

Charles University  
Faculty of Education  
Department of the English Language and Literature

## Bachelor Thesis

Perception of Russian-accented Speech by Native and Non-native Speakers  
of English

Vnímání ruského přízvuku rodilými a nerodilými mluvčími anglického  
jazyka

Alina Tumshevits

Supervisor: Mgr. Kristýna Červinková Poesová, Ph.D.

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## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this bachelor thesis titled “Perception of Russian-accented speech by native and non-native speakers of English” is my original work and no other sources than those listed on the works cited page were used in its compilation. I did not use this thesis for obtaining the same or any other degree.

Prague, April 17, 2019

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Alina Tumshevits

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## **Anotace**

Táto práce zkoumá vnímání angličtiny s ruským přízvukem rodilými a nerodilými mluvčími anglického jazyka. Teoretická část zahrnuje definice nejdůležitějších pojmů týkajících se řeči s přízvukem a poskytuje přehled nejvýznamnějších studií v oblasti vnímání přízvuku. Táto část se taky zaměřuje na ruskou angličtinu a stereotypy, které s ní souvisí. Praktická část obsahuje popis výzkumu provedeného prostřednictvím percepčního testu. Jeho cílem bylo stanovit jak ruský přízvuk je vnímán rodilými a nerodilými mluvčími anglického jazyka. V průběhu výzkumu sedm mluvčích s různými stupni ruského přízvuku byli nahráni při čtení textu v anglickém jazyce. Vybrané položky poté byly hodnoceny rodilými a nerodilými mluvčími anglického jazyka. Získané výsledky byly analyzovány a následně použity k potvrzení či popření hypotéz stanovených na začátku výzkumu.

## **Klíčová slova**

Přízvuk, ruský přízvuk v angličtině, srozumitelnost, výslovnost, vnímání přízvuku

## **Abstract**

This thesis focuses on the perception of Russian-accented speech by native and non-native speakers of the English language. The theoretical part gives definitions of the most important notions connected to accented speech and reviews some of the most prominent studies conducted in the field of accent perception. It also focuses on the Russian use of the English language and stereotypes connected to it. The practical part contains a small-scale research project conducted by means of a perception test. The aim of the research was to scrutinize the way a strong Russian accent and a mild Russian accent are perceived by native and non-native speakers of the English language. In the course of the research seven Russian speakers with different degrees of accents were recorded reading a text in English. Subsequently, selected samples were evaluated by native and non-native respondents. The results obtained from the perception test were analyzed and used to prove or disprove the hypotheses formulated at the beginning of the research.

## **Key words**

Accent, Russian-accented English, intelligibility, comprehensibility, pronunciation, accent perception

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## **Introduction**

The manifestation of a foreign accent is a topical issue for many learners of languages and especially immigrants. An accent can tell other people a lot about your background and origin. In many cases it happens that people subconsciously make certain assumptions about one's personality based solely on the way they speak. Therefore, an accent may make you feel insecure in everyday situations.

A native-like accent is not necessarily perceived as the ultimate goal by all language learners, although many of us still strive to speak a foreign language with a mild or no accent at all. As this is a very hard task to accomplish, only a few learners can do it. Therefore, when individuals fail at speaking without an accent, they may get discouraged from speaking the language completely. As far as the Russian accent is concerned it has never been presented positively in media and much of the time it is subject to mockery and denunciation.

These facts were the reason why I decided to scrutinize the topic of an accent. I was interested in finding out whether the importance of an accent is overestimated by some learners and teachers, or not. In addition to that, I was curious to learn how the strength of an accent affects the perception of one's speech and if the Russian-accented speech would really be perceived negatively by other speakers.

The theoretical part of this thesis focuses on the notion of accented speech and the importance of an accent and pronunciation in real life. It also reviews the most prominent studies that have been conducted on the topic of accent perception and describes such a phenomenon as language discrimination, which can occur in different areas of life. The last few segments of the theoretical part are concerned with the Russian-accented speech, its most prominent traits and the stereotypes connected to the Russian accent.

The practical part contains a small-scale research piece conducted with the use of a perception test. For the purpose of this, seven Russian speakers were recorded reading a text in English. Selected utterances from these recordings were later assessed by twenty non-native and twenty native speakers of English. The results of the test were used to evaluate the degree to which the strength of the accent influences the way an utterance is



perceived. The last chapter of the practical part describes the results of the test and attempts to uncover any correlations between the strength of an accent and the degree of perceived pleasantness.

## **Theoretical Part**

The theoretical part of this thesis focuses on the definition of accent and the implications of accented speech. In this portion, we review the results of some of the most prominent studies that have been conducted on the topic of accent perception. The segment will also take a closer look at Russian-accented speech and review a few studies which examined its perception by native and non-native speakers.

### **1 Accented Speech**

#### **1.1 Accent, Dialect and Intonation**

Putting it simply, accent is defined as the way in which the language is pronounced (Collins & Mees 2). O’Grady (1) provides a definition of accent from the sociolinguistic and geographic perspective, considering it as “the cumulative auditory effect of those features of pronunciation that identify where an individual is from regionally or socially, or identify the speaker’s occupation or social class.” Accents can be used to judge upon a person’s belonging to a particular culture, country, or social group, shaping the particular manner of such a person’s speech. Differences in pronunciation can still exist between representatives of the same culture, yet the common features can still be seen on a larger scale.

Accents should not be confused with dialects. According to Drew (101), a dialect can be defined as a language variety characterized by its own vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. A dialect should always be considered as a variant of a language inherent in a particular geographical area. In these terms, it can be stated that a dialect is different from an accent, as it is a broader term: accents are limited to the field of pronunciation, while dialects also extend to grammar and vocabulary.

It is also important to mention the notion of intonation as it is a very important aspect of speech, which greatly influences the way the speech is perceived. Wells (1) defines intonation as the melody of speech. While studying intonation, students usually learn how and when the pitch of voice changes from low to high and vice versa. They also learn how it can be used to convey certain linguistic and pragmatic meaning. According to Wells,

native speakers are familiar with non-native speakers having difficulty pronouncing certain sounds. Therefore, they are used to making allowances for segmental errors. However, they do not make allowances for errors in intonation, as they are simply unaware of them. Intonation sometimes causes more misunderstanding than do pronunciational errors.

Despite the previous fact, intonation is most of the time neglected by teachers as they lack knowledge of how to teach it and learners fail to learn it. Some of the language learners might pick up the correct intonation themselves, but certainly, some learners are unable to. The problem is that any intonation pattern in English is possible. However, each pattern can have a different meaning and sometimes it happens that learners are not able to use these patterns correctly to express the meaning they intend to express. Therefore, it is important to teach both pronunciation and intonation in order to avoid future misunderstandings and increase the effectivity of communication among all speakers.

Before we delve into the issue of accent importance, it is essential to define several aspects of non-native speech and those are accentedness, intelligibility and comprehensibility.

## **1.2 Accentedness, Intelligibility and Comprehensibility**

According to Derwing (554) accentedness should be defined as the listener's perception of how precisely the speaker pronounces an utterance in comparison to native speech. In their studies, Munro and Derwing typically use human raters who evaluate the accentedness of speech on a 9-point scale, where, for example, "1" is no accent and "9" is an extremely strong accent.

Comprehensibility and intelligibility have to be viewed as separate, but related dimensions of pronunciation. They both can be confused with "listening comprehension", which is a much broader notion. According to Derwing and Munro (1995, p. 76) intelligibility can be defined as "the extent to which a particular utterance is actually understood". In order to measure intelligibility of an utterance in their research Munro and Derwing used a listener transcription technique. They asked listeners to transcribe short samples of different lengths, which usually contained 4 to 19 words. The intelligibility rate was estimated as the percentage of correctly transcribed words. Even though, two foreign-accented

utterances can be fully understood and intelligible, one of them might require more processing effort from a listener, meaning that they might need more time to understand what was said. This aspect is called comprehensibility. It is defined as the degree of difficulty that the listener experiences in attempting to understand the utterance. In the studies by Munro and Derwing, the comprehensibility is measured by means of a 9-point scale where 1 is extremely easy to understand and 9 is impossible to understand.

As stated by Derwing and Munro (1997, p. 3), the comprehension of a text as pronounced by different speakers is affected not only by pronunciation itself, but also by the correctness of grammatical, syntactic, and lexical constructions used. A study run by the authors testifies that accentedness, intelligibility, and comprehensibility play an important role and are all interrelated, yet they are not equivalent. Thus, while some aspects of an accent can be salient for native-speakers, they do not necessarily affect the overall intelligibility of a non-native speaker's speech significantly. Derwing and Munro come to a conclusion that "The discrepancy between perceived comprehensibility ratings and transcription success suggests that some accented but fully intelligible utterances may require additional effort or processing time." (Derwing and Munro 12). According to the study, the accent ratings delivered by native speakers are harsher compared to comprehensibility ratings, which are in turn higher when compared to intelligibility ratings.

Ballard and Winke (126) also note that speech is comprehensible when small cognitive effort is required on the part of the listener. Intelligibility can be assessed more objectively, as it relates to the accuracy of the speaker's language with, for example, errors in transcriptions. An accent does not necessarily affect the quality of comprehensibility and intelligibility, yet it is also dependent on the degree and type of the speaker's accent. As the authors suggest, for ESL students, all the aforesaid components, i.e. accentedness, intelligibility, and comprehensibility, are important, as they affect to a certain extent how effectively the information will be perceived and mastered by the students. In a study carried out by Ballard and Winke, it was affirmed that intelligibility and then comprehensibility are the most important factors in terms of the ultimate understanding and processing of given information. In these terms, accentedness is less important. However, accentedness matters taking into account the degree of students' adaptation to

the speaker's accent. If students are familiar with this accent, its role is negligible. On the contrary, if this accent is unfamiliar to them, its effects for the ultimate understanding of a set of information grow significantly. As the authors conclude, "The more understandable the accent, the more acceptable the speaker was perceived as a teacher," which correlates with previous studies testifying that accent familiarity is interconnected with easier comprehension.

As far as English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) education is concerned, native-like accent used to be a priority before. However, after the studies on accentedness, intelligibility and comprehensibility were presented, it stopped being the aim for learners and teachers. According to James, as cited in Gilakjani (2), the acceptability of pronunciation can be described in three basic levels. In level 1, what the person is saying is not understandable to other people. In this level, communication is not effective. In level 2, what the person is saying can be understood, but the speech is not pleasant to listen to because of its heavy accentedness. Even though communication in this level is possible, it can affect understanding. In level 3, the speaker is understood and their speech is acceptable to listen to. Therefore, the level 3 is something that teachers of the English language and their students should aim at.

Therefore, based on the findings of this part, it can be concluded that in ESL and EFL education, the primary role is played by intelligibility and comprehensibility, yet accentedness should not be neglected either.

### **1.3 Factors that Influence the Strength of an Accent**

Before we delve into the issue of accent perception it is worth understanding what stands behind an accent and if there exists the possibility to reduce an accent. A study by Abu-Rabiya and Iliyan (165) shows that non-native speakers who are fully immersed into an environment of native speakers may find it easier to cope with their accent and to minimize its manifestations in speech. Speaking of immigrants, the authors note that the age of arrival in the foreign state and the availability of friends belonging to the local culture play an important role in defining the time required for achieving the minimization of an accent,

along with the quality of this process. Also, the researchers note that exposure to the foreign language is essential (reading, communication, passive learning, and so on).

According to Flege, as cited in Zárte-Sández (229), the age at which one starts learning a foreign language is not so important, in contrast to the opinion proposed by Abu-Rabiya and Iliyan. The researcher posits that the most important factor in accent reduction is the formal instruction obtained, namely the due approach to pronunciation accuracy and knowledge of the foreign language's phonological system with its specifics. However, just as the previous researchers, Flege affirms that the intensity of contact with native speakers is an important factor predefining the ultimate intensity of manifestation of the accent.

In addition to these factors of secondary nature (education, social environment, etc.), it should be understood that there are primary factors beyond the non-native speaker's control, which affect their accent. As Chakraborty (57-58) explains, such factors include the national origin of the non-native speaker and their belonging to a particular social group from birth. Countries and cultures' phonological systems differ, which has its reflection on the physiological level: the speech apparatus of people belonging to such different cultures is adapted into their particular language. As a result, they cannot be so effective in pronouncing particular sounds compared to native speakers of foreign languages, where such sounds are different from their mother tongue. This factor's impact can be decreased in the course of learning and imitation of native speakers' speech, but it cannot be eliminated fully, and thus remains a distinctive characteristic of the non-native speaker's language. A controversial issue is also the impact of racial belonging of speech, as they are associated with genetic features of human speech apparatus. As for social identity, it should be noted that different accents can be inherent of people belonging to different social layers. The social identity theory also serves for explaining the tensions, which can occur between native and non-native speakers based on sociolinguistic preconditions. This aspect of accented speech will be discussed further.

## 1.4 The Perception of Accented Speech

Analyzing the specificities of accents, Lev-Ari and Keysar (1093) point out that all non-native speakers have an accent, which can be pronounced to some degree. The manifestations of a non-native speaker's accent are twofold: on the one hand, it serves as a signal distinguishing the non-native speaker from the community of people for whom this particular language is their mother tongue; on the other hand, the presence of an accent makes it harder for recipients to understand the speech, i.e. to process it effectively. As a result, the authors note that accents can play the role of a barrier between native and non-native speakers, and the former often perceive an accent as a sign of being foreign, not belonging to their cultural environment or to their community. Foreign accents may arise pejorative connotations and contribute to making wrongful assumptions about a speaker (Carlson & McHenry 71).

Many studies have scrutinized the perception of non-native speech. Most of them have shown that an accent can affect the way the person is perceived by other people, not just in terms of their language abilities, but also in terms of their personality.

In the research by Lev-Ari & Keysar (1094) it was found that statements spoken by people with accents were perceived as less credible. Accent affected the "processing fluency", or in other words the ease with which the speaker was understood, and instead of assessing a statement as harder to understand, subjects assessed it as less truthful.

Tsurutani (589-603) performed a research experiment in Japan. In the course of the study English speakers of Japanese had to record a text. Afterwards, their performance was evaluated by Japanese native speakers. However, not only were they asked to evaluate the degree of accentedness of their speech; they also had to evaluate their personal attributes such as patience, friendliness, intelligence, competence and etc. The results showed that the stronger the accent of the speaker was, the lower they were ranked in terms of their personal features. Generally, they were rated as less intelligent, kind and competent.

Based on these results, we can assume that people with accents might have fewer chances of receiving a job offer, as they might be perceived as less attractive in regards to their personality. Carlson and McHenry (70-83) in their study asked several human resources

(HR) specialists to evaluate the chances of different candidates to be chosen for a job position. Some of the candidates had a certain type of non-native accents; some of them had a native accent spread in the area where the research was conducted. Moreover, there were also candidates of different ethnicities. The researchers found that ethnicity did not matter much for HR specialists and did not have any effect on their evaluation. However, subjects with stronger accents received considerably lower rankings, i.e. they were considered as unlikely candidates for getting the position. In that particular study, the type of job was not specified and candidates were presumed to have similar qualifications.

Another quite interesting research piece was conducted at the University of Georgia by Donald L. Rubin and Kim A. Smith (337-353). The study had a larger scope of interest and scrutinized many aspects of why non-native teaching assistants are undervalued by students. Here, the students never hesitate to skip lectures given by non-native teaching assistants. In the study, undergraduate students were asked to evaluate the lecture given by a non-native university instructor. At the same time, they were given a picture of the lecturer. What researchers discovered was that the degree of perceived accentedness was higher when students were given a picture of an Asian woman, a person of a different ethnicity. In addition to that, the higher the degree of this perceived accentedness was, the lower her teaching abilities were ranked. These results do not fully coincide with findings of Rubin and Smith, which state that ethnicity does not play an important role in evaluation of a speaker's personality, and show us that the perception of the accent is sometimes influenced by other factors that are not connected to speech, in our case ethnicity. People tend to have certain assumptions about particular nationalities and ethnicities, which makes them, to some level, prejudiced towards certain people. That is why the existence of stereotypes about certain nationalities can distort the way people of these nationalities are perceived when speaking English and can hinder them from having an effective and pleasant communicative process.

### **1.5 The Definition of Language Discrimination and its Occurrence in Real Life**

According to the website Workplace Fairness (2019), language discrimination can be defined as the unfair treatment of an individual based solely upon the characteristics of



their speech; such as, accent, size of vocabulary, and syntax. It can also involve a person's ability or inability to use one language instead of another. Currently, it is an official type of discrimination, which means that it really exists at the workplace and in real life. It is therefore worth examining where this discrimination stems from.

Lippi-Green (11-12) notes that all languages are equal in linguistic terms. This does not mean that all languages have the same tools and cover the same number of words. Each particular language adapts to the conditions of living of its bearers. For instance, in tropical countries' languages, there can be no words for denoting snow, just because snow as a climatic phenomenon does not exist in these geographic areas. According to the researchers, these facts are often used by non-linguists for judging upon particular languages based on discriminatory terms, even though in fact each language has its own most effective range of features and tools. This is where conflicts can arise between native and non-native speakers.

Chakraborty (58) points out that ethnocentrism is a central concept in understanding the opposition between native and non-native speakers. According to the researcher, "Deviations from those self-constructed or socially-constructed reference points are usually viewed unfavorably by ethnocentric people and will be reactively considered inferior or aberration." Interpreting this statement, it can be conceived that negative perceptions of non-native speakers can arise on the part of native speakers solely on the sense of group belonging. Thus, people who are perceived as foreigners based on their accent can be excommunicated from the native-speakers' community or not accepted into it. Obviously, the stronger a community's ethnocentric sentiment, the greater opposition can be expected toward non-native speakers, whose accent acts as sign of their non-belonging to the local community.

A practical manifestation of the importance of accent in perceptions of non-native speakers is shown in the a study by Lalwani, Lwin and Li (146-148), who note that in marketing and advertising, companies prefer acting with native speakers in each particular community where they run their business. The main reason is credibility: people with a foreign accent tend to be perceived much less enthusiastically by local native speakers due to the aforesaid sense of excommunication. Another empirical confirmation is the information found on the

website of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2019), which states specifically that employers cannot judge on whether an employee should be hired solely based on their accent (except for cases when this accent prevents from normal job performance). This testifies that the issue of discrimination or at least negative perceptions of non-native speakers by native speakers exist in various fields of a given environment.

This represents a kind of discrimination performed based on a person's accent and is a specific phenomenon referred to as accent discrimination. According to Seiner (430-431), accent discrimination is becoming more and more widespread today as a result of the growing flows of international migration. As tensions between the representatives of local cultures and incoming migrants are rising, the non-native speakers' accent has become one of the main identifying factors to put the barriers into effective communication. In the legal realm, democratic countries seek to minimize accent discrimination, for instance, by establishing rules for employment. However, this issue can hardly be controlled in the realm of social life, and together with other identifying factors such as racial belonging, skin color, gender, etc., an accent can be used as an important discriminatory feature.

The factors noted above are interconnected closely with underlying stereotypical perceptions. As noted by Lev-Ari and Keysar (1094), when native-speakers are provided with statements from non-native speakers, their truth perceptions are intertwined with their stereotypes regarding a particular foreign culture. The lack of belief in another cultures representative's statements can be preconditioned by the historical specificities of interaction with this culture, knowledge about it, the values promoted by such culture, and a number of other important features, yet in any case, a significantly lower credibility level will exist compared to the native speaker's own culture. Moreover, as the researchers claim, "even when speakers just deliver information from others, people perceive this information as less truthful when the speaker has an accent. They misattribute the difficulty of understanding the speech to the truthfulness of the statement." Therefore, it can be stated with certainty that accent-based stereotypical perceptions significantly affect the quality of communication and message interchange between the representatives of different cultures or nations. An important finding from aforementioned study by Lev-Ari and Keysar is the statement that processing difficulty plays only a minor role here: in most cases throughout the experiments, native speakers perceived non-native speaker's statements not as hard to

process, but rather as less truthful (based on the stereotypical perceptions of such accents). This allows drawing a conclusion, that in such cases, the presence of an accent acts primarily not as a linguistic, but rather as a sociolinguistic factor.

Jaber and Hussein (80) also note that stereotypical perceptions do not necessarily have to be negative, but they can rather be associated with the common perceptions of a culture or language in foreign cultures. Thus, according to the researchers, in a study where native English speakers were offered to listen to speech recordings of French, Japanese, and Jordanian women, most of them evaluated the French speaker as more intelligent, smart, and attractive. The most striking differences were observed in terms of the perceptions of pleasantness and friendliness, as most respondents rated these aspects as significantly higher for the French speaker. Jaber and Hussein explain that this occurs due to the fact that both the French culture and the French language are significantly more familiar to English native speakers compared to the culture and language of either Japan or Jordan. This shows again that individual's sociolinguistic stereotypes play an important role in their perceptions of non-native speakers and the process of communication with them.

Based on the findings of this chapter we can conclude that the issue of an accent is quite relevant nowadays. With the growing number of English speakers the potential for the language and, particularly, accent discrimination grows. Which means that accent really does effect the perception of one's personality and, therefore, can influence the quality of some individual's lives.

## **2 Russian Accent in English**

Having reviewed the perception and different implications of non-native speech, we will now take a closer look at Russian-accented English and its traits, the status of the English language in Russia and the stereotypes associated with Russian speakers.

## 2.1 The Most Prominent Traits of a Russian Accent

The Russian language belongs to the East Slavic branch of languages in the Indo-European family, whereas English, together with such languages as German, Dutch and some others, is a part of West Germanic branch (Crystal 376). As Russian and English do not belong to the same language group, it is natural that they have certain differences in syntax and phonetics. Therefore, the process of learning English causes more difficulty to Russian speaking learners in comparison to those whose first language belongs to the West Germanic branch.

In this part, we will list some of the most common features of a Russian accent and the sounds that might cause trouble for Russian speakers. All the features were described in the “Learner English” written by Michael Swan and Bernard Smith.

As stated in Swan (146-148), the major features that distinguish the Russian sound system from the English system are the absence of the short-long vowel differentiation and the absence of diphthongs.

### 2.1.1 Vowels

i:	ɪ	e	æ	eɪ	aɪ	ɔɪ
ɑ:	ɒ	ɔ:	ʊ	aʊ	əʊ	ɪə
u:	ʌ	ɜ:	ə	eə	ʊə	aɪə
						aʊə

Figure 1. Vowel sounds that cause difficulty for Russian speakers (Adapted from Swan 146)

The shaded sounds in the table are the sounds that have equivalents or close equivalents in Russian, so they do not generally cause much trouble and are not seriously distorted by speakers. The sounds that are not shaded have no equivalents in Russian and usually cause difficulty not just for beginners, but also for advanced speakers.

The most common mistakes in pronunciation of vowels:

- The sound /ɜ: /, which does not exist in Russian, is usually replaced with /e/ or Russian /o/. The pronunciation of such words as work, worth and etc. is especially difficult.
- The sound /ɑ: / is usually replaced by the frontal Russian /a/. This is due to the fact that in Russian there is no differentiation between short and long vowels, so eventually the length of most vowel sounds is shortened, especially when the vowel is unstressed.
- The sound /æ / is mostly replaced with /e /, which in most of cases leads to confusion in such pairs as sat and set.
- The sound /ɔ: / is replaced with a frontal Russian /o/ or sometimes diphthongised into /oo/. A confusion may arise in such words as caught and coat or bought and boat.
- Long vowels are sometimes pronounced too tensely, which leads to field being pronounced as filled and etc. The pronunciation of these kinds of pairs is especially hard to master even for advanced students.
- The diphthong /əʊ/ in English starts in a neutral position and then moves to /ʊ/, whereas Russian speakers often pronounce it as a single /o/ or sometimes /oo/.

### 2.1.2 Consonants

p	b	f	v	θ	ð	t	d
s	z	ʃ	ʒ	tʃ	dʒ	k	g
m	n	ŋ	l	r	j	w	h

Figure 2. Consonant sounds that cause difficulty for Russian speakers (Adapted from Swan 147)

As far as the consonant sounds are concerned, there also quite many differences between languages. In the picture above, shaded sounds are the ones that have equivalents or near

equivalents in Russian, which means they are not usually mispronounced, however, some of them usually reveal the Russian accent. The unshaded sounds in the table do not have equivalents in Russian and prove very difficult to pronounce.

The most common mistakes in pronunciation of consonants:

- Sounds /ð/ and /θ/ are hardly ever pronounced correctly among beginners. They are usually replaced with /z/ and /s/. At the beginning of the learning process, most students pronounce think /θɪŋk/ as /sɪŋk/, which confuses many English speakers if they are unfamiliar with the Russian accent.
- The sound /ŋ/ is usually replaced with Russian /n/. Therefore, in such words as wing, the pronunciation could be /wɪŋg/.
- The difference between the sounds /w/ and /v/ is usually almost imperceptible, so such words as vest and west can be easily mixed up.
- The sounds /t/, /d/, /l/, /n/ are often dentalized, which makes them sound foreign, even though the meaning is not usually distorted.
- In Russian, such sounds as /b/, /d/, /g/ in the final position are usually devoiced. This habit is most of the time transmitted to L2 and such words as pig and lab can be pronounced as pick and lap.
- The sounds /p/, /t/, /k/ are not aspirated in Russian. As a result, the beginnings of the words sound differently. Such words as pit and come might sound more as bit and gum to a native speaker.
- Russian speakers can replace /h/ with a harsher sound. It is due to the fact that Russian equivalent sound is pronounced with more fricative noise.
- Learners also tend to palatalize most English consonants before the front vowels, such as /ɪ/, /i:/, /e/, /eɪ/, /ɪə/, in the same way it usually happens in Russian. For example, in the word tea the sound /t/ can resemble /ts/.

- Quite frequently dark /ɫ/ (as found in the word *full*) replaces clear /l/ (as in the word *light*).
- The sound /ʃ/ is always quite dark. In English, this sound is slightly palatalized, whereas in Russian it is not.

### 2.1.3 Clusters, stress and intonation

In terms of clusters, there are many ways in which speech with Russian accent can differ from the English native speech. One of the most important features is that Russians tend to insert the neutral schwa /ə/ in combinations /tɫ/, /dɫ/, /tɲ/, /dɲ/. For example, little /'lɪtɫ/ is pronounced as /'lɪtəl/ and etc.

Russian stress patterns are also variable the same was as they are in English, however, secondary stress is usually something that many Russian speakers have difficulty identifying and applying. For example, the word competition, which should be pronounced as /,kɒmpə'tɪʃ(ə)n/, with Russian accent becomes /kəmpə'tɪʃ(ə)n/.

According to Sedgefield (481), intonation in Russian plays the same role as it does in English. It is used to add expressiveness to words and modify the meaning of a sentence. However, according to Swan (149), “the Russian low fall is not deep enough and the low rise does not begin low enough and tends to shoot up abruptly”. This unconvergence in application of intonation may sometimes cause misunderstanding and sound strange to listeners.

## 2.2 Russian Stereotypes in Media

Although there is not much evidence that a Russian accent is perceived as rude, the negative image of a Russian person has been employed by the media for a long time and helped to create many negative stereotypes about Russians. We think it is important to find out where and why it started. As these stereotypes connected to personality can lead to a negative perception of all people with traits of the Russian accent.

Smith (12-13) suggests that the stereotypes of Russians first appeared in the US media and gained rapid spreading after the end of World War II and were likely the consequences of the US' fear of Stalin's further aggression in Europe. As Smith (12) affirms, "it instigated Americans to desire to establish a view of the Soviet Union as "uncivilized". The subsequent development of the Cold War contributed to the development of these stereotypes. The arms race led to the intensification of fears among the Americans. However, in addition to these geopolitical factors, the geographical distance between the US and Russia, and the lack of knowledge of the Russian culture among the Americans played an important role in the popularization of such stereotypical views. For example, a common stereotype of Russians, which can be found in American media, is the image of Russian men as affiliated with the Russian intelligence services.

As Sharivker (2015) points out, this archetype comes from the times of the Soviet Union and the operation of the KGB. During the times of the Cold War, the media promoted a message on the infiltration of Russian spies in the United States to illustrate the threats they pose to the Americans. This leads to negative perceptions of Russians as enemies of the West. While Russian men are often portrayed as affiliated with the KGB, Russian women are often depicted in the US media as sexually promiscuous women, mail order brides, and so on. This leads to the popularity of Russian women's negative image, which in its turn creates an image of the harsh social situation in the Russian Federation.

These stereotypes remained rooted in American society even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which can be explained by the continued geopolitical rivalry between the US and the Russian Federation. Brook (2014) suggests that an important role in supporting such stereotypes is played by Hollywood movies, where a common image of a Russian is a 'bad guy'. The researcher notes that the popularization of these images in present day is due to Vladimir Putin's stance and aggression in Europe, which makes the Americans fear Russia's uncontrolled aggression. Verlaat (2018) adds that the 2016 elections scandal showed to the Americans that Russians are ready to affect the American security system, which only promoted further a common image of Russians as enemies and threats to US security in American media channels. Nikitina (5) points out that Russians are often portrayed as barbarians.



This stereotype is common, as Russians are depicted as people living in an obsolete country, with outdated technologies, which have an inferior level of culture. This preconditions the existence of negative sentiment toward Russian immigrants, especially as those are illustrated as USSR lovers who have negative feelings toward America. Vereykina (2015) suggests that this barbaric image is exaggerated further in American movies by the fact that all Russian villains have bold and easily recognizable accents with bad English pronunciation. Apparently, this is done in order to highlight the differences between the Americans and the Russians while bringing to the foreground the lack of education compared to the Americans. These stereotypes affirmed by American media quite rapidly reached other countries as well.

### **2.3 The Status of English Language in Russia**

The stereotypes connected to Russians might not quite be realistic, but as far as the Russian accent is concerned, the stereotypes are not entirely groundless. The history of teaching and learning English and other foreign languages in Russia has never been homogeneous. The education, its content and form, has always been affected by economic and political state of the government, which has never been stable. Therefore, it is important to review how the situation in Russia has been changing over the last hundred years.

During the times of Peter the Great speaking foreign languages was fashionable and bilingual children were not a rarity, as many children were brought up and educated by foreign tutors. According to Ivanova & Tivyaeva (307-308), the revolution of 1917 brought about many changes in all spheres of life, including education. In the early Soviet times, the state was isolated economically and politically, so there was no need for citizens to learn foreign languages as there was no way for them to apply this knowledge to real life. Later, at the times of industrialization, there appeared a need to study latest technological advances and the Soviet youth was encouraged to start learning foreign languages. This in turn, brought language to high schools and universities where foreign language classes became compulsory. Moreover, schools of a new type were opened, where the instruction was held in a foreign language. Authors also mention that during the Cold War this system suffered as international communication was rather limited and as a result, no one was

interested in professionals with good language skills. The situation only started to change in mid-50s when the state experienced a rise in international trade, education and intercultural events. Due to this unstable political situation, the need for foreign languages has never been steady, which hindered the improvement in the knowledge of the English language. It is also important to note that nowadays in many countries surrounding Russia, Russian language is still widely spread, which allows Russians to communicate in their own language with people from other countries. According to Swan (145), 80 million people in the former republics of Soviet Union speak Russian as their first language and 40 million in these newly independent countries speak Russian as their second language. This is one of the reasons why not all people feel the need to acquire a new language. However, the situation is most certainly changing now, as more people are interested in intercultural communication and traveling.

The education system has also undergone many changes. Since the Soviet times, new teaching methods have been introduced, including the communicative approach, which is still the most popular approach in teaching English. The new system of teaching languages is different to the Soviet system in that it uses a more student-oriented approach and the amount of commercial institutions offering English courses increased tremendously. However, despite all the changes the level of English proficiency in Russia remains quite low. According to the EF English Proficiency Index (22), in 2018, Russia occupied the 42nd place among all the countries covered by the EF survey and 27th place among the European countries, whereas the Czech Republic placed the 17th. The explanations offered by scholars are that in educational institutions more emphasis is placed on reading and translating and not enough emphasis is placed on communicative skills (Frumina & West 19). This can be considered as a significant drawback of the existing system in which active skills, such as speaking and writing, are disregarded and more attention is given to passive skills

#### **2.4 Perception of the Russian accent**

Despite the fact that the stereotypes connected to the image of a Russian person and their accent are so common, not much research has been carried out in the area of the Russian

accent in English. Therefore, there is not enough evidence to assert that a Russian accent is generally perceived negatively. However, some of the researchers who studied Russian accents provide some evidence in the support of it being perceived rather negatively.

A study held by Meyer, Dunajski and Menz (2005) testifies that among SLP graduate students, the perception of Russian- and Chinese-accented English speech provoke the most negative reactions. The Russian accent also has the least people having any positive attitude towards it.

Another study by Hyman, as cited in Crosby (23), shows the attitudes towards Chinese and Russian accents, where a speaker with a Chinese accent was preferred to a speaker with a Russian accent when being considered for a managerial position in a company. Crosby (23) also mentions the study conducted by Dorodnych, in which it was stated that Russian-speaking guides sounded rude to American and English tourists. The point of the study was to view the use of requests in English and Russian. The study indicated many differences in the use of syntactical and lexical items. However, the most important characteristic that differentiated the requests in Russian from the requests in English was intonation. These findings prove that intonation plays an important role in formation of a given impression about a speaker.

A study by Thompson (2015) suggests that the perception of Russian accents among the Americans is not homogeneous and depends on the linguistic proficiency of the American listener and the situation in which the judgement is to be made.

Due to the lack of research in this field, this paper aims to expose the benefits of examining how the degree of accentedness could affect the way the speaker is perceived and whether a Russian accent is perceived negatively by other speakers of English. In the practical part of this thesis we scrutinize the attitudes towards mild and strong Russian accents.

## Practical Part

The practical part of this thesis focuses on the perception of accented speech, particularly Russian-accented productions. The aim of the research is to find out if the strength of a foreign accent influences the way one's speech is perceived, either positively or negatively. Based on the findings of different studies conducted on accent perception summarized in the theoretical part, the following two hypotheses were formulated:

1. Speakers with a heavier Russian accent will be evaluated less favorably by other English speakers than those with a more mild accent.
2. The perception of native and non-native listeners will not differ extensively.

The first hypothesis was based on the presumption that speech with an accent is often perceived negatively by other people. It can be due to certain experience with some bearers of an accent, prejudice about specific cultures or mistrust for people of a different origin. As was uncovered in the theoretical part, native speakers tend to view people with an accent as less credible. It can happen either at a conscious or subconscious level.

As far as the Russian accent is concerned, it does not have a particularly positive image in the media; furthermore, the attitude towards Russian people in general is not homogenous. In many countries, due to different but mainly political reasons, Russians are not welcomed. This leads to an assumption that the Russian accent can trigger negative associations in people of other nationalities and distort their impression of such an individual's speech and attributes. As this phenomenon exists not only in the countries where English language is regularly spoken, but in other countries too, it can be reasonable to assume that the perception of native and non-native speakers of English will be similar.

This part of the thesis contains a thorough description of the method chosen for the needs of the research, which was conducted by means of a perception test devised and constructed uniquely for the purposes of this work. After the description of the method, the results are presented, examined and discussed.

### **3 Method**

In order to confirm or refute the hypotheses, a small-scale research project was conducted with the objective to compare the evaluations of stronger and more mild accents in Russian English.

First, seven Russian speakers of English with different levels of proficiency were recorded reading a part in a short dialogue and answering some basic questions in English. Secondly, these recordings were analyzed and the degree of their accents was judged by a group of five individuals, who were familiar with the English language and its phonetics. Thirdly, a short perception test containing twenty-six utterances was created. Half of these utterances were pronounced with a strong accent and the other half with a mild accent. Then, twenty native speakers and twenty non-native speakers of English evaluated the pleasantness of the utterances on a 9-point scale. Afterwards, the data were analyzed and certain conclusions were drawn.

#### **3.1 Perception Test**

This part contains a thorough description of the process of creating the perception test, including the process of selecting Russian speakers, recording the productions, the evaluation of the accents and the creation of the audio test.

##### **3.1.1 Russian speakers involved in the recording**

For the purpose of the study, three speakers with a stronger Russian accent, two speakers with a mild Russian accent and two speakers with a near native-like accent were chosen to take part in the recording. The speakers were chosen by the author of this thesis who relied solely on her own judgement when choosing the individuals to record. All of the speakers were young subjects between 20-27 years of age. Most of them have been living in an intercultural environment in Prague for more than two years. Therefore, all of them had the opportunity to communicate with foreigners, which means that they were exposed to the English language and foreign speech quite frequently. Finding a person with a very thick

Russian accent proved to be very difficult in these conditions. Due to this fact, the author procured speakers not only living in the Czech Republic, but also in Russia. For this reason two of the recordings had to be recorded separately. However, the speakers were contacted by the author of the thesis and were instructed carefully on the tasks required of them. The recordings were done under the supervision of the author of this work. Before the recording, each speaker completed a questionnaire, which included the information about their age, level of English and experience learning and communicating in the English language. They were also asked to share if they practiced pronunciation in the classroom where they studied English. The information about all the speakers can be found in table 1 below.

	Speaker 1	Speaker 2	Speaker 3	Speaker 4	Speaker 5	Speaker 6	Speaker 7
<i>Age</i>	21	24	22	24	23	26	25
<i>Learning English for ...</i>	3 months	7 years	2 years	3 years	15 years	10 years	16 years
<i>Proficiency level</i>	A1	B2	A2-B1	A2-B1	C1	C1	B1
<i>Frequency of using English in real life</i>	2-3 times a week	4 times a week	Rarely	3-4 times a week	Daily	Almost every day	Almost every day
<i>Frequency of communicating with native speakers of English</i>	Rarely	2 times a month	Rarely	Hardly ever	Daily	Once a week	Rarely
<i>Do you practice pronunciation in English classes or by yourself?</i>	Yes	No	Yes	Sometimes	No	Sometimes	No
<i>Do you watch films, TV programs or TV shows in English?</i>	No	Rarely	Yes	Rarely	Sometimes	All the time	Sometimes
<i>Accent (as evaluated later in course of research)</i>	Strong (1,5)	Strong (2)	Mild (4)	Strong (2,5)	Mild (5)	Mild (5)	Strong (1,5)

Table 1. Information about recorded speakers including the evaluation of their accents

### **3.1.2 The Process of Recording**

Before the recording, each speaker was given a dialogue to read and four questions which they were asked to think about in advance. All of the speakers were given enough time (2-3 days) to prepare in order to avoid any mistakes. There were certain problems that arose in the course of recording the dialogue. The text appeared to be too difficult for elementary level learners to read. Nevertheless, we decided not to change the text, but to use only shorter and easier utterances in the test. Also, we decided to add some questions to the test in order to add more examples, which would resemble natural speech. It proved very difficult to make speakers' reading sound easy and natural. Therefore, a set of simple questions was created to add some spontaneity to the speakers' productions.

The choice of the dialogue was based on the idea that it should contain questions and answers, so that the speakers could reply with as much intonation as possible. The dialogue between a receptionist and a guest would require the speakers to add certain emotions to their speech and provide us with examples of different ways of using intonation. The dialogue and questions can be seen in Appendix 1.

The recordings were done individually in a closed and quiet space. The samples were recorded using a voice recorder on an iPhone 5s and the quality of the recordings was rather high. However, two speakers recorded themselves because they were located in Russia. As a result, the quality of their recordings is slightly lower. However, this does not interfere with the clarity of their utterances.

The speakers were not informed about the purpose of the recordings, in order to mask the intention. All the speakers were aware of the opportunity to be recorded in an additional attempt in the event that the first recording was not successful. Therefore, the speakers did not experience any stress while reading the text. Prior to the recording, all the speakers had a short English speaking session so that it would be easier for them to pronounce English words. After the recording each speaker was thanked for their participation.

### 3.1.3 The Evaluation of the Recordings

In order to obtain a more objective evaluation of the speakers' accents, five people with a high level of proficiency in the English language were asked to assess each speaker's accent on a 5-point scale, where "1" and "2" identified a strong accent, "3" – a mild accent and "4" and "5" - a native-like accent. Three women and two men were chosen to be the evaluators. Two of the evaluators were students at Charles University majoring in the English language. Even though they were of Czech nationality, they were familiar with the Russian accent as they studied with many Russian students. Three of the evaluators were of Russian origin who use English at their workplace every day. Therefore, they often communicate with both native and non-native speakers of English.

The results were as follows:

- speaker 1 and 7 – 1,5 points
- speaker 2 – 2 points
- speaker 4 – 2,5 points
- speaker 3 – 4 points
- speakers 5 and 6 – 5 points

Most of the results were in concurrence with the information given by the speakers about their experience learning English. It shows that individuals who were evaluated to have more mild accents in English had more experience communicating with foreigners and native speakers of English. These individuals also mentioned in the questionnaires that they frequently watch TV series or films in English. Nevertheless, there were two speakers (number 2 and number 7), whose accents were later estimated as heavy, despite the fact that they both had been studying English for a reasonable amount of time and claimed to communicate in English in everyday life. In their questionnaires speakers 2 and 7 also pointed out the fact that they had never intentionally learned and practiced pronunciation by themselves or in class.



### **3.1.4 The Process of Creating the Audio Test**

For the purposes of the test, twenty-six short fragments were chosen: thirteen made by speakers 5 and 6 with a mild accent and thirteen made by speakers with strongly accented productions. The author listened repeatedly to the recordings and tried objectively presented the most representative examples of both mildly and strongly accented speech. The parsed selections corresponded to phrases or short sentences. The test was created in the audio editing program Audacity. The test begins with two trial items. The respondents could attempt a sample test and subsequently ask any questions if necessary. Each test item was played twice with a very short pause in between. After each repetition, listeners had 2.5 seconds to assess the recording. This proved to be the right amount of time to capture the respondents' first impression. After the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> item there were two 45-second breaks with relaxing music. This was done to let the respondents relax and clear their mind so as to avoid skewed results. The selections chosen for the audio test can be seen in Appendix 2.

## **3.2 Realization of the Perception Test**

### **3.2.1. Collection of Data**

Before participating in the perception test, each listening respondent was asked to fill out a questionnaire, which contained questions about their origin, age, country of residence and the experience communicating with non-native speakers (see Appendix 3). These questions were included in the questionnaire to determine if the respondents are familiar with non-native speech. As we mentioned in the theoretical part of this thesis, the familiarity of accents can play a big role in the perception of one's speech; if the accent is familiar to a listener, it is more likely to be evaluated favorably.

One group of the respondents, precisely respondents from the Czech Republic and Cyprus, were able to do the test offline during a personal meeting with the author of this work. The other group of the respondents had to do the perception test online using the google forms service. All respondents were instructed in the same way and nobody mentioned

experiencing any difficulty in the process of doing the test. None of the respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, so that it would not affect their evaluation of the productions. The respondents were asked to evaluate each item in terms of how pleasant it sounded on a 9-point scale, where “1” meant very unpleasant and “9” – very pleasant. For the purposes of the test, an answer sheet was created. It can be found in Appendix 3.

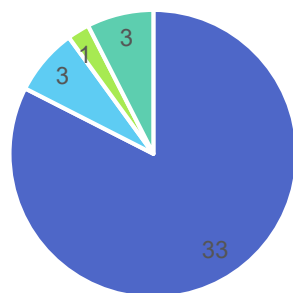
After the results of the perception test were collected, a few respondents were asked to comment on some of their answers so a deeper understanding of what stood behind their evaluations could be gained. The answers were not recorded, but were taken into consideration in the process of analyzing the data.

### **3.2.2 Respondents**

As can be seen in figures 3, 4 and 5 below, more than eighty percent of all respondents (33 respondents in total) were young individuals between the ages of 18 and 30 years old. The remaining twenty percent were older people, the oldest being 60 years old.

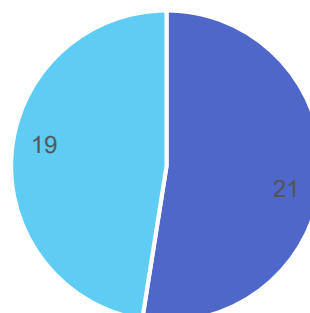
There was nearly an equal number of male (21) and female (19) participants.

In addition, fifty-five percent of the respondents (22) answered that they often communicated with non-native speakers of English, which indicated that they were acquainted with non-native speech and different accents. Only two of the respondents claimed that they had no prior experience with non-native speakers of English. As far as the professional background of the listeners is concerned, there were people of various professions, including musicians, students, educators, doctors, businessmen and etc.



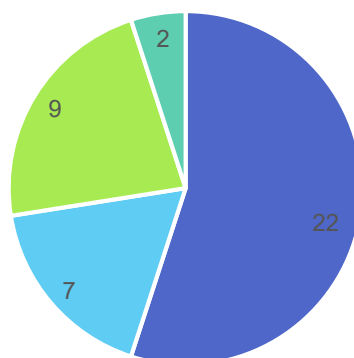
■ 18-30 y.o. ■ 31-40 y.o.  
■ 41-50 y.o. ■ 51-60 y.o.

Figure 3. Respondents' Age



■ Male ■ Female

Figure 4. Respondents' Gender



■ Often ■ Sometimes ■ Rarely ■ Never

Figure 5. Frequency of communicating with non-native speakers of English

The respondents were divided into two groups comprised of native and non-native speakers of English.

Non-native speakers were of various origins (see fig. 6). As the research was conducted in the Czech Republic, four of the respondents were Czech. The same number of respondents represented Germany, three respondents were from China and two from Cyprus. In addition to that, Belgium, Portugal, Bulgaria, Poland, France, Norway and Hungary were represented by one respondent each.

As can be seen in figure 7 below, most of the native respondents came from the United Kingdom and the United States of America. There were also respondents from Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Jamaica.

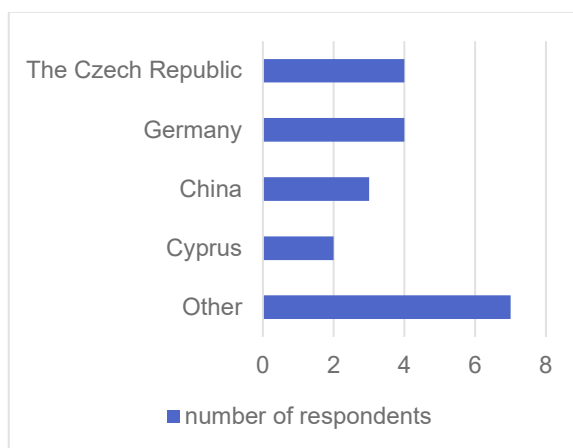


Figure 6. Origin of the non-native listeners

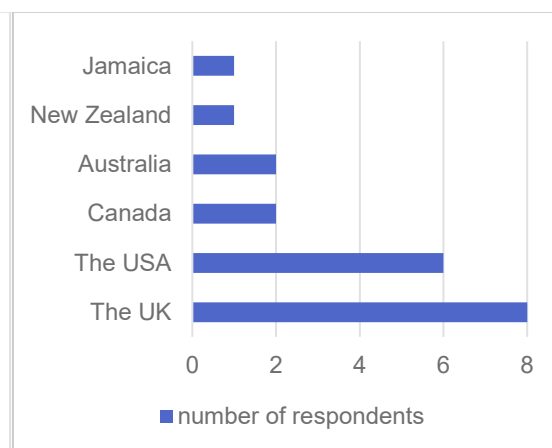


Figure 7. Origin of the native speakers

### 3.3. Results

#### 3.3.1. Overall Evaluation

Overall, our hypothesis that the speakers with a mild accent would be evaluated more favorably in terms of pleasantness than the speakers with a heavier accent was supported by the results of the test. The average evaluation of utterances pronounced with a mild accent received a score of 6,8 and the overall score of the utterances pronounced with a stronger accent was 5,6 points (see fig.8).

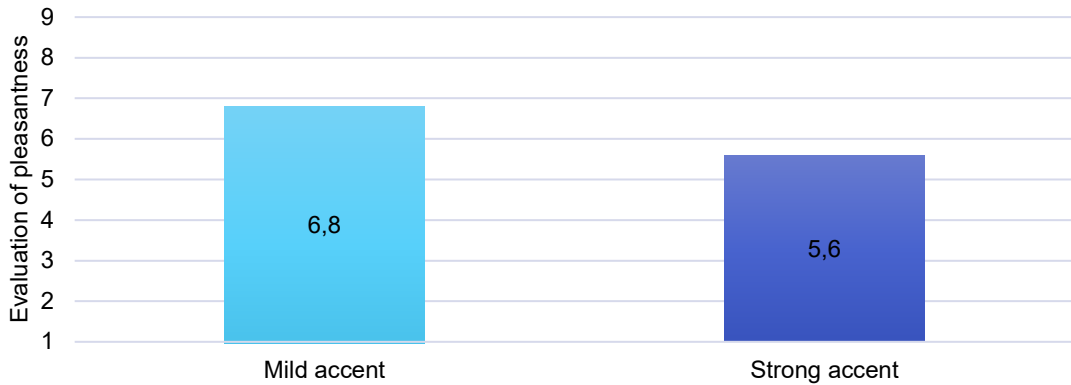


Figure 8. Overall evaluation of productions by native and non-native listeners

However, as it is evident from the figures below, native listeners' assessments were generally more positive than the assessments of the non-native listeners. The former gave much lower evaluation (5,2 points) to strong accents, whereas native speakers had a better impression of the strongly accented productions (6,1 points). Moreover, the difference between the evaluation of strong and mild accents in native speakers was less distinctive. The gap in their evaluation was only 0,9 points, whereas the gap in non-native listeners' evaluation was 1,4 points.

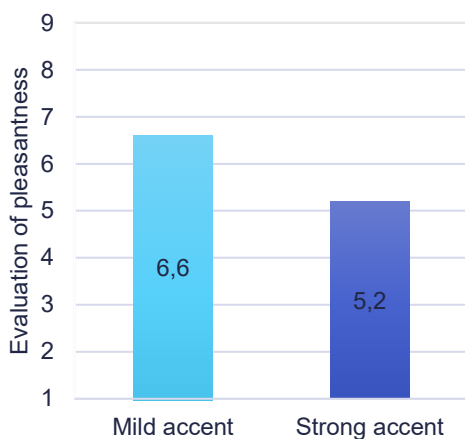


Figure 9. Overall evaluation of productions by non-native listeners

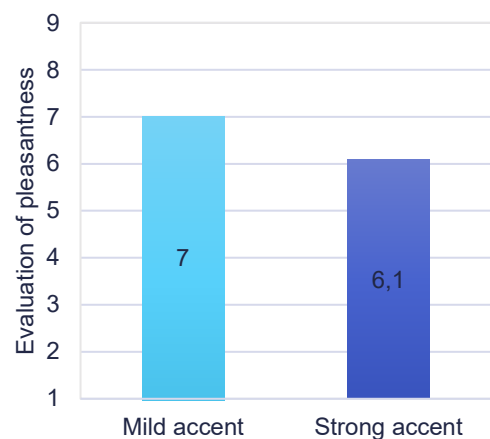


Figure 10. Overall evaluation of productions by native listeners

### 3.3.2. Item Analysis

If we take a closer look at non-native speakers' rankings of separate items (see fig. 11), we can see that the mildly accented items are consistently evaluated more positively than the strongly accented ones. The only exception is the item number 2.

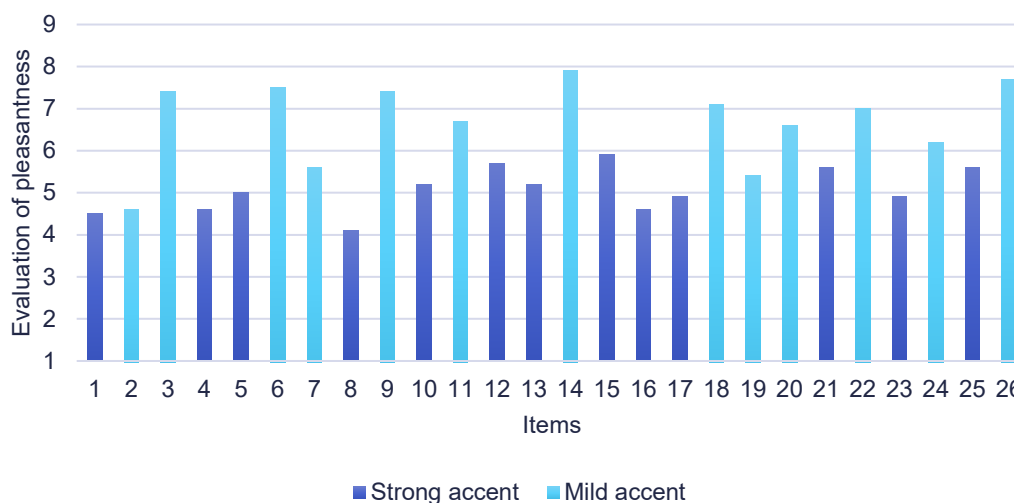


Figure 11. Evaluation of individual test items (1-26) by non-native listeners

As was anticipated, the lowest evaluation among non-native speakers was attributed to heavily accented productions. The lowest evaluated item was item number 8. Moreover, as can be seen in figure 12, this is true for both native and non-native listeners. This may be due to the wrong pronunciation of the word *noisy*, which was pronounced as /nɔɪsɪ/, not /nɔɪzɪ/. Another possible explanation is that the intonation was rather flat and unusual for English, which could have made the sentence sound strange to other speakers. It is also possible that the content of the utterance, which was rather negative, could have influenced the evaluation.

An anomaly was found in that a rather poor evaluation was given to a mildly accented item number 2. After having scrutinized the utterance, we came to the conclusion that speaker 6, although pronouncing individual words with a mild accent, did not use the correct intonation. In the English language, intonation in yes/no questions, or polite requests, is

usually rising or fall-rising, which means that our pitch usually rises at the end of the question. Questions with this intonation usually sound neutral and polite. Falling intonation is mostly applied when the speaker already knows the answer, or for emphatic function. It can imply certain emotions such as anger, impatience and annoyance (Wells 45-46). In this particular production the intonation was falling.

Exactly as we expected, the items that received the highest evaluation (14 and 26) belonged to the speakers with a mild accent.

When analyzing how the evaluations differed according to the nationality of the listeners, it was discovered that there was no substantial difference between the evaluations (see fig.12). However, only the nationalities that were represented by three or more respondents were taken into consideration. In our case, there were four Czech, four German and three Chinese speakers. All respondents' evaluations ranged from 6.1 to 6.7 points. The least positive evaluation belonged to Czech listeners who did not show definite preference for mildly accented productions as the difference in their evaluation of mildly and strongly accented items was only 0,3 points. The most positive evaluation belonged to German respondents. In their assessments we can see a wider difference between mildly and strongly accented items. We were also curious to see how the Chinese listeners would respond to the perception test as the Chinese language differs from both Russian and English significantly. Interestingly, evaluations of the Chinese respondents did not differ much from the evaluations of the Czech and German respondents. Despite that, we must admit that it was a very small sample size in the research survey and we could scale up the number of respondents in order to draw persuasive conclusions.

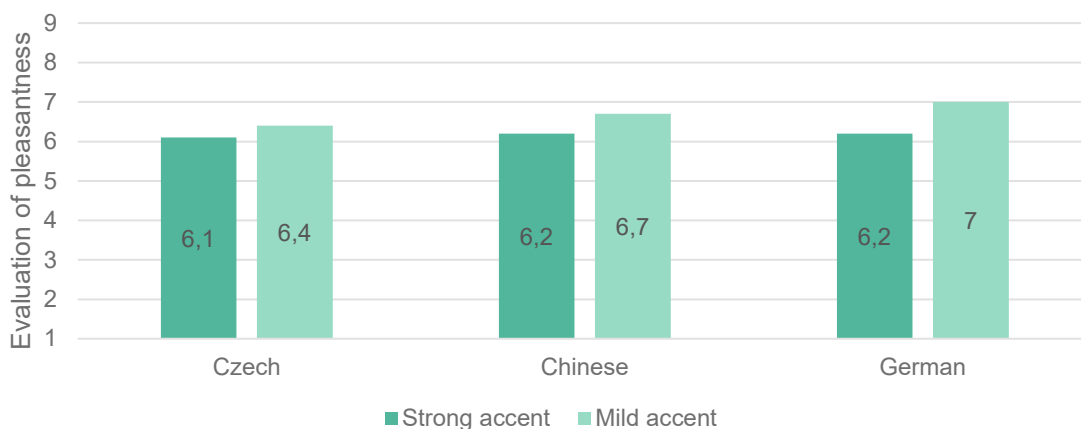


Figure 12. Evaluation of productions by non-native speakers according to nationalities

Let us now have a look at the results of native listeners, which were very similar to the results of non-native listeners, but showed certain inconsistencies. It can be seen in figure 13 that the overall evaluation of the accented speech, whether mildly or strongly accented, was higher than the assessment of non-native listeners. However, at the same time there turned out to be many more inconsistencies. There were three mildly accented sentences that received very low evaluation on the pleasantness axis (items 2, 7, 19), even lower than some heavily accented productions. On the other hand, items 5 and 25 received very high score despite the fact that they were heavily accented.

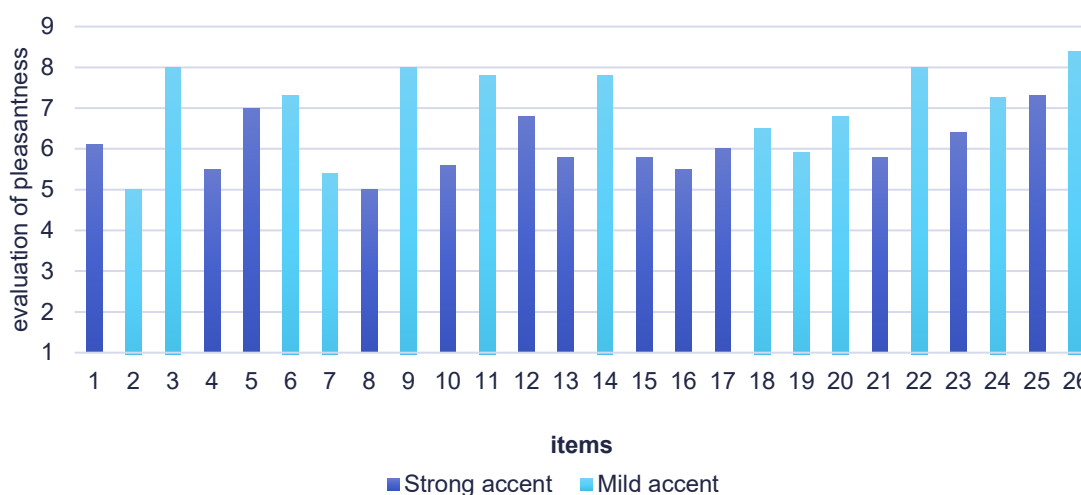


Figure 13. Evaluation of individual items (1-26) by native listeners



Just as in the case of non-native respondents, among all items number 8 received the lowest evaluation from native respondents. Similarly, low evaluation was given to the mildly accented item 2. What is interesting is that between native speakers item 2 was one of the lowest evaluated items. The idea of intonation playing a big role is still relevant here. However, we were interested in investigating this question a little deeper and asked some of the respondents about the factors that influenced their evaluation. The respondents pointed out that they had problems understanding what was said in the utterance. Therefore, we can assume that intelligibility, i.e. how well the utterance is understood, influenced the pleasantness of the way the utterance sounded. In that particular case we can hear that the speaker tried to copy the American accent, but she happened to exaggerate some of the sounds, which might have made her utterance incomprehensible and, therefore, unpleasant. In addition to that, the evaluation given to this item by British respondents was even lower than the evaluation from other native listeners. Respondents from the UK estimated the utterance at 3,5 points, whereas respondents from the USA gave it 5 points. One of the possible explanations of this difference is the pronunciation of this particular speaker. As we mentioned before, the speaker used an American pronunciation as a model, which might have sounded unpleasant to British English speakers.

The importance of intonation is also highlighted in the evaluation of item 25. Although it was pronounced with a heavier accent, an intonation contour produced in this particular question was in concurrence with the standard English intonation of polite requests and yes/no questions. This can serve as one of the possible explanations as to why this item was rather highly evaluated by native speakers. After examining another highly evaluated item number 5, which belonged to the same speaker, we came to the conclusion that both utterances were pronounced clearly. Even though the speaker was evaluated to have a heavy accent, in these particular examples his accent was not that prominent. Poorly evaluated and mildly accented item 19 was also improperly intonated; the speaker's utterance was rather monotonous. Item number 7 may have caused problems with understanding, as the speaker's speech was fast and certain words might have been unintelligible.

Speaker 5 received the highest scores out of all the speakers evaluated in the test. After having examined the items and having interviewed several respondents, we concluded that out of all speakers her speech was the clearest, even though it was not always perfect, her intonation was lively, meaning it was more varied than in other speakers. Varied intonation is more usual and natural for English speech. As mentioned in the theoretical part, Russian intonation is also quite varied and plays an important role in speech as it can be used to add specific meaning to the utterance and help emphasize certain words. However, the changes in pitch are still not as extensive as in English.

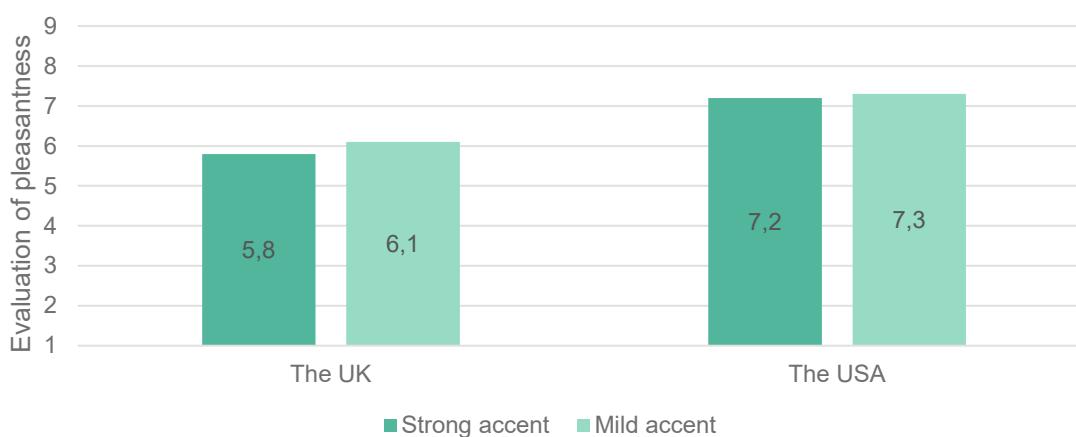


Figure 14. Evaluation of productions by native speakers according to nationalities

In the figure 14 above, we compared the evaluations according to the country of origin of native speakers. We only used the respondents from the UK and the USA as the number of respondents from the other countries was too small. We compared the evaluations of six American listeners and eight listeners from the UK. As you can see in the chart, in general the evaluation from British English speakers was lower, whereas Americans perceived accented speech more positively. What might have caused this difference is different experience that the respondents had with non-native speakers. Five out of eight British respondents stated that they rarely communicate with non-native English speakers, which might have negatively influenced their impression of a non-native accent. Five out of six American English speakers indicated that they had wide experience communicating with non-native speakers of English and that they stay in contact with non-native speakers on a daily basis. In addition, as some of the speakers clearly showed the tendency to use more

American-like pronunciation, it might have sounded abnormal to some respondents from the UK. However, we can only surmise that this was the case. It is definite that more research is needed in order to reject or support this idea.

### **3.4 Discussion**

The results presented in the previous chapter indicate that the strength of accent affects the pleasantness of the way accented speech sounds to other speakers. The most interesting finding seems to be the fact that native speakers generally tend to perceive accents more positively. There are some reasons that can explain this tendency. With English being a lingua franca, and millions of people speaking their versions of English, native speakers are used to hearing all types of accents and all types of mistakes. As a result, they do not perceive accented productions as something unpleasant provided that it is intelligible. In the meantime, non-native speakers usually aim to sound like native speakers. At schools and universities, they are taught and encouraged to use standard British pronunciation, which might make them believe that everything that does not sound like standard accent is not correctly pronounced. Therefore, it would be logical to assume that non-native speakers are, in a way, taught to be more judgmental towards other non-native accents.

One of the native respondents mentioned that it was incredibly hard for her to judge people, as she never thought of an accent or sounding being something upon what a person could be judged. Another problem that was mentioned by one of the respondents was that he never really thought of an accent as something unpleasant or irritating, which partially goes against the research by Dorodnych that claims that guides with the Russian accent sound rude to other people. Nevertheless, the respondent said that when he did not understand what the person was saying, he felt angry with himself for not understanding it. Although he assured that this negativity was not directed towards the speaker, but rather towards himself, in some cases these negative emotions may inadvertently lead to misjudgment and downgrading of a speaker's personality. In the case of these respondents, intelligibility and comprehensibility of utterances were of a bigger importance than the accentedness. Most certainly, this could affect the results of the survey as some people could confuse the

comprehensibility of the utterance with the pleasantness of the way it sounds at a subconscious level. Therefore, if some further research is ever to be conducted in this area, these notions have to be explained to respondents in order to avoid confusion.

This brings us to the point that sometimes strongly accented speech is perceived more favorably perhaps because of the clarity of the examined speech. The data and the respondents' commentaries suggest that intelligibility of one's speech plays an important role and may have a greater impact on how we perceive accented speech than accentedness. Often when accents of two individuals are compared, native speakers prefer strongly accented, but clearer and slower speech.

Before conducting the perception test, we assumed that intonation would be one of the focal points in forming the impression of respondents about the speakers. The results of the practical experiment supported this idea. The utterances with similar content, but different manifestations of intonation differed extensively in several items. Therefore, we can assume that the combination of heavily accented speech and natural intonation may be perceived far more positively than the combination of mildly accented speech and incorrect intonation. This proposition, however, requires further research.

## 4 Conclusion

This bachelor thesis aimed to uncover the importance of an accent in the perception of one's speech. For this purpose, a perception test was done, in which native and non-native speakers of the English language were asked to assess their impression of several Russian-accented productions in terms of pleasantness.

The results of the perception test suggest that the strength of an accent influences how pleasant one's speech sounds to other people. The data indicated that strongly accented productions are perceived as less pleasant than mildly accented ones. The assessments of native and non-native respondents did not differ significantly, yet they were not the equal. The results showed that native English speakers generally have a more positive attitude towards accented speech, as their overall evaluation of the test samples was higher than the non-native speakers' evaluations. This finding seems to be in accord with the studies mentioned in the theoretical part that affirmed that the Russian accent can be perceived as unpleasant and rude. Nevertheless, this tendency was not confirmed in the whole research sample and certain mismatches occurred, for instance strongly accented items were assessed as relatively pleasant and vice versa. The explanations of individual cases are presented in the Results and Discussion sections.

It was also supported that intonation plays an integral role in the process of forming an impression of one's speech. As mentioned at the beginning of this work, the instruction of intonation is often neglected by teachers of the English language due to the lack of knowledge of the way it should be taught. Yet the results of our research show that intonation plays an equally big role in the perception of one's speech as the degree of accent. Therefore, the intonation instruction should be given more attention in ESL/EFL classrooms.

The research project described in this thesis evidently has some limitations that should be taken into consideration. Foremost, it uses only a limited number of respondents. For better and more precise results the number of respondents should be higher. However, the number

of respondents still allowed us to see certain tendencies. Secondly, the origin, background and other characteristics of respondents are not uniform, which could have influenced the results of the test. Lastly, the difference in the degree of accentedness in Russian speakers could have been greater and more distinctive to fully satisfy the purpose of this work.

The results of the test not only supported our hypotheses, but they also raised additional questions that might be used for further research. For example, we could see that the evaluations of the respondents from the UK were lower than the evaluations of the respondents from the USA. As the number of respondents was not sufficient, we could not affirm that such an evaluation would be the same if more respondents took part in the test. We also did not have enough information to establish the connection and reasons for this difference. In order to prove that there is a correlation between the nationality of a respondent and their perception of a particular accent a more extensive research project should be conducted. Another direction in the future research could be the exploration of the Russian-accented speech. In order to prove or disprove the idea that the Russian accent is perceived more negatively than other accents, it seems worthy to compare the perception of the Russian accent with the perception of other types of accents. However, all of these questions would obviously require separate and more detailed pieces of research.

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## 7 Appendices

### 7.1 Appendix 1

#### *Dialogue*

**Hotel: Good afternoon. Welcome to the Woodward Hotel. How may I help you?**

Guest: I have a reservation for today. It's under the name of Hunnighan.

**Hotel: Can you please spell that for me, sir?**

Guest: Sure. H-U-N-N-I-G-H-A-N.

**Hotel: Yes, Mr. Hannighan, we've reserved a double room for you for two nights. Is that correct?**

Guest: Yes, it is.

**Hotel: Excellent. Just sign the receipt here, please.**

Guest: Whoa! Five hundred and ninety dollars a night!

**Hotel: Yes, sir. We are a five star hotel after all.**

Guest: Well, fine. What's included in this cost anyway?

**Hotel: A full Continental buffet every morning, free airport shuttle service, and use of the hotel's safe are all included.**

Guest: So what's not included in the price?

**Hotel: Well, you will find a mini-bar in your room. Use of it will be charged to your account. Also, the hotel provides room service, at an additional charge of course.**

Guest: Hmm. Ok, thanks.

**Hotel: Should you have any questions or requests, please dial 'O' from your room. Also, there is internet available in the lobby 24 hours a day.**

Guest: Ok, and what time is check-out?

**Hotel: At midday, sir.**

Guest: Ok, thanks.

**Hotel: My pleasure, sir. Have a wonderful stay at the Woodward Hotel.**

#### *Questions*

What's your name?

Where do you come from?

What are your hobbies?

What do you dislike?


Why do you like Prague?


## 7.2 Appendix 2

Example 1: My pleasure sir. Have a wonderful stay at the Woodward hotel. (Speaker 3)

Example 2: Can you please spell that for me, sir? (Speaker 1)

1.	Good afternoon. Welcome to the Woodward hotel. How may I help you? (Speaker 1)
2.	Can you please spell that for me, sir? (Speaker 6)
3.	Good afternoon. Welcome to the Woodward hotel. How may I help you? (Speaker 5)
4.	Can you please spell that for me, sir? (Speaker 4)
5.	My name is Konstantin. I come from Russia. (Speaker 7)
6.	Excellent. Just sign the receipt here, please. (Speaker 6)
7.	And I don't like grumpy and sad people. (Speaker 5)
8.	I don't like my neighbor, 'cause he is too noisy. (Speaker 7)
9.	Have a wonderful stay at Woodward hotel. (Speaker 6)
10.	Have a wonderful stay at the Woodward hotel. (Speaker 4)
11.	Can you please spell that for me, sir? ( Speaker 5)
12.	Good afternoon. Welcome to the Woodward hotel. How may I help you? (Speaker 2)
13.	My name is Anna. I came from Russia. ( Speaker 4)
14.	My name is Victoria. I come from Russia. ( Speaker 6)
15.	I like Prague, because it's wonderful city. ( Speaker 1)
16.	I love reading books, because they give me a food for my imagination. ( Speaker 7)
17.	Have a wonderful stay at the Woodward hotel. ( Speaker 2)
18.	We've reserved a double room for you for two nights. Is that correct? ( Speaker 6)
19.	I really like this process when you create clothes from scratch. (Speaker 3)
20.	Should you have any questions or requests, please, dial "0" from your room. (Speaker 5)
21.	Should you have any questions or requests, please, dial "0" from your room. (Speaker 2)
22.	My pleasure, sir. Have a wonderful stay at the Woodward hotel. (Speaker 5)
23.	My name is Ruslan. I come from Russia, from small city Nevinnomyssk. (Speaker 1)
24.	I love dancing because it's a big part of who I am. (Speaker 6)
25.	Can you please spell that for me, sir? (Speaker 7)
26.	Excellent. Just sign the receipt here please. (Speaker 5)

 - heavy accent

 - mild accent

### 7.3 Appendix 3

#### Questionnaire

Sex:

Age:

Profession:

Where are you from?

Do you speak any foreign languages apart from English?

What country do you live in?

How long have you been living there?

How often do you communicate in English and with whom?

#### Instructions:

You will hear short recordings of people reading a text or answering questions in English. Please, evaluate your impression of the speakers' productions on the scale from 1 to 9, where 1 means very unpleasant and 9 means very pleasant. You will hear 26 excerpts and each will be played twice. There will be 2 – 3 seconds after each item for you to rate the speech. There are two short breaks with relaxing music after the 9th and 18th item.

Listen to two examples and mark your impression on the scale.

Example 1:

1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

Example 2:

1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

1)

1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

2)

1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

3)

1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

4)

1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

5)

1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

6) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

7) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

8) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

9) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

---

10) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

11) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

12) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

13) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

14) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

15) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

16) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

17) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

18) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

---

19) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

20) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

21) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

22) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

23) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

24) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

25) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant

26) 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9  
very unpleasant very pleasant