variation than the word list. They are as follows:

1. What is it called when you throw toilet paper on a house?
2. What is the bug that when you touch it, it curls into a ball?
3. What is the bubbly carbonated drink called?
4. What do you call gym shoes?
5. What do you say to address a group of people?
6. What do you call the kind of spider (or spider-like creature) that has an oval-shaped body and extremely long legs?
7. What do you call your grandparents?

8. What do you call the wheeled contraption in which you carry groceries at the supermarket?
9. What do is it called when rain falls while the sun is shining?
10. What is the thing you change the TV channel with?

All of these questions have been extracted from the Dialect Survey, except for question 10. They address everyday realities such as food, people and domestic activities, exactly like Vaux's other questions. This version is more popular on YouTube than other iterations which also requested users to read a short extract from a book, or explain how they came up with their username. Some of these still elicit strong answers from the participants, as will be discussed in the second section of this paper. The way vloggers interact with the Accent Tag is the subject of the third part of this section.

1.3 Vloggers and Accent Tag

The key dimension of the Accent Tag for Internet users is to document their own pronunciations and represent the region they come from. The selected corpus of videos is made of eleven African Americans, mainly from the eastern part of the United States, a zone where African American ancestry is prevalent, and eleven Scots who live in the traditional Scots-speaking regions of Scotland, amongst which four hail from Glasgow. The total length of the material amounts to about two hours of recordings. Occasionally, a comparison with other Accent Tag Challenges will be conducted.

Most of the vloggers are proficient in video editing and have stylized the video, adding a theme song or even editing their answers for more clarity. Another important aspect of the Accent Tag is its participative nature: each vlogger has to tag (that is, to designate) a number of friends to perpetuate the challenge. In most of the videos, the description features a series of links towards other social media where to follow their uploaders: creating a video equals promoting one's personal brand. No wonder, then, that the Accent Tag was so popular. The creation of "micro-content focusing on social connections between people" (Alexander, 2008 in Leung, 2013) is also possible thanks to more recent types of blogging such as vlogging. It requires extra editing skills but is a "new literary practice" more and more used in Web 2.0 (Jones & Hafner, 2012).

The creation of these videos based on a given pattern lets YouTubers achieve two aims: feed their personal channel, and express themselves: "blogs are the most popular channels to help users connect, share updates about themselves, and see updates about others. [...] [They] are also used to satisfy recognition needs." (Leung, 2013, p. 1003). As Leung shows, the need to expose oneself is very close to the need to see what others do, and compare them to ourselves. This may be the reason why the title of these videos almost always features the name of the minority language, or dialect spoken by the users: tagging their video allows potential viewers to know what they will find—and linguists to categorize them easily. This hypothesis is confirmed by the introductory portion of most videos, such as this extract: "I was watching a bunch of [Accent Tag Videos] on *YouTube*, it's so funny and it's so cute but this one is

gonna be the Miami Ratchet girl style accent tag.” Doing the Accent Tag equals liking the concept (through others’ contributions) while adding to it. The user qualifies her video (hence, her accent) as coming from a given city (Miami, FL), and injects an extra sociolinguistic description. Being “ratchet²” is a neologism from the hip-hop culture, meaning “ghetto.” First used by rappers, it has been partially reclaimed by African American women, such as this submitter, who considers it synonymous with “strong, independent.”

A vlogger added quite a different disclaimer at the beginning of her video: “I add [sic] some of my own words because them words that I was supposed to do was stupid and they need to be revised so I revised them for your ass.” Judgment over the corpus did not prevent her from doing the Accent Tag challenge, but she still submits to the format. The words she added are items she often uses, such as “rinse” (she links it to hair care), “boy” and “girl,” and she also provides context. For the item “sure,” she added the questions, “you sure? You sure you want to do that?” Contextualization is an important part of her contribution. As she frees herself from the format of the challenge, she adds the situation, hence shifting the interest in pronunciation towards syntactic, lexicographical goals. However, the phonologist is not entirely left behind, because the token under scrutiny always bears the nucleus of the tone unit in her dummy sentences.

The original linguistic atlas has greatly evolved, and its shortened form is much more portable and adaptable to the needs of a vlogger, through memetic furtherance in a strict Dawkinsian sense. He defines a meme as being “a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation” (Dawkins, 1976) which evolves through replication. Vloggers ignore the goal of the original study, which is all the more interesting to study the content of their videos. The second part will tackle the issues of spontaneity and free utterances, as well as question the limits of an unsupervised (and unofficial) study of language.

2. Spontaneity and findings

This part will deal with the results found on the Accent Tag corpus, especially with issues linked to the questions and tasks at hand, as well as naming and evaluating daily realities around them.

2.1 Issues linked to the questions

The main problem here is the adaptation of a survey that was tailored for Americans and obvious disparities between cultural practices. One of the most complex questions on the Dialect Survey was about the name of the “bubbly carbonated drink,” with its 8 answers. The percentages of answers to the Dialect Survey (DS), African American Youtubers (AfAm) and Scottish respondents to the Accent Tag (Scottish) are presented in the following chart.

	DS	AfAm	Scottish
Soda	52.97	44	0
Pop	25.08	34	0
Coke	12.38	11	0

² An alternative spelling of the word “wretched,” from Louisiana.

Soft Drink	5.89	(-soft) 11	0
Tonic	0.67	0	0
Lemonade	0.01	0	0
Cocola	0.29	0	0
Fizzy Drink	0.14	0	10
Ginger	N/A	0	10
Fizzy Juice	N/A	0	80

Table 1: Results for “Bubbly Carbonated Drink”

African American answers to the questions are quite close to the results from the Dialect Survey, as the three most frequent words “soda,” “pop” and “coke” are proportionally represented here. This allows us to hypothesize that this item presents no difference between American and African American English. However, as this question appears on Vaux’s webpage (and other articles about dialects of English in America), it is an important part of American identity, and a way to discern geographical influences over language. On par with Vaux’s findings, one of the respondents even adds, “it’s weird how y’all north say ‘pop’”. Nonetheless, the Scottish corpus is much more surprising. None of the American respondents have suggested “fizzy juice,” which is the most frequent Scottish answer, with 80% of the results. This token and “ginger” are absent from Vaux’s study, and thus prove the lexical difference between the two language areas. The Dialect Survey was designed for an American audience, and so was the Accent Tag, hence disparities with Vaux’s findings.

This is confirmed partly by the refusal of a respondent to give a definite answer. To the question about throwing toilet paper on a house (which predicted targets, thanks to Vaux’s study are “tp’ing” (57.61%) and “toilet papering” (21.04%), a Scots answers: “In Scotland, nobody does that [...] the youth of Scotland are about more evil [sic] than that and they’ll throw flying bricks at your house so it doesn’t actually have a name.” This example shows how hard it can be to calibrate a survey of this kind: naming realities implies that they must exist where the questions are asked. This brings us to consider the issues of multiple names and addresses these respondents can give.

2.2 Naming, calling

Some questions are addressed in a very confident manner. For the “spiderlike creature with long legs” (question 6), one of the American informants answers, “that’s a daddy long legs and I haven’t heard anyone from any region say anything other than daddy long legs.” Apart from a vlogger who answered “spider,” this goes towards confirming what Vaux showed. In the Dialect Survey, almost 95% of all answers converged towards the expression “daddy long leg(s)”. Other answers are more equivocal, and the issue of naming objects and everyday realities can be delicate.

Lexical variation is sometimes objectively approached in these testimonies, as shown by the answer provided for the “wheeled contraption” (question 8). One of the respondents says: “Some people call it a buggy, some people call it a cart, I call it a basket.” Lexical variation is a known, attested fact and alternate tokens are provided—although they are merely mentioned, not attached to a region or a different group of

people. Epilinguistic comments (in the Culiolian sense of “unconscious metalinguistic activity” as described in his 1968 paper) are spread throughout the videos, and will mainly be analyzed in the third part of this paper.

Skepticism arises in the question part of the challenge, partly because some realities do not have specific words. One of the trickiest questions is about “rain falls while the sun is shining.” Most of Vaux’s respondents (55.15%) did not have an expression for that natural event, and it is reflected in the videos. An African American vlogger declares, “Um::: I don’t know, there’s a word for that? That’s weird, y’all.” Indeed, the lexemes proposed as answers, within the videos or in the Dialect Survey suggest that names were either constructed with other words, such as “sun shower” or “liquid sun,” or are longer, quite obscure responses such as “the devil beating his wife” or “fox’s/monkey’s wedding.” An informant comments on his first experience with such a phenomenon:

Now in Detroit we don’t see that ever so when I was in Atlanta and I seen the rain falling while I was—when the sun was beaming I didn’t know how to tell it apart, OK I got a little scared I was kind of freaked out it was like so weird.

As shown by this example, the uniqueness of the event (and ensuing discomfort) explains why this informant did not have any word for it. The same goes for a girl who comments the question about “throwing toilet paper on houses” (item 1) with the following statement: “Now:: Let’s be honest:: Who the hell goes around throwing toilet paper on people houses? I never really heard of that:: in New Orleans.” Contrary to the Scottish informant whose reaction was presented in 2.1, judgment over others’ actions is palpable in the long pauses and the general castigation in intra- and extralinguistic hints, through her lowered voice, more frequent pauses than in other parts of the video, and her alternatively furrowed and lifted brows. A phonetic study of these utterances would show there are sharper intonation patterns because of the emotional involvement. Commenting on language means commenting on one’s identity and experiences.

Lexical problems may arise because of the weight words have. In the following example, the respondent does not want to acknowledge the definition used by one of her close family members:

This causes so many arguments in my house. Um my boyfriend calls it the box my mom calls it the duffer, I call it the remote if anyone says to me, “where is the box?” I just ignore them because it’s not a box it does not open it does not contain stuff so it’s not a box.

The semantemes and concepts associated with “box” are incompatible to her with “object used to change TV channels with,” and the emotional response is not in the video, but rather in her personal life.

All these examples illustrate Sapir’s observation on human communication, “Language is a guide to ‘social reality’ [...] The worlds in which different societies live are distinct works, not merely the same worlds with different labels.” (Sapir, 1929:209). Giving a definite name for a concept, and even close, domestic concepts such as the ones in the question part of the Accent Tag, is quite the conundrum. The fact that these vloggers react to questions naturally (with no notes or prepared material) allows for spontaneous answers, which may, in turn, cause problems.

2.3 Spontaneity and quid pro quo

The questions let us compare their answers with naturally made utterances. One of the items, “what do you say to address a group of people?” is actually answered by most vloggers at the beginning of their videos, but there are discrepancies with how they answer. Vaux’s query targeted various pronominal plural forms of you. These can be either made of a pronoun and another element bearing the plural such as “you all/y’all” or “you guys,” or other derivations such as “you’uns/yinz” or “youse.” The difference between the Dialect Survey and the Accent Tag consists in how vloggers understand the phrase “address a group of people.” Most of them did not think about the pronoun, and instead, talked about phatic expressions they used. Hence, some only answer with a simple suggestion, such as “What’s up? [wəz’ap] {laugh} I just say ‘hey’ [hɛ:ɪ]”. This respondent laughs because of the exaggerated, enthusiastic manner she uttered the first greeting.

Goffman sees one of the goals of phatic discourse (and especially, greetings) as “establish[ing] the roles the interlocutors will have in the conversation about to take place.” (Goffman, 1967). That may explain why an African American respondent nuances her answer according to the situation: “informal is ‘what’s up?’, ‘what’s good?’, formal is ‘hello, how are you?’”. In YouTube videos, there is no real conversation per se, although an audience (obviously plural) is directly involved. Phatic addresses at the beginning of the YouTube videos in this corpus confirm that hypothesis. They can be greetings such as “hello everybody,” “hiya,” rhetorical questions like “what’s up?”, including “aye ken?”, “what’s good y’all?” or even introductions like “hi um my name is Lauren.” The pronoun “you” is always used, even in very short contributions, and variants around “guys” (“hey guys” or “you guys”) are the most common form of plural address found in all videos, including Accent Tag Challenges out of the corpus.

The discrepancy between what users say to answer the question and the address opening the video is important, as already mentioned. Some people are very consistent, such as this user who starts with “hey guys” and answers “hi guys.” Others advance various propositions. A Scottish vlogger who started his video with “hey good afternoon guys” answered the question with “hey guys how is it going?” and “how youse doing?” Both do not have the same weight. The introduction to the video contains a temporal hint as to when it was recorded (good afternoon”), and seems very close to the first proposition. However, switching a greeting for a question is not innocent: a phatic question does not need an answer, but it still acknowledges the presence of the second party, and invite an answer. Both phatic phrases follow the adjacency pair format (Schlegoff & Sacks, 1973) but the second is both an example of a Scottish plural pronoun “youse” [yu:z] and of the omission of the auxiliary verb of the question. This form is closer to an authentic utterance, produced with peers. Here, there is a real difference between the audience of the video (addressed to with a neutral phrase) and the relaxed setting it would be uttered in, with more natural sociolinguistic asides ... and the answer to Vaux’s initial question.

The issue of users not answering the actual question is very quickly circumvented by discrete hints left in the answers. It is all the more interesting to compare spontaneous, opening addresses with the short roleplay all the respondents

seem to create in order to answer this question which, more than others, targets the way they communicate with others.

Undergoing a linguistics study to an unmotivated Internet memetic video is a challenge, but the unconstrained setting helps liberate language, and natural utterances. Filmed under their own terms, in their homes, these vloggers add extra information and make many comments on words and by extension, on how they envision the world they live in. Most of the epilinguistic comments, whether they are emotionally loaded or not, are spontaneously offered by these submitters. The last section of this paper will focus on linguistic imaginaries, a notion developed by Anne-Marie Houdebine, and more precisely on the rampant prescriptivism in all these vloggers' remarks when assessing their language variety or others.'

The perception of their own accent, and how they see it is as important as the judgments they pass onto others. As the audience can comment on videos, metalinguistic observations on what they heard is also crucial.

3. Prescriptivism and perceptions

The rampant presence of prescriptivism is, surprisingly enough, visible throughout the Accent Tag challenge. Most of the selected videos have been recorded by people having highly recognizable accents which are sometimes discriminated against. Titles often suggests a region pitted another one, in the case of videos with multiple contributors: "NORTH vs SOUTH," "AUSTRALIAN vs AMERICAN vs SCOTTISH." When the user is alone, they will resort to either identifying their city or country "Accent Tag: British (London)"; "Yorkshire); "Jamaican Accent." Having an accent and coming from a region is problematic, and will be the first object analyzed in this section. As a result, there are many comments focusing on the emotional impact of the accent they heard. Perceptual linguistics and the way non-linguists evaluate a variety of English will be the main point of the second subpart.

3.1 Having an accent or not

The question of having an accent partially overlaps that of using a dialect, or a minority language. Some resort to semi-technical jargon, like this young man who describes his speech as "kind of a mash-up between Chicago and I guess the black sl— African American Vernacular, what one would call it." Although his first lexical choice favored "black slang," an almost derogatory term pointing at African American Vernacular being a substandard, improper version of English. As noted by Dumas and Lighter, "the layman applies the term [slang] imprecisely to a large body of lexemes including true slang, jargon, regionalisms, and colloquialisms" (Dumas & Lighter, 1973:13). The other problem with the phrase "black slang" is its improper use regarding phonetic realization of words: I can extend Dumas and Lighter's observation to pronunciation. However, the name "African American Vernacular" is what he finally chooses, although he adds the comment "what one would call it," maybe to distance himself from the phrase, as it sounds technical.

When considering the following quote, it appears crucial to study what these informants speak, and when they speak it—and how all this is deeply linked with

identity issues: “Creating and recreating one’s identity is a constant, dynamic process which requires continuous rethinking and repositioning of oneself in the light of changing parameters in one’s surroundings, possibly to be followed by the substitution of one symbolic form of expression by another” (Schneider, 2003). The symbolic forms of expression vary according to the setting, as declared by this informant: “you get with your family your friends, you know, the ratchetness comes out of you and you just be speaking an all new language because it sure isn’t English. It’s not English, it’s Ebonics.” Being with her peers reasserts her identity as being “ratchett,” and after 1996’s Oakland Board of Education’s decision legitimating the African American language, the lexeme “Ebonics” became much more spread amongst non-linguists. This comment confirms Schneider’s observations about the intersection between identity and accent—although it may displease some vloggers. Hence, this Scottish informant living in Glasgow gives her point of view about what she speaks:

The reasons I don’t really like my accent is when I’m talking to you guys, I talk—I pronounce a little bit better than usual when I’m talking to like other Scottish people um I don’t know why and I know sometimes because I was born in England and because my mom is very English she’s from Barnet and I was like for the first two years of my life lived in Ealing um I do it sometimes I occasionally get about an English twang to my voice because um I like grew up listening to my mom.

The dislike seems to arise from the fact that her accent is somehow different from her Scottish peers because she was raised by a “very English” mother. Her sense of belonging is stretched between her two allegiances, one familial, one of her peer group. Her perception of English, as someone who lived in a district of London, being raised by a non-Scottish woman, shows the dichotomy between a “proper” pronunciation (English in England) and that of her Scottish peers. Even if she includes an axiological judgment through the phrase “a little bit better,” when addressing an unknown audience on her vlog, she is still unhappy about the difference between her and her friends.

And indeed, if the peer group and the respondent have similar regionalisms, some can forget they have an accent, such as this young African American man who declares, “I do not have an accent I don’t think I have an accent to be honest with you I think I spoke normal but other than that I don’t really think I have an accent.” This utterance can be phonetically transcribed as [a də nə hæv ə 'æksɪn ə dən ðɪŋk ə hæv ə 'æksɪn tə bɪ 'ɑːns wɪt ʃʊ ə ðɪŋk ə spəʊk nɔːml̩ bɪ ʌðə də də ə 'rɪːli də tɪn ə əv ə 'æksɪn]. The features of African American Language (AAL) are perceptible in this extract. Final consonant clusters in a word like “accent” are often simplified (but not in “think”) and the fricative [ð] is produced as [d] in fast speech (segment “other than that”). Post vocalic /r/ is muted in “normal,” an expected trait for AAL, a non-rhotic language. Diphthongs like [aɪ] in “I” are also reduced to their first element and [æ] is lowered as [ɑ] in “accent” when he emphasizes what he is saying. These traits are highly recognizable as being features of AAL phonology (Bailey & Thomas in Mufwene, 1998). Yet, he does not detect the features of his speech as being associated with a given minority language, dialect or else.

To perceive an accent, one must be aware (or rather, want to acknowledge) the existence of alternate dialects, or be confronted with people from other linguistic areas. The vlogger who declared, “I always get told that I have such a strong accent,

and people say that they love my accent” merely describes such an encounter with people using another accent. The question of assessing accents is the focal point of the second subsection.

3.2 Judging other accents

Preston devoted an important body of work on perceptual linguistics and folk judgments passed on one’s accent, whether these informants talk about themselves or others. The stances around these accents always oppose affective and subjective assessments over them, and need to pit two varieties against one another. In the comments section of the YouTube videos, many remark not only on the video itself, but on the variety of English (or the minority language) they heard. These observations are very emotionally loaded, in part because anonymity online allows for such expressivity. Hence, a comment reads, “Glasgow accent is fucking horrible.” It was so offensive that other users have downvoted it, and “buried” it, that is, made it inaccessible unless clicked on. On one of the Glaswegian videos, the first 140 “top comments” (that is, up voted or answered) paint a heterogenous picture. 25% are negative, 38.5% offer a positive image of the accent in question, and 36.5% are neutral, i.e. not referring to the accent itself. The point here is the choice of arguments. Be they positive or negative, they always pertain to intelligibility.

Positive comments frequently follow the pattern, “I come from X and I love your accent,” such as “I love the way you talk! I’m from south Mississippi and a lot of stuff we say the same”; “I’m American, but I can understand every word.” Some even express envy about the accent, and displayed how deeply affective these judgments are. It is worth noting that neutral remarks did not evoke the accent, but the vlogger herself. Most of the comments judged her appearance, and the value of performance is important here. Some commenters said they also were from Glasgow, thus created regional cohesiveness between them and the vlogger.

Negative comments are much more polarized. Some are somewhat neutral, such as “as a Texan your accent is very hard to understand :-(.” The emoticon shows some sadness but is not insulting, contrary to “What fucking language are you talking, looks like you have a cock in your mouth.” Attacks on the language spoken by this informant are frequent and question either the legitimacy of their variety, such as “this is not English,” or ridicule the accent thanks to alternative spellings, like “ey cull me gran gran! Lol.” In this example, the vlogger produced [ʒi kəl mə græn græn] for “I call my gran ‘gran’” (answering item 7), and the peculiarities of the Scottish accent are highly visible in its written imitation. Another comment evokes the “sco’ish [sic] accent,” a use of the “parochial apostrophe” to symbolize the replacement of intervocalic /t/ by glottal stops in Scottish English and in Scots.

Negative comments also resort to linguistic imaginaries when they allude to cliché Scottish representations, such as comparing her accent to those of the actors from the film *Trainspotting*, or Scottish realities like this comment does, “What’s that lady saying? Something about kilts?” Here, all the discourse held in this seven-minute video is summarized into a stereotype. Needless to say, she never evoked kilts in the video, but language and dialectal perception go with mental representation of what identity people have. Be they linguistic, like written imitation, or cultural, like the

evocation of kilts, both types of comments show how iconic an accent can be, in the following sense, “*Iconicity* is a semiotic process that transforms the sign relationship between linguistic features and the social images to which they are linked. (Irvine in Preston, 1999 [1996].)

The metalinguistic judgment included in a comment like ‘Just because a lot of people sound like this doesn’t make it a different accent. It’s not a different accent ... this is simply not pronouncing well’ tackles the issue of propriety and norms. The non-recognition of regional features of language and the opposition between variation and an inflexible standard is problematic. It is not only an affective judgment, it becomes a vision of a ‘symbolic linguistic capital’ (Preston, 1999) invested in the Standard of the language which is definitely not Scottish English or Scots, here. This goes against analyses made by linguists, like ‘the essence of any living language is not perfection but variation’ (Metcalf, 2017). The discrepancies between linguists’ opinions and those reported in perceptual studies is hardly an innovation, but it is confirmed not only in the videos, but also in the comments themselves. Prescription of a Standard and perceptions of difference between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ or even ‘informal setting’ vs ‘formal contexts’ is important to create such a scale of values.

Conclusion

The observer’s paradox is a well-known problem raised by William Labov which he expressed as follows, ‘the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain this data by systematic observation.’ (Labov, 1972). The existence of the Accent Tag directly shortcuts this paradox and offers alternative paradigms for field linguists. Here, informants are particularly loquacious, as they are sometimes eager to share information about themselves, or introduce parenthetical comments on the questions. Although there are certain variations within the questions, especially in the initial word list, the motivation behind the newly selected tokens are significant.

The answers given by non-Americans give insights on cultural discrepancies as well, and paint a fuller picture of what is perceived as foreign or not. The lack of context in the questions creates a highly affective response from most vloggers, who add many extra details throughout their videos. The knowledge of technical words show their stance towards language: even if some African American respondents have labeled their variety as ‘Ebonics’ or ‘African American Vernacular,’ none of the Scottish respondents felt they used ‘Scots.’ This discrepancy is noteworthy, but is not the purpose of this analysis. Prescription is ubiquitous in the videos, and epilinguistic comments (on an unconscious level) go hand in hand with metalinguistic judgments on languages. The perception of one’s accent is a delicate matter. If there is no other standard than their own, they do not hear their accent—but listening to a video strongly elicits answers about regional differences and similarities.

Confronting the issues of a viral video challenge and an actual study is a new approach to field work, even if the (socio)linguists cannot direct exchanges or the output given by informants. The adaptation of the concept is highly memetic and offers unique testimonies, both in the videos and in the comment sections.

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