

# Introduction

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*Accent* is a loaded, non-technical, and ambiguous term. It can be used as a synonym for 'focus' or 'emphasis', it can refer to diacritics in a writing system, or, in the more familiar sense in which we use it here, it has to do with the perception of pronunciation. In this last sense it is typically bipolar: it is identified in terms of proximity to, or distance from, the pronunciation of a particular group of people, and may be adopted as a target model in a foreign language class. As such, accents can be perceived as 'good' or 'bad', and as such they attract value judgements.

Politicians speaking a foreign language in an international setting may be praised, if their accent is perceived to be good,<sup>1</sup> or, more likely, held up to ridicule if they are heavily influenced by their mother tongue.<sup>2</sup> In Italy, and very probably elsewhere, a near native accent when speaking a foreign language seems to be universally admired. In the 2020 European football championship,<sup>3</sup> Italian media discov-

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**1** For example, the 'Whatever it takes' speech given in 2012 by the then President of the ECB Mario Draghi.

**2** A number of videos showing Matteo Renzi's difficulties with English went viral on the Internet when he was *Presidente del Consiglio*.

**3** Postponed because to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

ered a new talent: Federico Chiesa. Not only did he score the goals which took Italy into the final against England, it also turned out that he could speak English fluently with a near native speaker accent.<sup>4</sup> This seemed to rub salt into English wounds after the match which had been hyped up in the British media with the ubiquitous slogan ‘Football’s coming home’ and which gave rise to a rejoinder in a banner held up by Italian fans at Wembley Stadium ‘And all roads lead to Rome’. It was as if Italy had beaten England twice at their own game.

But in the context of foreign language learning, how important are accents? Should proximity to a native speaker accent be the default target for teachers in a foreign language class? Is it a realistic or even a useful target? What do students of languages think about accents – their own, and those of other people? What attitudes have they acquired from their own language background – since attitudes are learned, not intuitive (Garrett 2010, 22). Does motivation play a part in the acquisition of accents?

These are some of the questions which are addressed in this large scale and wide-ranging background study of student attitudes to accents and pronunciation. With no such study currently existing for the Italian context, as far as the authors are aware, it comes at a timely moment. The year 2018 saw the publication of the *Companion Volume* to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Learning, Teaching Assessment*. This new volume radically revises its description of pronunciation competence and levels. In the original, 2000, version of the Framework there is a single holistic scale for “phonological control”. At lower levels on the 6-point scale it refers to a “foreign accent” as a negative feature of the learner’s pronunciation, and the amount of “effort” which a native speaker has to make to understand it.

Commenting on the need to revise the *Framework*, Piccardo writes

a new sensibility has been emerging in the applied linguists’ scholarly community when it comes to re-evaluating the traditional idea of the ‘native speaker’ as a model or perception of the norm in pronunciation. This is especially visible in English considering the movement towards ‘global Englishes’ or ‘English as a Lingua Franca’, but similar considerations have been applied to all languages. (Piccardo 2016, 6)

In the revised version, the single scale is replaced by three: “overall phonological control”, “sound articulation” and “prosodic features”. The term “foreign accent” has disappeared as a yardstick for measuring lack of success; so too has the reference to “native

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkZotPh2\\_6w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkZotPh2_6w).

speakers”, and the effort they might have to make to understand the speaker. Instead, the new scales refer to “accent retained from other language(s)”, and to the “interlocutor”. This is an interesting new direction for the *Framework*, for at least two reasons: it recognises that international communication is not necessarily between non-native (L2) speaker and native (L1) speaker, but may sometimes, and, in the case of English, usually, involve two L2 speakers, for neither of whom the language of communication is the mother tongue. Secondly, the reference to an “interlocutor” underlines the fact that the listener is also a participant, and that communicative success is the result of speaker and listener together co-constructing meaning.

In this way the revised *Framework* reflects an increased interest in pronunciation acquisition, teaching, and assessment, from a perspective of intelligibility. The notion of *intelligibility*, first proposed in 1985 by Smith and Nelson (Smith, Nelson 1985) as part of a three-part paradigm of *intelligibility*, *comprehensibility*, and *interpretability*, was reformulated by Levis (2005) as the *Intelligibility Principle* for pronunciation teaching, in contrast with the *Nativeness Principle*. It is an area which has been extensively researched by (among others) Munro and Derwing (Munro, Derwing 1995; Derwing, Munro 2009 etc.) and, more recently, examined from an assessment perspective by Isaacs and Trofimovich (2017).

This, together with work in the area of student attitudes towards pronunciation, including motivational factors (Dörnyei, Csizér, Németh 2006) provides the research background which informed the study we report on in this volume. The immediate stimulus however, which led to the project, was the recognition by the Italian Ministry of Education of the Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultures (DSLCC) at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice as one of Italy’s 180 ‘Departments of Excellence’ for the quality of its research, which led to a range of new research projects for the period 2018-22, and of which the one presented here is an example. A wide-ranging survey of first-year undergraduate students across the department seemed an appropriate response to the award: Ca’ Foscari offers the highest number of foreign languages (currently more than forty) of any university in the country and every year counts one of the highest numbers of language graduates. An investigation of incoming students’ attitudes, and expectations, offered an opportunity for a collaborative multi-lingual project and the possibility to inform choices for university language curricula.

In the end, researchers from the ‘big five’ languages of the department – English, French, German, Russian, and Spanish – joined forces to create a six section, eighty-one item Google Forms survey which made use of a five-point Likert scale for statements with which respondents were invited to agree or disagree, and open-ended questions, usually at the end of the sections. The questionnaire was tri-

alled with 93 students in May 2019, after which minor revisions and adjustments were made. The final version was structured as indicated in table 1.

**Table 1** Structure of questionnaire

Section	Topic	Questions
A	Personal details and language background	24
B	Opinions and attitudes towards foreign accents and the importance of good pronunciation	15
C	Accent issues in the students' first foreign language	15
D	Accent issues in the students' second foreign language	15
E	The pronunciation of English lingua franca	7
F	The pronunciation of Italian	5

This might look like a rather weighty questionnaire, which we calculated would take students around half an hour to complete. However, we also reckoned there would be considerable interest and motivation to do so; after all, these were incoming students who had chosen a particular university degree course, in which oral communication, and hence pronunciation, was a fundamental feature, arguably the most fundamental feature even in an academic setting; and here was a survey in which they were invited to reflect, perhaps for the first time, on their own opinions, attitudes, and experiences as language learners, and how these might contribute to the learning process itself. 372 students, mostly Italian L1 speakers, who had enrolled for courses in thirteen languages, rose to the challenge.

The individual chapters of this volume report and analyse the results obtained in the various sections of the questionnaire. The first chapter, by Marie-Christine Jamet, is devoted to Section A of the questionnaire, which focuses on personal details and on the linguistic background of the respondents, i.e., gender, age, school attendance in Italy and abroad, acquisition of Italian as first or second language, bilingualism, languages studied at school, high school diplomas, foreign language and dialect usage in everyday life, motivations for degree course enrolment, and languages chosen as major subjects in the degree programme (including self-assessment of proficiency level). Jamet offers an overview of the answers and, by comparison with available general statistical data (age, gender, language choices), shows that the sample of 372 respondents can be considered representative of the entire population of students enrolling to the Venice bachelor's degree course in modern languages (*Lingue, civiltà e scienze del linguaggio*, LCSL). Thus, the teaching staff of the department may consider the responses as providing a reliable picture not only of the linguistic profile, but also of the opinions and

attitudes of their BA students towards L2 pronunciation. The author then goes into more depth on three aspects that could have an impact on the answers in the subsequent sections: gender, motivation, and multilingualism. With respect to gender there is, as is usual in such courses, only a small proportion of male students (11%), which means that they might not be typical of male language learners in general and possibly do not differ greatly from female students in their views and attitudes. Regarding the motivation for enrolment, Jamet illustrates the scheme used to assign a motivational coefficient (on the intrinsic/extrinsic axis) to each respondent, which (in the subsequent chapters) turns out to be a significant predictor of various surveyed attitudes. Finally, she discusses the responses linked to (different notions of) plurilingualism. Interestingly, almost 30% of the informants consider themselves as bilingual, although far fewer declare a first language different from Italian and/or a substantial school attendance abroad (7% each). 50% claim to speak at least one foreign language in everyday life and even more (54%) report an occasional use of an Italian dialect, especially with friends and family. Some of these variables, as well as the total number of languages learned at school, languages chosen as main subjects, and self-rated proficiency levels, displayed significant correlations with the answers in the remaining sections of the questionnaire.

In the second chapter, Pavel Duryagin and Elena Dal Maso report the answers to Section B, which aimed at identifying general attitudes towards foreign accent and pronunciation, and they examine possible correlations between these attitudes and the students' personal backgrounds (collected in Section A). Respondents were asked to rate 14 Likert-type items with statements about the desirability of an accurate (opposed to native-like or comprehensible) L2 pronunciation and the importance of spending time and effort to achieve it, about feelings of (dis)comfort in communication depending on L2 pronunciation, and about identity issues that arise while speaking with a native-like or foreign accent. These questions referred to foreign languages in general, i.e., respondents could think of any of the foreign languages they speak. It turned out that the vast majority of respondents consider the native accent as a fundamental point of reference and are willing to invest time in the classroom to improve pronunciation skills. Likewise, almost all students appreciate being mistaken for native speakers when speaking. On the other hand, some items highlighted the existence of different opinions: the importance of pronunciation in comparison with grammar and vocabulary, as well as comprehensibility or native-like pronunciation as the main goal of the students displayed controversial responses. Many students seem to aim at an accurate and/or comprehensible pronunciation, but realise and accept that they will never reach a native-like accent. The authors also tested possible correlations between the

students' answers and their personal background variables (gender; age of acquisition of Italian; self-declared bilingualism; the number of foreign languages studied at school; self-reported everyday usage of foreign languages; usage of Italian dialects; extrinsic/intrinsic motivations for enrolment to the degree course). As for gender, regression modelling did not show fundamental differences in attitudes; however, males tended to downgrade the importance of pronunciation compared to grammar and vocabulary and the influence of pronunciation quality on their confidence in communication. Daily use of foreign languages appears to be associated with greater pleasure and self-confidence in communication due to correct pronunciation, as well as to less discomfort in imitating a native accent. The dialect speakers seem to appreciate more than others the importance of pronunciation compared to grammar and vocabulary, but on the other hand feel less bothered by the fact that their foreign accent might reveal their origin. Finally, the authors found that intrinsically motivated students were more concerned about foreign-accented speech revealing their origins and, thus, more willing to dedicate time to pronunciation training in the classroom.

The third chapter, written by Ignacio Arroyo Hernández and Peter Paschke, refers to Sections C and D of the questionnaire. These two sections focus on attitudes and opinions linked directly to the two languages selected by students as major subjects of their degree course. Thus, the same series of 14 Likert items (plus 1 open-ended question) was presented twice: once in Section C referring to the first language of study, and once in Section D with reference to the other language chosen. However, if the student had not reported a proficiency level of at least A1, the corresponding section was skipped. For purposes of analysis, the responses of both sections were grouped together. The statements to be rated in Sections C and D by means of five level-Likert items belong to three areas of interest, including perceptive, affective and cognitive factors: (i) pronunciation accuracy and foreign accent of one's own L2 speech and the ability to distinguish good and bad L2 pronunciations in one's own or someone else's speech; (ii) the extent to which L2 pronunciation is experienced by respondents as enjoyment or vice versa as a demanding or anxiety-provoking activity as well as the emotional states that might affect their L2 pronunciation; (iii) the knowledge about individual L2 pronunciation problems and that of (other) Italian speakers. It turns out that, although a native-like accent is considered a landmark by students, they do not believe that a good L2 pronunciation must necessarily be accent-free. They are quite sure they can evaluate the pronunciation of other L2 speakers, but they display considerable uncertainty in the field of self-evaluation and of knowledge about their own pronunciation problems. In addition, for most respondents, L2 pronunciation is associated with pleasure. The authors also an-

analyse the role of predictors linked to target languages and individual background by means of regression analysis. As expected, the most important and robust predictor of responses is self-rated proficiency: students at higher levels are convinced that they pronounce more accurately and are better raters of pronunciation; they display more L2 pronunciation enjoyment and think that they have better knowledge about L2 phonetics and pronunciation difficulties. Target languages, or at least some of them, are also relevant predictors for all areas of interest. Compared to English, languages like German, Swedish and Russian often get lower self-ratings for pronunciation quality, evaluation ability and pronunciation knowledge. Pronunciation of German is also less associated with enjoyment, while the reverse is true for Portuguese and Spanish, for which the authors discuss possible reasons (phonological distance and/or language-related attitudes). Arroyo Hernández and Paschke also tested the role of personal background variables such as gender, first language (Italian or other), number of foreign languages studied at school, total years of language study, and the motivational coefficient linked to enrolment motivation. A higher number of foreign languages and a first language other than Italian were associated with better self-ratings for L2 pronunciation quality, perception and knowledge, suggesting the idea that plurilingualism (in its various forms) might promote L2 pronunciation. Finally, intrinsic (enrolment) motivation turned out to be associated with better self-evaluations of L2 pronunciation and, unsurprisingly, with high pronunciation enjoyment.

Chapter 4, written by David Newbold, concerns Section E of the questionnaire, which deals with the pronunciation of English as a lingua franca (ELF). The 7 Likert scale items of this section, administered to all informants, regardless of the languages chosen in the degree course, try to determine their attitudes towards non-native accents when English is used in an international context. Given that the majority of English-language communication is between non-native speakers, one might assume that students, as part of their “ELF awareness” (Sifakis 2014), rate the importance of a native accent lower and intelligibility higher compared to other foreign languages. The first-year undergraduate students did actually show some incipient awareness of the reduced importance of native accents in ELF contexts and, partly, conceded that a non-native accent might help intelligibility, but many seem to be annoyed by a marked foreign accent, including the Italian one. The role of accommodation strategies and intercultural and/or pragmatic factors in communication appears to fall outside their personal experience and tends not to be recognised. In a second stage of his research, Newbold administered the same survey to two groups of master’s students, assuming that these, due to a more extensive communication experience in ELF, might exhibit different attitudes. MA students indeed turned out to be significantly

more tolerant towards a marked foreign accent than BA students, but surprisingly, they also showed a significantly lower ELF awareness when it comes to the adaptation of pronunciation to the interlocutor. In addition, Newbold found some significant differences within the MA group between English language and literature specialists and students of International Relations. Contrary to what one might expect, i.e., a more pragmatic, instrumentally motivated approach, the latter give more importance to a native-like accent in ELF communication, and are less likely to see communication breakdown as the result of cultural or pragmatic problems. Language specialists, on the other hand, are more convinced that non-native accents can support intelligibility. With some of the items, they seem to have a greater ELF awareness than their peers majoring in International Relations, but in the key issue of accommodation there is still no significant difference: both groups claim that adaptation to the interlocutor's pronunciation is not necessary for comprehension. The findings lead the author to a reflection on the usefulness of an 'ELF-aware approach' in English language courses in higher education in Italy and Europe.

The Appendix contains the questionnaire in its original Italian form, while English translations of the single questions are given in the various chapters of the book.

As there is no chapter for Section F of the questionnaire, dedicated to the pronunciation of Italian with regional or foreign accents, the main results will be summarised here. In Section F, the 372 informants were invited to rate the following statements:

- F01. When a foreigner speaks Italian with a strong accent, it's hard for me to listen.
- F02. I enjoy imitating a foreign accent in Italian, e.g. speaking like Laurel & Hardy.
- F03. I enjoy imitating other regional accents, e.g. the Neapolitan accent.
- F04. When I talk for a long time with people from another region of Italy, my accent changes.

F01 was rejected by more than two thirds (67%) of the respondents, with only a minority (14%) agreeing, thus highlighting a substantial tolerance towards foreign accents in Italian, partly interpreted (in the free comments) as a rejection of any discrimination of foreigners. Such a wide acceptance of foreign accents in the respondents' L1, while they aim for a native accent in their L2, is in line with studies that found more tolerance towards a foreign accent in other speakers compared to one's own L2 speech production (e.g., Dewaele, McCloskey 2015, 232). Foreign accent imitation in L1, sometimes suggested as a technique in L2 pronunciation acquisition (Rojczyk 2015), is enjoyed by 44% of the respondents when rating statement F02, while



38% express disagreement. A linear regression model<sup>5</sup> revealed a robust correlation ( $p < 0.01$ ) with enrolment motivation, i.e., more intrinsically motivated students reported a higher enjoyment of foreign accent imitation. A similar approach to L1 pronunciation appears to be coherent with the higher L2 pronunciation enjoyment displayed by intrinsically motivated students in Sections C and D (see ch. 3). A great majority of respondents (54%) also appreciates the imitation of regional Italian accents, while only half as many (27%) express disagreement. Finally, 50% of the respondents approve statement F04, i.e., they report accommodation effects when speaking with interlocutors from other Italian regions, while 31% disagree with the statement. As revealed by linear regression, gender is a significant predictor ( $p < 0.05$ ) in this case, as male students express more disagreement than females. This result confirms other studies in which women were more likely to accommodate to an interlocutor than men (cf. Namy, Nygaard, Sauerteig 2002).

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<sup>5</sup> For discussion about the use of parametric statistics for Likert-items see § 4.1 of ch. 3.

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