Beyond the standard: Unfamiliar English accents slow down lexical access in learners

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English language teaching typically prioritises standard accents, most notably Southern British English (SBE) and General American (GA). However, real-world communication frequently involves exposure to non-standard varieties, including native regional variation. While the perception of regional accents has been extensively studied in native (L1) listeners, comparatively little research has examined how foreign language (L2) learners process regional variation in their target language. Existing L2 work has largely adopted a sociolinguistic lens, focusing on learners' ability to identify or understand dialects in read or spontaneous speech (Lam & O'Brien, 2014; Schoonmaker-Gates, 2017, 2018).

More recently, Yaw and Ferronato (2025) directly tested comprehensibility, intelligibility and acceptability of Northern, Central and Southern Italian dialects in L2 listeners, showing that Southern Italian ranked lowest on all measures. Although contact with the target language predicted comprehensibility, accent familiarity did not. These findings demonstrate that regional variation can reduce intelligibility for L2 learners. However, no study to date has examined, at a psycholinguistic level, how dialectal variation affects one of the most fundamental processes underlying intelligibility: lexical access.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating how lexical access in French learners of English is modulated by standard and nonstandard accents. Forty-six native speakers of French studying English at university completed a speeded auditory lexical decision task. Participants had 2.5 seconds to decide whether an auditorily presented stimulus was a real English word. The stimuli consisted of 80 words and 80 matched nonwords. Words contained phonetic segments selected to maximise accentual differences across four varieties: two familiar accents (SBE and GA) and two unfamiliar accents (Northern English, NE, and white South African, SA). Target segments included vowels from multiple lexical sets (e.g., KIT, TRAP, GOAT), intervocalic /t/, initial /h/, and word-final <er>. Each accent was represented by two speakers (one male, one female), and stimuli were balanced across accents and segment types.

Results revealed significantly faster and more accurate lexical decisions for words produced in standard accents than in non-standard accents. Learners were both quicker (β = -0.17, p = .0002) and more accurate (β = 1.31, p < .0001) for SBE (94%, 500 ms) and GA (96%, 471 ms) than for NE (83%, 578 ms) and SA (87%, 547 ms).

These findings provide direct psycholinguistic evidence that dialectal variation impacts early lexical access in L2 listeners, even when later comprehension may be supported by contextual information or perceptual adaptation.

Reference list

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