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Vikas Grover
New York Medical College

Aravind Namasivayam
University of Toronto

Nidhi Mahendra
San Jose State University, nidhi.mahendra@sjsu.edu

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Viewpoint

A Viewpoint on Accent Services: Framing and Terminology Matter

Vikas Grover,^a  Aravind Namasivayam,^b  and Nidhi Mahendra^c ^aDepartment of Speech-Language Pathology, New York Medical College, Valhalla ^bDepartment of Speech-Language Pathology, University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada ^cDepartment of Communicative Disorders & Sciences, San José State University, CA

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to offer a contemporary viewpoint on accent services and contend that an equity-minded reframing of accent services in speech-language pathology is long overdue. Such reframing should address directly the use of nonpejorative terminology and the need for nurturing global linguistic diversity and practitioner diversity in speech-language pathology. The authors offer their perspective on affirmative and least-biased accent services, an in-depth scoping review of the literature on accent modification, and discuss using terms that communicate unconditional respect for speaker identity and an understanding of the impact of accent services on accented speakers.

Conclusions: Given ongoing discussions about the urgent need to diversify the profession of speech-language pathology, critical attention is needed toward existing biases toward accented speakers and how such biases manifest in the way that accent services are provided as well as in how clinicians conceptualize their role in working with accented speakers. The authors conclude with discussing alternate terms and offer recommendations for accent services provided by speech-language pathologists.

Pivotal events of 2020 with a global pandemic, significant revelations of related health inequities, and heightened attention to racial discrimination are beginning to have an impact in speech-language pathology. There has been critical reflection and a widespread call for action to address equity issues and barriers to the entry of diverse students and professionals in speech-language pathology. One example of a specific barrier in speech-language pathology is a bias toward accented speakers, who often speak different languages or World Englishes and frequently identify as racial or ethnic minorities. Recent

census data reveal that approximately 40% of the U.S. population is increasingly diverse by race or by ethnicity, with 60% of the population identifying as White alone and not of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity. Also noteworthy is that 13.6% of Americans are born outside the country (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Compared to these demographics that reveal steadily increasing population diversity, only approximately 8.5% of current American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) members, international affiliates, and nonmember certificate holders identify with a racially minoritized group (ASHA, 2021).

Regarding linguistic diversity, merely 8% of current members and affiliates meet ASHA's definition of being a bilingual service provider (ASHA, 2021), whereas approximately 22% of Americans speak a language besides English at home (United States Census Bureau, 2017). Indeed, the profession of speech-language pathology urgently needs more linguistically diverse providers to nurture heritage languages and provide needed services to diverse clients and families affected by communication disorders. The lack of racial and linguistic diversity among speech-language pathologists (SLPs) can inadvertently result in an excessive

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focus on speech and language standardization across speakers of accents, dialects, and World Englishes. Such standardization has been critiqued as “an attempt to stop language change” or to “fossilize language by means of controlling variation” (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 8). Discrimination based on accent and spoken language is called accentism or linguicism and is frequently rooted in implicit and explicit bias toward accented speakers (Orelus, 2020; Sener, 2021). Persistent linguicism has notable consequences in educational, professional, and life settings. For example, there is documented evidence of the effects of linguistic racism in seeking employment (Carlson & McHenry, 2006; Cerrato, 2017; Deprez-Sims & Morris, 2010; Timming, 2016) as well as seeking housing (Baugh, 2018). Outside speech-language pathology, it is well documented that discrimination occurs based on speaker accents and spoken language variation (Akomolafe, 2013; Enns-Kananen et al., 2021; Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010a, 2010b; Orelus, 2020). It is noteworthy that in the United States, such discrimination against accented speakers (and by extension, of their national origin) is prohibited explicitly under Titles VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2008).

Of direct relevance to SLPs, ASHA has a clear position against discriminatory treatment toward students and professionals who speak varied social dialects (ASHA, 1983) or who are accented speakers with clear guidance that accents are communication differences and not disorders (ASHA, 1998, 2011, 2016b). Yet despite this supportive stance from ASHA, the authors have firsthand experience of accent-related stereotyping and discrimination in their own professional journeys as internationally trained, bilingual SLPs. Furthermore, the authors continue to witness their students experiencing these barriers in academic programs. Accentism is an understudied area in speech-language pathology (ASHA, 2011; Chakraborty et al., 2019; Cheng, 1999; Levy & Crowley, 2011; Pimentel, 2003; Sudler, 2012). Recently, linguistic discrimination against accented speakers and students in speech-language pathology has come up repeatedly (ASHA SIG 14: Cultural and Linguistic Diversity community e-mail; California Speech Language Hearing Association, 2021; Silman, 2021; Yu, 2020).

It is often acknowledged that every speaker has an accent (ASHA, 2011; Matsuda, 1991). However, every accented speaker does not experience discrimination nor is every speaker advised to undergo accent modification or accent reduction. An accent is characterized by a set of phonological and prosodic variations that render a person’s speech distinctive. As such, accents reveal information about speakers’ national origin, regional affiliation, cultural or ethnic group membership, and possibly social class and educational level. The focus in this article is on accented speakers with known proficiency in spoken English. For many accented speakers, their accent is a

source of pride and ethnic or regional identity and comes bundled with rich linguistic and cultural experience. However, unfavorable reactions or negative perceptions from listeners toward linguistic variation, or undue pathologizing of accent differences, can cause psychological harm to a person (ASHA, 2011; Chakraborty et al., 2019; Derwing & Munro, 2009; Kim et al., 2019; Lippi-Green, 2012; Orelus, 2020; Roessel et al., 2018). This runs counter to a core ethical principle for SLPs to do no harm (ASHA, 2016a) and is inconsistent with culturally sustaining practices. The effects of linguistic discrimination can include microaggressions (Abdelaziz et al., 2021) such as colleagues in the workplace imitating an accent or correcting a speaker’s pronunciation during a presentation. Linguistic discrimination also can include macroaggressions, which can range from withholding a student’s clinical practicum placement due to an unfamiliar accent, to documenting an employee’s accent as problematic on a performance evaluation, to making grossly inaccurate assumptions about an accented speaker’s spoken or written competence in English, intelligence, and professional credentials or accomplishments (Chakraborty et al., 2019; Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010a, 2010b; Orelus, 2020; Pimentel, 2003). Other consequences of accentism may be perceived low self-efficacy as a professional, challenges in the workplace (Kim et al., 2019), poor evaluations during interviews (Deprez-Sims & Morris, 2010), and overall diminished career prospects (Carlson & McHenry, 2006; Cerrato, 2017; Timming, 2016).

Given that linguistic discrimination of accented speakers remains largely undocumented and underinvestigated in SLP, there are significant gaps in understanding the perceptions and lived experience of accented speakers who receive accent modification services offered by SLPs. We acknowledge that some accented speakers independently elect to receive accent services from SLPs and also may experience that such services are beneficial (see Pierson, 2021, in *The ASHA Leader*, for a recent example). Yet it is likely that even such seemingly volitional choice of accent services stems directly from experienced discrimination, association between accents and negative stereotypes, internalized stigma, and the anxiety about the negative effects of an accent on social or career mobility (Silman, 2021). In understanding accent services offered by SLPs and in seeking to be conscientious practitioners, it is necessary to reflect on how such services are framed and labeled, what specific techniques are used, and what the evidence is for the efficacy of accent services. Among SLPs, some terms more commonly used to describe accent services include *accent modification*, *accent reduction*, and *accent remediation* (Gu & Shah, 2019), whereas less commonly used terms are *accent conversion* (Felps et al., 2009) and *accent elimination* (Derwing & Munro, 2009). Each of these aforementioned terms reveals a power distance between those with acceptable and standard speech patterns

and those without while conveying that an accented speaker has to temper or dilute their speaker identity and acquire a different accent to be judged an acceptable communicator. Such subtractive framing has the unintended and harmful consequence of reinforcing a superiority or linguistic hegemony of mainstream or standard American English (AE) as well as conveying nonacceptance toward accented speakers whose first language (L1) is not English, or those who are World English speakers.

We contend that SLPs, as communication experts, need to interrogate their practice patterns when providing accent services and question the frequent deficit framing of these services as well as the continued use of terms that convey deficit thinking about accents. We ask SLPs to adopt an equity-minded, culturally sustaining stance and to advocate for affirmative, inclusive terms when working with accented speakers. One possible term we suggest is *accent expansion*. We suggest this term as one option given that the target of accent services is often to help a speaker to expand their existing speech production repertoire to learn new patterns of sound production, as well as lexical and phrasal stress. This concept of expansion is similar to what is known about expansion of phonetic maps and sound inventories, seen in L1 speakers who subsequently learn to speak a second language or L2. In the example of emerging bilingual speakers, features of an L2 are acquired in an additive manner while retaining the L1 as equally important. This idea has direct relevance in thinking about accents in that a speaker may similarly retain features of their unique accent while acquiring an additional accent for functional communication, as needed. In rethinking the terms used to describe accent services, we present an evolution of terminology and concepts around accent management, leading to our suggestions for alternate terms. In the next section, we provide the results of a scoping review and text mining analyses completed on the available published literature on accent management.

Revisiting Terminology

Search Methodology

Four databases (Scopus, MEDLINE, EMBASE, and CINAHL) were searched for peer-reviewed articles published between January 1, 1985, and July 31, 2020. A preliminary search revealed that studies reporting accent and speech pronunciation were first published in the mid-1980s; therefore, 1985 was selected as the starting date for the search. A social dialects position statement was developed by ASHA in 1983; however, we did not include this in the current literature search as it did not meet inclusion criteria for being a peer-reviewed journal publication, nor was accent discussed or addressed in this statement. Search terms relating to accents were culled from a small focus

group and from key words in published, peer-reviewed articles and gray literature. It is noteworthy that we were not seeking to identify studies in which investigators documented the effects of native or nonnative accents on listener comprehension or test performance. Rather, our interest was to identify studies documenting the type and methodology of accent service provision. Specific keywords and search syntax were varied depending on the database search criteria and limits. Only journal articles published in English were included (books and gray literature were excluded). Table 1 outlines the search strategy used for the Scopus database, and Figure 1 presents our search procedures.

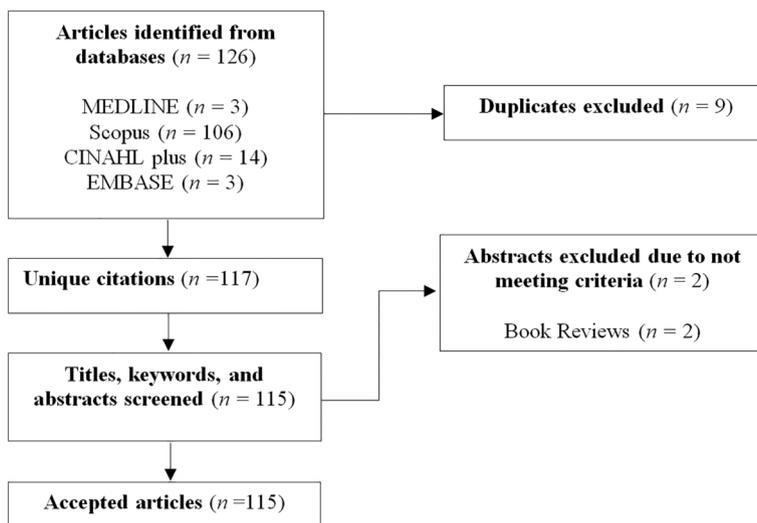
Data Handling and Analysis

Information about the title and year of publication from accepted articles (i.e., output of database searches) was imported into an Excel spreadsheet, used to tabulate data, and created frequency tables (see Figure 2). To investigate the evolution of terminology and research relating to accent over the past 4 decades, we divided this time window into four epochs. Preliminary analysis of year of publication revealed only two papers prior to 2000 (1986 and 1999); hence, these two papers were collapsed into pre-2005 (considering up to 2004 as Period 1), 2005–2009 (Period 2), 2010–2014 (Period 3), and 2015–2020 (Period 4). A text mining approach (a subfield of data mining) was used to identify the patterns, relationships, and changes in terminology and research themes across the four epochs

Table 1. Outline of search strategy and keyword combinations used in the Scopus database.

No.	Search strategy for the Scopus database	Results
1	TITLE-ABS-KEY("ELL" OR "English language learning" OR "EFL" OR "English as a foreign language" OR "ESL" OR "English as a second language" OR "WES*" OR "World English Speakers" OR "IES*" OR "International English Speakers" OR "accented English")	1,947,251
2	TITLE-ABS-KEY("accent" PRE/2 (modification OR management OR reduction OR elimination OR conversion OR expansion OR improvement OR correction OR adaptation OR "training" OR "addition" OR "neutralization" OR "elocution"))	339
3	TITLE-ABS-KEY("deaccentation")	116
4	TITLE-ABS-KEY("speech coaching")	4
5	TITLE-ABS-KEY("American" PRE/1 (pronunciation OR diction))	215
6	TITLE-ABS-KEY(("foreign language" OR English) PRE/2 "pronunciation" OR "training")	1,674
7	#2 OR #3 OR #4 OR #5 OR #6	2,322
8	("pronunciation" PRE/1 (learning OR training OR instruction OR teaching))	2,733
9	("intelligibility enhancement")	547
10	#8 OR #9	3,276
11	#1 AND #7 AND #10	106

Figure 1. Flowchart illustrating the search procedure.



(see Krishnamurthy & Balasubramaniam, 2019). Text mining was performed using the KH coder software (Ver.3. Beta 01c), which allowed transformation of text data into visual representations based on word associations (Krishnamurthy & Balasubramaniam, 2019; Nie & Sun, 2017). Specifically, a co-occurrence network analysis for words present in the article titles was performed. This yielded a graphic representation in which words are grouped together in color-coded clusters (i.e., closely associated themes) with word associations indicated via connecting lines

and the size of each node indicating frequency of occurrence (Krishnamurthy & Balasubramaniam, 2019; Nie & Sun, 2017; Takamatsu et al., 2018). This completed literature search resulted in the identification of 115 studies on accents and pronunciation in the last 3 decades, with a surge in publications in recent years (see Figure 2).

Figure 3 shows several clusters or themes evident in the co-occurrence network analysis. The first cluster (in yellow) was identified as the most prominent node, representing the highest frequency word being “pronunciation,” frequently

Figure 2. Distribution of published research in the area of speech accents since 1985.

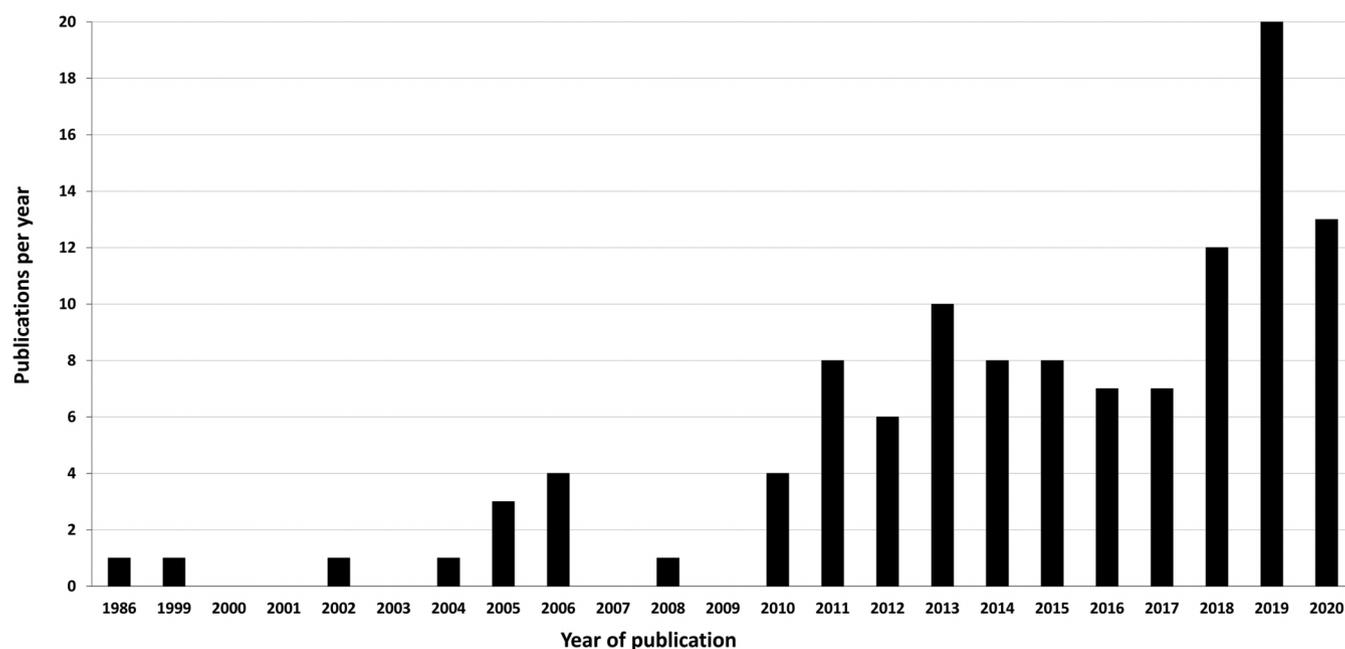
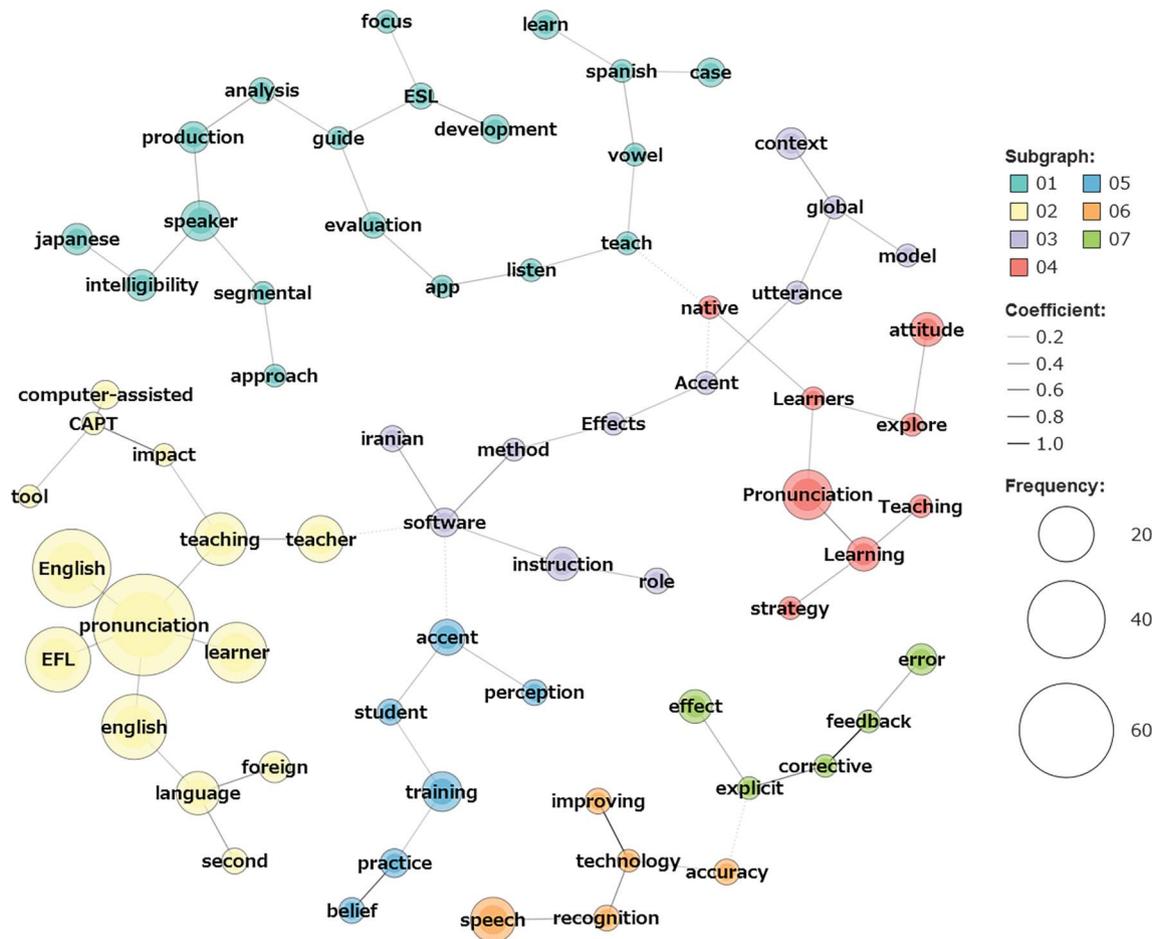


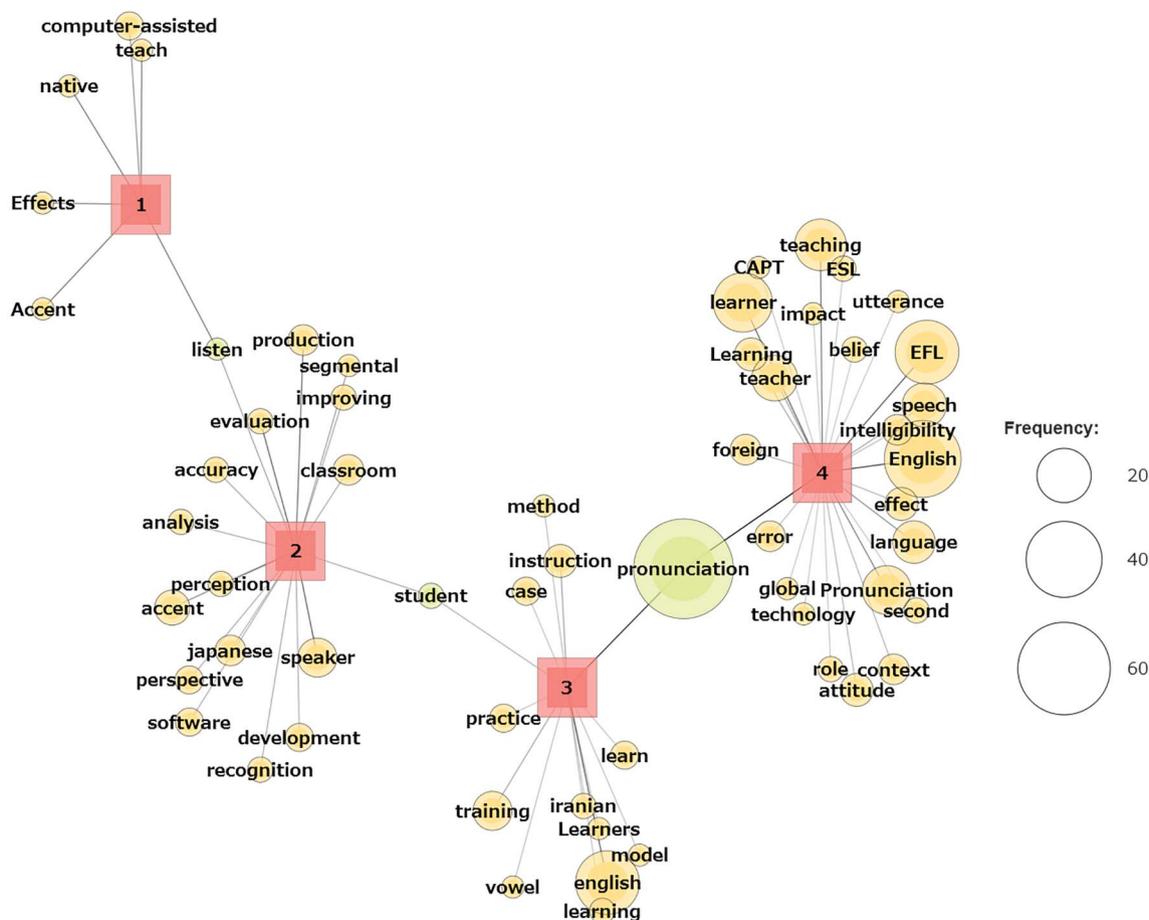
Figure 3. Co-occurrence network analysis for article titles published between January 1, 1985, and July 31, 2020. CAPT = computer-assisted pronunciation training; EFL = English as a foreign language; ESL = English as a second language.



associated with the words “English,” “teaching,” “teacher,” “EFL” (English as a foreign language), and “computer-assisted” pronunciation training (and accent reduction software). The second cluster (in red) or the next most frequently occurring words were related to “pronunciation,” “learner’s attitudes,” teacher’s “attitudes,” “learning” styles, and “strategy.” The theme for the third cluster of words (in turquoise) related to the investigation of pronunciation errors and speech intelligibility in “speakers” of Arabic, French, Japanese, Mandarin, Slavic, and Spanish. Smaller clusters were found around the word “accent” (or variations of this word, i.e., “accented” or “accents”) and related to student training (policies regarding students with accents in SLP programs), perceptions and attitudes toward accented speech (in Thai, Mandarin, Macedonian, and Japanese speakers), and the use of accent reduction software. An in-depth analysis of article titles revealed that the word “accent” was associated mostly with the words “reduction” or “modification” and not with positively oriented words such as change, adaptation, or expansion.

Figure 4 shows co-occurrence network analyses across four time epochs based on year of publication and reveals multiple interesting trends, research themes, and gaps in the current evidence base. Table 2 details extraction of key themes by epoch, with this extraction based on careful analysis and coding of themes and content by two independent raters (with interrater reliability exceeding 80%). Further analysis of the themes and content in these epochs were extracted from reading the abstracts, followed by reading the full articles (see Table 2). The earlier Periods 1 and 2 reveal emphasis on listener perceptions of accent, teaching approaches, and effects of length of residence on production accuracy. Interestingly, accent reduction software and computer-assisted accent modification programs were being used prior to 2009 (in Periods 1 and 2) yet not specifically by SLPs. Period 3 (2010–2014) revealed a shift toward studies in which authors report measures of documenting accent change, objective intelligibility measures, research studies to improve training methods, beliefs among English-as-a-second-language teachers and

Figure 4. Co-occurrence network analysis for article titles across four epochs based on year of publication (periods: 1 = pre-2004; 2 = 2005–2009; 3 = 2010–2014; 4 = 2015–2020). CAPT = computer-assisted pronunciation training; EFL = English as a foreign language; ESL = English as a second language.



learners, motivation and attitudes toward accented English, and an evolution of training techniques including use of software technology. Furthermore, Period 3 included studies that investigated brain and behavioral factors that influenced acquisition and learning of English pronunciation, again without particularly highlighting practices in SLP. A detailed analysis of publication titles from Period 4 (from 2015 to 2020) revealed an increase in technology-based themes (use of computer software, automatic speech recognition technology, use of social media, web-based, and android apps), efficacy testing of training methods, and a marked increase in studies focusing on personality factors, learner attitudes, foreign language pronunciation anxiety, psychosocial training, teacher beliefs and practices, and instructor tolerance toward accented English.

In summary, these text mining analyses reveal a clear shift away from output-oriented remediation programs (i.e., focused on pronunciation errors or improvement in intelligibility), aimed at correcting a speaker’s accent, and toward an increased understanding of the impact of accent

differences on the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of speakers and listeners. The persistent use of terms like *management* and *improvement* conveys subtractive or deficit thinking and a negative view of accents as needing to be managed or improved, in a manner more similar to thinking about a communication impairment. By comparison, use of the term *intelligibility enhancement* (Blake, 2020) is more indicative of SLPs’ understanding that accents are not communication disorders.

Terminology Used: Words Matter

Developing a consensus on terminology regarding accent services provided by SLPs is crucial because terminology communicates a certain mindset, orientation, and framing for delivering such services. In speech-language pathology, the terms consistently used when providing accent services are *accent modification*, *accent reduction*, *accent elimination*, *accent management*, and *intelligibility enhancement*. These

Table 2. Extraction of topic themes by epoch.

Epoch 1 Pre-2004 (<i>n</i> = 4 articles) Themes	Epoch 2 2005–2009 (<i>n</i> = 12 articles) Themes	Epoch 3 2010–2014 (<i>n</i> = 34 articles) Themes	Epoch 4 2015–2020 (<i>n</i> = 65 articles) Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training ESL teachers • Learning correct English pronunciation and pronunciation errors (segmental and suprasegmental) • Computer monitoring of accent • Attitudes toward and comprehension of foreign-accented speech 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training ESL teachers • Learning correct English pronunciation and pronunciation errors (segmental, suprasegmental) • Listening comprehension and perceptual training in ESL learners • Factors underlying accentedness: exposure to English speakers & length of residence • Listener judgment of accentedness and fluency in ESL speakers • Computer software programs to assist ESL pronunciation training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training ESL teachers • Learning correct English pronunciation and pronunciation errors (segmental, suprasegmental) • Pedagogical considerations and strategies • Intelligibility of accented pronunciation • Computer software to assist ESL pronunciation training and automatic recognition of pronunciation errors • ESL teacher beliefs and practices • ESL learner beliefs, motivation, and attitudes toward English accents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training ESL teachers • Learning correct English pronunciation and pronunciation errors (segmental, suprasegmental) • Listening comprehension and perceptual training for ESL learners • Pedagogical considerations & strategies • Intelligibility of accented pronunciation • Listener judgment of accentedness and fluency in ESL speakers • Computer software, social media (e.g., Twitter, Telegram) and web-based apps for ESL pronunciation training and automatic recognition of pronunciation errors • ESL teacher beliefs and practices • ESL learner and ESL teacher cognitive, affective, and behavioral attitudes toward accented English.

Note. ESL = English as a second language.

terms collectively convey a persistent use of a native speaker-based model, which ignores a global reality that English is spoken by millions of speakers worldwide. We submit that an equity-minded stance in providing accent services would include appreciation and respect for a speaker's heritage language/s, speaker identity, and communicative strengths, and deciding not to “prescribe” accent services.

Regarding the often language- and dialect-diverse history and experiences of accented speakers, clinicians offering accent services must have an understanding of the phonetic and phonological features of a speaker's L1 and the influence of L1 on speakers' L2 production (Behrman, 2017). As gleaned from our aforementioned scoping review, there has been a shift in focus from decreasing accentedness to increasing intelligibility in desired communicative contexts (Behrman, 2017; Blake, 2020) when providing accent services. Continuing use of terms, such as *modification*, *reduction*, or *elimination*, reveal a misunderstanding of accent services as being interventions that alter the phonetic and phonological features of a speaker's L1. Indeed, researchers have shown that perceptions of speaker intelligibility, or accentedness for that matter, are associated with important listener attributes such as age (Burda et al., 2003), language background (Deprez-Sims & Morris, 2010), perceptual adaptation ability (Bradlow & Bent, 2008; Schertz et al., 2016), or presence of communication disorder such as aphasia or dementia (Burda et al., 2007; Mahendra et al., 1999). Whereas these listener attributes are not the focus of this particular article, it is the case that

speakers have to acquire some phonetic and phonological features of L2 as well as suprasegmental features in order to alter their accent and be more intelligible.

A key issue is whether terms like *accent modification*, *accent reduction*, or *accent elimination* are misnomers, as researchers have questioned whether accents can be completely changed or eliminated in adulthood (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996; Flege et al., 1995). We consider the term *intelligibility enhancement* (Blake, 2020) as a more accurate descriptor of services because of its emphasis on a shared responsibility for intelligibility, successful speaker-listener interactions, and on functional communication in context. On critical analysis, however, even this descriptor “intelligibility enhancement” is inadequate and misrepresentative because it fails to convey that an accented speaker is fully intelligible in their L1 (if not English) and also intelligible in their accented English or World English to speakers who share their linguistic or cultural background or who have been previously exposed to their accent.

We acknowledge that accent services can be complex, are a relatively newer addition to the scope of practice for SLPs, and are not supported by extensive research or exhaustive evidence. It is likely that a single frame of reference may not fully capture the depth and breadth of accent services as delivered by SLPs and other professionals (e.g., accent coaches). Given that accent services currently fall under the scope of practice of SLPs (ASHA, 2016b), we must adopt terminology that demonstrates our mindset of recognizing typical variations in speech and communication

rather than highlighting efforts to reduce, eliminate, or modify habitual speech patterns. Changing the terminology is critical because words have lasting power and shape a reality of bias and exclusion for those who speak with an accent. Importantly, changing terminology reveals our growing social consciousness as a discipline and signals a need to alter how these services are delivered in a client-centered manner.

In this article, we do not offer one singular choice of an alternate term to describe accent services. Rather, we pose contenders for deliberation that include (but are not limited to) accent expansion or, possibly, L2 pronunciation. We propose *accent expansion* because this term has a positive valence that potentially clarifies the value of accent services for those seeking such services, without overt or covert messaging that a client needs to modify, reduce, or eliminate their established pattern of speaking and functional communication. Beyond choice of terms, there is a larger discussion to be had about the techniques used and messaging delivered in accent services and the burden of proof needed from clinicians to demonstrate that services offered are efficacious, as documented by objective measures and client-reported outcomes. We do not offer a final decision in the right term or the preferred term to be used within speech-language pathology for accent services or adjudicate at this time on whether SLPs should or should not offer accent services. Such firm directions require substantial research, ongoing discussion, critical reflection, and thoughtful decision-making, which is supported by an incisive understanding of the barriers created unintentionally for accented speakers and professionals in our discipline. We take our place to extend an invitation to SLPs to critically reflect on accent services, their framing, and the weight of terms used in everyday practice. Going forward, any new terms or framing for accent services must come from a place of cultural humility and other relevant cultural considerations while clearly conveying that:

1. SLPs will affirm that accents are not disorders and are an inherent and welcome feature of speaker differences and global variability among English speakers.
2. Delivery of accent services should be grounded in an appreciation of natural cross-linguistic variation and recognize that pronunciation of L1 (and its effects on L2) or pronunciation of a distinct World English is a speaker's strength and an index of their linguistic capital.
3. Accent services should be offered only when volitionally chosen by speakers, and clinicians should support client autonomy in goal setting (Feinstein-Whittaker et al., 2012) as well as choice of functional contexts where more intelligibility is sought.
4. Clinician effort should include increasing communicative success by raising awareness about the phonetic and phonological contrasts between L1 or

World English versus those in AE, as well as considering the larger role of cross-cultural adaptation to communication skills in which both listeners and speakers must engage.

Conclusions

SLPs need to adopt an emancipatory and culturally sustaining stance that welcomes speakers to expand their accent repertoire if they so prefer, without obligating them to “modify” or “reduce” an accent that is a distinct part of their identity. Clinicians need to be more intentional about inclusive, affirmative language when providing accent services. Such services, when framed properly and informed by evidence, can be positive and supportive of speakers learning to communicate effectively while navigating cross-cultural interactions. Careful attention and reflection about ethical practice is necessary so that accent services do no harm, are not mandated, and are not delivered in a punitive manner suggesting that one form of spoken English is superior or implying that there may be consequences for the speaker or professional if they declined accent services. As SLPs, scholars, and educators, we are concerned about equity, inclusion, language rights, and barriers for diverse professionals precisely at a time when our profession urgently needs more diversity among its practitioners. Therefore, when working with persons seeking accent services, it is necessary to reject terms that stigmatize accents and center speakers' cultural identity and heritage languages, their linguistic and global capital, and their preferences. We invite SLPs to critically reflect on accent services and reevaluate the weight of terms used in everyday practice.

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