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Reactions to Dialects and Accents in UL: *An Analysis of the Perception and Awareness of Regional Accents and Dialects amongst UL Students*

At the age of 19 I moved from my home town in Co. Wicklow to Limerick to begin my studies in Applied Languages. While I expected some small cultural differences, I didn't think that my accent would be something that made me stand out from the crowd. For the first few weeks, it was a hot topic whenever I met someone new. Eventually the comments such as "You're not from here, are you?" and "say that again" began to subside. I didn't think much about it until later when I began studying sociolinguistics

In September 2019, my sister joined me in UL, as a first year student. I saw her experiencing the exact same situation that I had, and noticed her changing the way she spoke. All of the theories and research that had been taught in that sociolinguistic class came back to me. That was when I decided on the topic for my FYP. I decided to title my project: *Reactions to Dialects and Accents in UL: An Analysis of the Perception and Awareness of Regional Accents and Dialects amongst UL Students*.

I revisited the notes I had taken in that sociolinguistics class and read more about the topics we had covered. To begin with I looked at Irish English. For such a small island we have a large repertoire of regional accents due to the long and complicated history between the Irish and English languages. It took our country over three hundred years to swap from the native language to the language of the English settlers. In this time, words such as "craic" and even grammar patterns were transferred over to create our own unique and varying form of the English language.

I looked at research that involved language attitudes, particularly Irish English accents. Language attitudes weren't considered important until the 1960s when psychologist Dr. Wallace Lambert researched by using a method called matched guise testing or MGT. This method involved playing recordings of different speakers and asking participants to rate them based on different traits, such as how intelligent, kind or reliable they sounded. Many more studies using this method were carried out including in Ireland. Results usually showed that those with received pronunciation ranked higher in intelligence but lower in kindness. What these research tells us is that people have perceptions of different accents and they associate them with certain traits and areas.

Next I looked at the Communication Accommodation Theory which was developed by

Dr. Howard Giles. This theory suggested that people change the way that they speak to accommodate the listener. In other words, people will change their tone or accent to make the listener feel more comfortable. There are many reasons why someone would want to accommodate to the listener. One reason is in response to language attitudes.

This is where my own research came into play. My hypothesis, which I had developed by using the aforementioned research, was that UL students from areas outside of the south west of the country had received more negative reactions to their accent and that because of this they had changed the way they spoke to acquire an accent/dialect more similar to their SW counterparts. My main research questions were: was there a general awareness of different regional accents in UL? Was there a consensus regarding which dialects/accents are preferable or disliked? Has communication accommodation occurred in students since their studies at UL began?

To gain answers to these questions I created an online survey after receiving ethical approval. This survey asked students about their linguistic background (i.e where they were from, who they spent most of their time with etc) as well as their experiences in UL relating to comments regarding their accents. I also held interviews with some of the survey participants to discuss their experiences in more detail, this gave me qualitative data which I was able to use to back up the data from the online survey. Over 70 UL students answered my survey and I conducted 7 interviews in total.

The results supported my hypothesis. They showed that UL students in general had a strong awareness of different accent/dialects; however, it was clear that certain groups of students showed more awareness than others did, such as those who studied languages, were on erasmus (spent time with non-native speakers) and those from outside the southwest of Ireland (in fact some participants from the southwest didn't think that they even had an accent).

Participants gave different reasons for liking and disliking accents. For example some participants liked the Donegal accent because it was distinct and musical, others disliked it because it was too *strong* and *different*. While there wasn't a general agreement on which accents were liked, there was a clear dislike for Dublin accents by the majority of participants.

This correlated with the survey results which showed that students from outside the southwest, but in particular students from the eastern counties of Dublin, Kildare and Wicklow were far more likely to receive negative reactions to their accent. Some participants said they were often slagged for their accent but they took it as a joke.

Students from the southwest didn't usually often notice a reaction to the way they spoke but if they did it was generally perceived as a neutral or positive reaction. The students from the east were also much more likely to change the way they speak. When asked about this, they usually mentioned that they did this to prevent more slagging or comments regarding their accent or that they just wanted to fit in with the people they were around.

The results from this study allow for a clearer understanding of the ways in which Irish students settle into life away from home. While there is so much more to a person, the way they speak is a huge part of their identity as seen by others. Understanding this and changing the way we think of accents could hugely improve the way people settle into new surroundings.