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UNDERSTANDING ACCENT AND IDENTITY ON THE BORDER: EXPLORING BILINGUALS' PERCEPTIONS OF INTELLIGIBILITY, ACCENTEDNESS, AND LANGUAGE-LEARNING GOALS

Shannon Mccrocklin[1*]
[1]Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, USA

Abstract

Although the field of second language (L2) pronunciation teaching has moved toward intelligibility models and goals, several studies have shown that many L2 learners still profess a desire to sound native-like in their L2. This study explores the perspectives of bilinguals who have navigated their accent and identity in two different languages to explore the impact of increasing recognition of links between accent and identity on language-learning goals. Findings show that almost all bilingual participants (97%) recognized links between accent and identity, yet 72% still reported preferring a native accent if they learned a new language today. Intelligibility emerged as a key issue, with those wanting a native accent linking nativeness to increased intelligibility and those rejecting native accents separating the two dimensions (accent and intelligibility) while prioritizing intelligibility.

Keywords: Identity; Bilingual; Second Language Learning; Intelligibility; Accent.

[*] Associate professor in the School of Languages and Linguistics at Southern Illinois University. She earned her Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics and Technology from Iowa State University. Her research focuses on second language acquisition of phonology, pronunciation teaching, and computer-assisted language learning. E-mail: shannon.mccrocklin@siu.edu. ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5365-2067.

As research has increasingly recognized the ways accent in a second language (L2) is tied to identity (Beinhoff, 2013; Cutler, 2014; LeVelle & Levis, 2014; Moyer, 2004; Ullah, Aresar, & Rustamani, 2024), the field of L2 pronunciation teaching has moved toward intelligibility models and goals (Levis, 2020) that shift focus from native-like features to features most important to maintaining listeners' comprehension. Yet, several studies have shown that many L2 learners still profess a desire to sound native-like in their L2 (Beinhoff, 2013; Derwing, 2003; Jenkins, 2013; McCrocklin & Link, 2016; Sung, 2016; Timmis, 2018). Based on these findings, it is possible that L2 learners do not perceive substantial links between their accent and identity (McCrocklin & Link, 2016).

Ellis (2006) established that bilinguals better recognized aspects of L2 learning, including first language loss and development of an L2 identity. McCrocklin and Link (2014) similarly noted that bilinguals who had mastered two languages were more likely than language learners earlier in the learning process to see accent and identity as linked and were also more likely to note the downsides of a native accent in portraying their identity. Yet, the findings were drawn from a small sample of students (five bilinguals and eight language learners) and unable to explore whether there was a connection between seeing links between accent and identity and wanting to retain a foreign accent. This research study builds on this previous work, exploring bilinguals' understandings of accent and identity along the U.S.-Mexico border and how their experiences with identity creation in this context have affected language-learning goals.

Literature Review

Identity in Language Learning

Although there can be multiple ways to define the term *identity*, often reflecting the various scientific disciplines which focus on and explore it, a common way to approach identity is through the ways it signals affiliations or relationships to various groups (Coulmas, 2019). Identity, then, could be defined as "a range of social personae, including social statuses, roles, positions, relationships, and institutional and other relevant community identities one may attempt to claim or assign in the course of social life" (Ochs, 1993, p. 288). Such community identities include imagined communities, such as nation-states, which are considered imagined because individuals will never know the totality of members but may hold in their minds a shared affinity and mutual participation (Norton, 2013). Although individuals may be ascribed certain identities, for example through the circumstances of birth (e.g. nationality or gender), individuals also work to negotiate and co-construct their identity through interactions with others and may change roles and identities over time (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Notably, interlocutors play a key role in the process as they perceive, respond to, evaluate, and participate in the co-construction of identity features.

Baker and Wright (2017) point out that language is one of the most robust and potent indicators of group identity. Coulmas (2019) reflects on the power of language, remarking, "Many languages are consciously cultivated as the medium to convey our thoughts, valuable receptacles of tradition, links that connect our offspring to our forebears, and as symbols of our identity" (p. 103). Although a shared language is not required to form a group identity, shared language can be a powerful way to mark a shared identity (Baker & Wright, 2017).

Accents, a person's "dynamic segmental and suprasegmental habits" (Moyer, 2013, p. 11), are particularly prominent and have been called "the face of language" (Levis as cited in Derwing & Munro, 2015). Researchers have shown that accent can be used to display a range of identity aspects in a speaker's first language (L1), such as race (Bailey, 2000), gender (James, 1996), religious affiliation (Levon, 2006), class (Labov, 2006), and sexuality (Podesva, Roberts, and Campbell, 2001). Increasingly, research has also examined how identity may be constructed in a second language or second culture, showing accent continues to play an important role.

Accent & Identity for L2 Learners

Although everyone speaks with an accent of some kind, accent is a salient feature of language that allows listeners to easily determine if a speaker is a native or non-native speaker of a particular language (Moyer, 2004). Listeners, both native and non-native, are generally able to identify non-native accents in speech quickly and reliably (Flege, 1984; Major, 2007). Learners often discover that second language accents carry surprising weight; listeners believe that they can identify not only where a person is from but also assume that they can glean aspects of the speaker's culture or personality, such as friendliness and pleasantness on the basis of a foreign accent (Beinhoff, 2013).

As learners progress in developing an L2, they must begin to negotiate their relationship with and identity within the new culture (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Marx, 2002, Piller, 2002; Sung, 2019). Norton and Toohey (2011) further point out that certain identity features may even exist in a seeming contradiction or opposition of one another (Norton & Toohey, 2011). For example, they discuss language learners who may have high levels of motivation to learn a language, but report limited investment because of community language practices that are racist, elitist, or anti-immigrant. Sung (2019) explores these seeming contradictions through a case study of a Cantonese L1 learner of English, pseudonym Liam, finding that Liam, who was motivated to learn English, chose to invest heavily in opportunities to use and interact in English in the workplace, but held little investment in L2 academic domains largely due to struggles in creating a positive academic persona.

Norton (2016) highlights the ways that language holds social meaning which allows us to mediate complicated, and often uneven social relationships within groups. For example, interlocutors can use linguistic convergence to minimize

social distance or can purposefully show such distance through linguistic divergence (Moyer, 2013). For accents, specifically, working to retain an accent in their L2 may be a means of connecting with a home community (Cutler, 2014) or of maintaining distance from the new culture (LeVelle & Levis, 2014). Working to "pass" as a native speaker can be an effort to signal or create group membership (Cutler, 2014). It is important to note, however, that given the difficulties in acquiring a second-language phonology, second language accent may not always represent an intentional choice (Derwing & Munro, 2009; Sung, 2014).

Given the ever-growing body of research connecting accent and identity, the field of L2 teaching has raised concerns about the ethical ramifications of working to improve or change a learner's pronunciation in their second language (Daniels, 1995; Porter & Gavin, 1989; Thomson & Foote, 2019). Researchers and theorists have since proposed frameworks and alternative approaches to pronunciation instruction that allowed for or encouraged a non-native accent, such as accent addition approaches, which focused on adding a native-like accent into a student's repertoire without erasing, or subtracting, a foreign-accented version (Kjellin, 1999). More successful among teachers and researchers were pushes for intelligibility approaches to language instruction, which prioritize the teaching of segmental or suprasegmental issues that most hinder intelligibility, versus focusing on all pronunciation features that may differ from a particular native model and create foreign-accented speech (Kanellou, 2011; Levis, 2005; 2020). An example of this for English instruction is Jenkin's (2000) Lingua Franca Core, which put forward a model of English for teaching that aimed to retain crucial features for intelligibility but allowed for other non-native features to remain accented in order for learners to be able to display or claim their identity. Although work in this arena later shifted away from a focus on identifying core features (Jenkins, 2015), her work's foundational interest in intelligibility was transformative for the field.

Yet, despite acceptance among many teachers and researchers, such models have often been out of alignment with students' professed interests. Learners often report wanting to sound like a native speaker in their L2 (; Beinhoff, 2013; Derwing, 2003, Jenkins, 2013; McCrocklin & Link, 2016; Sung, 2016; Timmis, 2018). Notably, differences in learning context (e.g. learning the L2 as a foreign language versus second language or learning the L2 as an immigrant versus an international student) affect preferences, yet high rates of native-accent preferences still abound (Masztalerz, 2021; Ullah Aresar, & Rustamani, 2024). Although there is evidence of learners' shifts towards intelligibility as a goal (Li, 2019), attempts to introduce intelligibility models to students have, at times, fallen flat. In introducing her system of English as a Lingua Franca to students, Jenkins (2013) noted that students may acknowledge the benefits of such an approach while continuing to profess an interest in pursuing a native-speaker standard. One reason may be that learners do not always see links between identity and accent in their second language (McCrocklin & Link, 2016) and therefore may not see a particular reason to maintain accented features, focusing instead on the

advantages of native-sounding accents. Language learners may see a native accent as a skill to be achieved or as a way to connect with native speakers (McCrocklin & Link, 2016). They may also perceive an advantage to being able to cloak their second-language speaker status (Derwing, 2003) given possible discrimination (for examples of various studies on discrimination towards L2 accents, see Frumkin & Stone, 2020; Kang, Rubin & Lindemann, 2015; Roberts, 2021).

Native-accentedness may also be seen as a way to ensure intelligibility. In a study of learners of English as a Lingua Franca, Sung (2016) found that learners reported that native-accentedness can be advantageous for promoting intelligibility while also noting that they wanted to be seen as competent language speakers. Yet, it is important to note that research has shown that accentedness and intelligibility are separate (albeit related) constructs; fundamentally, it is possible to be highly accented, but also highly intelligible (Munro & Derwing, 1995).

Although language learners may express the desire to sound native, it is a challenging goal to meet as the majority of adult second language learners are not able to obtain native-like accents (Moyer, 2013). Length and consistency of language use, as well as social factors, are important components guiding ultimate L2 pronunciation attainment (Flege, 1995; Moyer, 2013; LeVelle & Levis, 2014). As learners master the phonology, though, they may find that moments of "passing" as a native speaker are transformative. For example, Piller (2002) explored the impact of moments of passing for L2 learners of German. She found that some speakers became uneasy with listeners' perceptions of their accent and assumptions that they were German. Piller discusses the story of one such participant who, following an experience of passing, then decided to work to maintain a noticeable foreign accent.

Prior to these moments, though, learners may struggle to see links between their accent in their L2 and their identity. McCrocklin and Link (2016) surveyed and interviewed English as a Second Language (ESL) learners finding that most reported seeing no link between their accent in their L2 and their identity. Instead, learners pointed to other ways of showing identity such as an ethnic appearance, clothing, and knowledge of their first language in showing their identity. In fact, when asked if they might fear obtaining a native accent because they may lose a marker of their cultural identity, several learners laughed at the idea. These findings raise questions about the possible impact of a perception of a link between accent and identity. If learners perceive such a link, are they more likely to reject native-accentedness as a language-learning goal?

Accent and Identity for Bilinguals

Bilingualism connects a person to two different ethnic, cultural, and/or national groups (Edwards, 2013). Several factors, such as media exposure, immersion contexts, language proficiency, and age of acquisition affect learners' strength of identification to their first or second cultural affiliation (Schroeder et al., 2017). Bilinguals, speakers who have navigated identity in two languages

and possibly two cultures, may be more likely to perceive a link between their accent and identity. Of course, bilingualism can be tricky to successfully define. While the term broadly refers to the ability to use two languages, researchers have differed in the specific definition, ranging from definitions based on age of acquisition, degree of competence equivalency (balance) in the two languages, and ability to successfully communicate in the languages (Butler, 2013).

Early bilingualism, when two or more languages are learned from a young age, is more likely to enable speakers to sound like native speakers in both of their languages, creating a notable difference from most adult L2 learners. In the same way that passing can be a transformative experience for L2 learners, the experience of nativeness in two languages may impact the ways that bilinguals view links between their accent and identity. Indeed, research indicates that in the context of teaching, early bilinguals are more likely to have greater insights into identity issues that arise in language learning, such as developing a bicultural identity, than monolinguals or late bilinguals (Ellis, 2006). In particular, they seem to be more likely to recognize links between their accent and their identity (McCrocklin & Link, 2014). Sung (2014) notes that many bilinguals referred to issues of identity in explaining their accent preferences for their L2, pointing out that bilinguals' understanding and ideas regarding accent and identity were complex and varied. As bilinguals are likely to report and see links between accent and identity, their experiences of bilingualism may impact their goals for language learning in general, perhaps being more likely to reject native-speaker standards for a newly learned language. However, other research has shown that bilingual children, who show no preference between the two languages they know when listening to speech, do show preferences for native accents within those languages (DeJesus et al., 2017).

Research Questions

Studies of border spaces have proven fruitful for socio-linguistic research related to identity (Martínez, 2003). The current study examines bilinguals along the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) of South Texas in the United States. This study explores the ways experiences of bilingualism in the border space of the RGV have shaped self-reported, self-identified bilinguals' understanding of the relationship between accent and identity and the ways these experiences may affect ultimate pronunciation learning goals for new languages. Specifically, it examines:

1. What are the RGV bilinguals' perceptions of accent in their two mastered languages, English and Spanish?

2. How have their experiences of bilingualism on the border affected their understanding of their accent in relation to their identity?

3. How do their perceptions of bilingualism and/or understanding of their accent in relation to their identity affect expectations or desires regarding an accent in a possible third language?

Methods

Data were collected from participants living in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. The RGV is considered a transborder region that includes the northern part of Mexico, with paired border cities including Matamoros/Brownsville and McAllen/Reynosa. The RGV area of Texas is predominantly Hispanic (US Census Bureau, 2020). Spanish was introduced to the native Coahuiltecan groups of the region in the 1500s, predating the arrival of English (Skowronek & Lovett, 2014). Substantial immigration of English speakers occurred in the 1830s when Mexico granted land to English-speaking settlers, again in the early 1900s when the area was promoted as a "Magic Valley" for crop growth, and since the 1960s as the RGV has gained notice as a winter tourism destination (Brannstrom & Neuman 2009; Crompton, Fakeye & Lue, 1992; Cummings 2015; Rister 2010). South Texas, and the RGV specifically, has a history of maintaining Spanish while learning English. Unlike the common three-generation language shift process, Mejías et al. (2003) and Anderson-Mejías (2005) found that in the RGV bilingualism in Spanish and English can often be maintained to fourth or fifth generations. Data collection methods included a survey and an interview. More information about the participants, data collection methods, and analysis are provided in the following sections.

Participants

Participants (n=60) were recruited from a mid-size university in the Rio Grande Valley. The study was introduced in a wide range of primarily lower-level or introductory courses on campus (primarily the core courses in English composition and the university's UNIV courses, which aim to support student learning and success during their first year on campus) in order to recruit participants, who were offered extra credit for participation in the first stage of the study, the survey. Although participants were asked to confirm that they were at least 18 years old, no other restrictions were placed on participation, which allowed all interested students to feel comfortable volunteering. Initially, 108 individuals started the survey and provided informed consent. A small number (n=11) did not complete the full survey and were not included in the data analysis. One of the first questions of the survey asked participants about their language background. At this point, six participants self-reported being monolingual, while 31 reported not being sure if they could be considered bilingual. Given that this study was focused on bilinguals, only the remaining 60 participants who identified themselves as bilingual in Spanish and English were included in the data analysis.

The participants had an average age of 24.00 (*SD*=5.57), with an age range of 19-43. The majority of participants were female (76.67%), while the remaining 23.33% reported being male. The majority of participants (58.33%) had lived in the Rio Grande Valley for their entire life. Only a small group of participants (5.00%) had lived in the region less than 5 years, while 11.67% reported 5-9 years, 5.00% reported 10-14 years, and 20.00% reported over 15 years. For those that had lived in other locations, the majority had lived in Mexico (*n*=12) or another state in the United States (*n*=10). A small number had lived in another country other than Mexico (*n*=3) or a different region in Texas (*n*=3).

As part of the questions about language background, participants were also asked to provide a reason for their claim of a particular status (monolingual/bilingual/not sure). The majority of the sixty participants (88.33%) selected that they considered themselves bilingual because they could easily communicate in two languages, while 10% reported that they considered themselves bilingual because they learned two languages from a young age. Despite focusing on communication ease in claiming bilingualism, over half of the participants (51.67%) reported that they considered English and Spanish to both be native languages, while most of the remaining participants (46.67%) considered Spanish their native language. It can be inferred from this data that most participants would be considered early bilinguals as they either starting learning both languages from birth or, for those with Spanish as a native language, would likely have started learning their L2, English, upon entering school at the age of five or six. One trilingual participant (1.67%) considered both Spanish and Zapotec to be native languages. Finally, one person (1.67%) reported that they considered themselves bilingual for one "other" reason but did not fill in the provided textbox to explain. This person did, however, report English as their native language and that they learned Spanish as an adult. Participants were asked to report the contexts in which they use English and Spanish. They could select as many contexts as were applicable and could provide additional contexts in a text box. Spanish was most likely to be used at home with family, while English was most used for school, but saw broad use across contexts. Specifically, participants reported that they commonly used Spanish to socialize with family (n=56), to socialize with friends (n=36), for entertainment (movies/music) (n=28), for employment (n=24), and for school (n=10). Participants reported that they commonly used English for school (n=58), for employment (n=54), for entertainment (movies/music) (n=54), to socialize with friends (n=54), and to socialize with family (n=36).

A little over half of the participants (55%) had tried to learn another language beyond English and Spanish. A variety of learned languages were reported, including American Sign Language, Chinese, French, Gaelic, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, and Portuguese. The remaining participants had not tried to learn an additional language (41.67%) or skipped the question (3.33%).

Survey

The first page of the survey included information about the study and asked participants for informed consent. The survey asked 35 questions, including questions adapted from McCrocklin & Link (2016). The first 13 questions sought demographic information. The next 19 questions were provided in three sets of Likert scales, one set asking about their agreement with statements about their accent in English, another asking about their accent in Spanish, and a final set asking about accent and identity in language learning more generally. Participants were provided with a six-point scale which ranged from 1=Strongly Disagree to 6=Strongly Agree. An example of the first set of Likert Scales for English is provided in Appendix A. The final three questions were open-ended with textboxes for responses that asked about accent and identity. As participants finished the survey, they were able to leave their email if they wished to be contacted for the second stage of the study, an interview.

Interviews

The interview was semi-structured with 13 starting questions (see Appendix B). Questions were designed to be tailored to each participants' language experiences and were often followed up with additional relevant questions. Examples of the starting questions include, "Based on your pronunciation ability in Spanish and/or English do (would) you feel comfortable speaking with Americans/Mexicans (or Mexican-Americans)?", "Do you think your accent in Spanish and/or English reflects something about your cultural identity?", and "If you were to learn a new language today, what language would you learn? In that language, what would you ultimately like to sound like?". The interviews took less than an hour and were recorded with two devices, a standalone digital recorder and a computer using a USB microphone and *Audacity*. Of the 60 self-reported bilinguals who took the survey, 10 indicated interest and participated in the interview.

Analysis

For the quantitative data obtained from the survey, inferential statistics were used to compare participants' beliefs about their accent in English and in Spanish. Additionally, comparisons were drawn between more general beliefs about accent and identity and beliefs reported for their specific languages. Because Likert scale data should not be considered interval level data, non-parametric statistics, specifically Wilcoxon Signed Ranks, were run in SPSS to examine differences for statistical significance. Given that multiple tests were run to compare Likert pairs, an alpha level of .01 was adopted to reduce chances of a Type 1 error. Effect sizes were calculated as $r = |Z|/\sqrt{N}$, as recommended by Rosenthal (1994) for use with nonparametric statistics.

The responses provided in the interviews, stored under pseudonyms, were first transcribed verbatim. Then, the open-ended responses from the survey and the interview transcripts were coded for themes using a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2003). Multiple themes could be coded on a single utterance if applicable. This approach required multiple rounds of coding as themes emerged. The transcripts and themes were then checked by a colleague for accuracy, which led to an additional round of checking and coding.

Results

Bilinguals' Perceptions of Accent in English and Spanish

Participants were presented with matching sets of Likert scale questions in which participants were asked not only about their current accent, but also what they desired for their accent and how they thought people would respond to their accent in different contexts (see Table 1). Participants generally thought that they sounded like native speakers in both English and Spanish, but noted differences in how often they had trouble being understood in the two languages. While they disagreed that they are often misunderstood in English, they were closer to slightly disagree when asked about Spanish (a difference of almost a full point, 0.92). This difference was statistically significant ($p<.01$) with a medium effect size. Participants agreed that they wanted their pronunciation in both languages to be easy to understand, but differed in how important it was for them to sound like a native speaker. Participants thought it was more important to sound like a native speaker in Spanish than English (a difference of about half a point, 0.45). This difference was statistically significant ($p=.01$) with a small effect size. No other statistically significant differences emerged.

Table 1. Average Likert Scale Agreement on Statements about English and Spanish

Likert Statement	English *M*	English *SD*	Spanish *M*	Spanish *SD*	Sign. *p*	*r*
In my own pronunciation of ____ I sound like a native speaker.	4.80	1.41	4.45	1.55	.22	.16
I often have trouble being understood when speaking to people in ____.	1.76	1.29	2.68	1.54	*<.01	.42
I want my pronunciation of ____ to sound like a native speaker.	4.85	1.29	5.30	0.87	*.01	.32
I want my pronunciation of ____ to be easy to understand.	5.43	0.96	5.62	0.49	.24	.24
I would like to have more of an accent in ____ to show my cultural identity.	2.50	1.37	2.83	1.66	.13	.19

I think (Americans/Mexicans) would respond to me negatively if I had a strong accent in ____.	3.48	1.50	3.05	1.77	.04	.27
I think people in the Rio Grande Valley would respond to me negatively if I had a strong accent in ____.	2.43	1.44	2.55	1.46	.48	.09

Note. 1=Strongly Disagree to 6=Strongly Agree

Participants thought Americans would be more judgmental of accented English than Mexicans would be of accented Spanish. This difference was nearly a half point (0.43) and was approaching statistical significance. Participants thought that residents of the RGV would be the least judgmental of accented speech, less than Americans or Mexicans in other regions. Notably, for both languages, participants slightly disagreed that they would like to have more of an accent to show their cultural identity.

As a follow-up, Wilcoxon signed ranks was also used to compare the importance of nativeness and intelligibility for each language. Participants thought it was more important to be easy to understand than to sound native in both English ($p<.001$, $r=0.47$) and Spanish ($p<.01$, $r=0.40$).

Perceptions of Links between Accent and Identity

Through qualitative analysis of survey and interview commentary, it became clear that 97% of participants saw links between accent and identity. Table 2 reports themes identified that explain the nature of the links perceived between accent and identity, focusing on themes reported by at least 10% of participants (representative of more commonly held beliefs). Primarily participants saw accented speech as indexical of a specific cultural or ethnic identity (35.00%) or of a specific place (33.33%). Similarly, participants noted that accent can be a purposeful show of a particular identity (13.33%) and that it is important because of what listeners will assume about you. A small number (18.33%) noted that a foreign accent shows that a person is a second language learner.

Table 2. Counts and Examples of Identified Themes Regarding Accent and Identity Links

Theme	*n*	Examples
It shows your culture or ethnic identity.	21	"Some people use their accent to enrich their cultural identity and strengthen the duality." "An accent traces us back to our roots"
It shows where you are from.	20	"Everyone has an accent and it is unique to whatever region you are from." "It is like a constant reminder that you are from your home country."

It is important because of what listeners will think of you.	12	"People assume your identity based on your accent." "I don't want to be viewed as an outsider."
It shows you are a language learner.	11	"[accents] show that you are not a native speaker of a language" "I see someone with an accent as an L2 learner"
It is a purposeful display of who you are.	8	"Accents show that you are from a different culture and are proud of it." "It allows your native language to be displayed, therefore displaying your possible culture as well."

To better understand the impact of the border on perceptions of accent and identity, participants were asked how living in the RGV had shaped their views of their accents in English and Spanish and of possible links with identity. Participants responded with a wide range of ideas. Table 3 highlights themes identified that were reported by at least 10% of participants. Interestingly, the two major themes that emerged were opposing ideas regarding the level of acceptance of accents in the RGV. While some saw the RGV as particularly accepting of linguistic and ethnic diversity, others described the RGV community as particularly judgmental of accents.

Table 3. Counts and Examples of Identified Themes Regarding Influence of RGV on Beliefs

Theme	*n*	Examples
RGV is accepting	14	"I think that living in the RGV has made me extremely proud of my Hispanic roots." "I think that living in the RGV continues to add to the richness and fluidity that I need to help me understand and respect that there isn't just ONE language or custom."
Accent is NOT embraced in RGV	10	"Living in the valley has made me feel like, in my identity I have to be perfect in both languages." "I think it is kind-of looked down upon here when you don't speak Spanish, or you don't speak it well- especially if you look like me (Mexican as hell!)" "It has made me self-conscious of my accent in Spanish"
Bilinguals are everywhere	8	"many of my classmates over the years have all been bilingual in English and Spanish." "Here people speak English and Spanish all of the time." "Living in the valley and needing to be bilingual…has led me to believe it is best to compartmentalize each language"

Difference between accents in Spanish and English	6	"I think it is frowned upon when you have an English accent while speaking in Spanish." "If I cannot pronounce something 'correctly' in Spanish, then I am speaking 'pocho' Spanish, meaning I am more Americanized than being Hispanic-Mexican. "In the RGV it is normal to have or not have an accent… It's normal to have an accent in English but frowned upon to have an accent in Spanish."

Effects of Bilingualism on Accent Goals in New Language Learning

In the last set of Likert scale questions, participants were also asked their beliefs about people learning new languages generally and their own goals if they were to work toward a new language today (see Table 4). Participants agreed that it was important that a person work to be easy to understand, but slightly disagreed that it was important that a person work to sound like a native speaker. This difference was also tested with Wilcoxon Signed Ranks and was found to be statistically significant ($p<.001$, with a large effect size $r=0.73$). While participants may have recognized that it is less important for learners to sound like natives ($M=3.17$) than to be intelligible ($M=4.70$) in the abstract, their own preferences showed a greater desire to sound native not only in English ($M=4.85$) and Spanish (5.30), but also in a hypothetical new language ($M=4.18$). There was over one full point in difference (1.01) between how important it should be for a person to sound native compared to their own preference to sound native in a new language. This difference was also statistically significant ($p<.001$) with a medium effect size ($r=0.57$). Participants disagreed that learners of a new language might lose their sense of cultural identity or that learners should specifically work to retain a non-native accent to show their cultural identity.

Table 4. Average Likert Scale Agreement on Statements about Language Learning

Statement	*M*	*SD*
When a person learns a new language, it is important they work to be easy to understand.	4.70	1.11
When a person learns a new language, it is important that they work to sound like a native speaker.	3.17	1.34
When a person learns a new language, they should work to retain a non-native accent in the language to show their cultural identity.	2.80	1.23
When a person learns a new language, they might lose their sense of a cultural identity.	2.22	1.34
If I started to learn a new language today, I would want to sound like a native speaker.	4.18	1.52

To explore participants' reasoning, participants were asked to explain why they would or would not like to sound like a native speaker, if they started to learn a new language today. Although 97% of participants saw links between accent and identity, 72% still reported preferring a native accent if they learned a new

language. For a follow-up analysis, participants were divided into two groups, those that would like a native accent and those that would not. Table 5 shows the themes that were identified for each group.

Table 5. Percentages and Examples of Identified Themes Regarding Reasons to Want or Not Want a Native Accent in a New Language

Would (N=43)	%	Examples	Would NOT (N=15)	%	Examples
It would increase intelligibility	44%	"I would like to sound like a native speaker so that I could be understood better."	Intelligibility is more important. Accent not vital.	46%	"I just want to communicate effectively. An accent does not hinder my capability to communicate well."
It would mark L2 mastery	32%	"It shows how much you have mastered the language."	Not a native speaker	40%	"I am not a native speaker; therefore, I am okay with not sounding like one."
It would help me fit into the new culture.	23%	"I would like to sound like a native speaker as it would be easier to communicate and bond with a person that is actually a native speaker."	Accents are a cultural display.	33%	"I want to make sure that they know that I learned this language because I want to rather than because I have to." "It is important to preserve diversity even if that means that one will retain an accent."
			It's difficult/ impossible	26%	"Learning a new language is a challenge on its own. I think making an effort to learn is good enough." "The odds are I'll never perfect it."

Both groups noted the ways that their accent choices might reflect meaning about their cultural affiliations. While those reporting a desire to sound native focused on the ways that a native-like accent could help them fit into a new culture, those not wanting to sound native saw a retained accent as a display of culture and difference. Further, those not wanting to sound native noted that to have a native accent would misrepresent them because they would be L2 learners, not native speakers. Finally, both groups acknowledged the effort and work that would go into acquiring a native-like accent. Those desiring a native accent focused on the ways that a native accent represented ultimate attainment and mastery of a language. Within this theme there was also an undercurrent that a native accent was the most proper or acceptable form of the language. This was stated explicitly in about 7% of cases, such as the following comment by Sofia, "I feel like it pays respect to the culture and language when the language

is spoken properly." On the other hand, those not wanting a native accent noted that it was exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to obtain a native-like accent as an L2 learner.

Interestingly, the most important concern for both groups was intelligibility. While those desiring a native accent saw a native accent as a way to increase intelligibility, the group that did not want a native accent made a clear distinction between accent and intelligibility and prioritized intelligibility. As a follow-up, the researcher collected all of the comments on intelligibility (*n*=26) and divided them into two camps, comments signaling that intelligibility is supported or enabled by native accent (*n*=19) and comments signaling that you can have an accent and still be intelligible (*n*=7). The entire group of participants (100%) that saw a native accent as supporting intelligibility reported wanting to sound like a native speaker. On the other hand, the majority (86%) of those that saw accent as a separate measure from intelligibility then reported that a native accent was dis-preferred. Only one participant noted that they would like to sound native while acknowledging that intelligibility was most important and possible with a noticeable foreign or L1-influenced accent. Luis reported:

> I would like to sound like a native speaker if I were to learn a new language today, but it would not be the most important thing for me. The most important thing for me would be that people are able to understand me, regardless of my accent.

While Luis prioritized intelligibility over native-accentedness, he notes that a native accent is preferable to a non-native accent.

Discussion

This study sought to understand the ways that bilinguals perceive links between identity and accent, how their perceptions have been shaped by experiences living along the border, and how their beliefs and experiences then shape language learning goals for hypothetical new languages to be learned. While participants considered themselves to sound like a native speaker of both English and Spanish, they did note greater difficulty with being misunderstood in Spanish. This is not particularly surprising, despite the fact that almost half of participants reported learning Spanish first and English second (sequentially). Montrul (2013) notes that, as second-generation immigrants head to school in a majority language, it is common for bilinguals to grow stronger in the majority language that they are surrounded by. Fishman (2013) further claims that language shift "has been a dominant (and perhaps even *the* dominant) 'American experience' almost since the very beginning of the founding of the country" (p. 467). Participants' increased interest in sounding native in Spanish may be seen as protective of their heritage language, a way to resist linguistic hegemony through maintained bilingualism (Suarez, 2002). This protectiveness is illustrated

by Isabella, who reported that accents are important, "to show the importance and resistance that you're doing purposefully to be able to prove you are keeping your identity intact."

Whereas previous research showed adult L2 learners may sometimes struggle to perceive links between accent and identity (McCrocklin & Link, 2016), almost all (97%) of the bilinguals represented in this study did perceive links between accent and identity. However, participants generally disagreed that learners should work to maintain a non-native accent to show their cultural identity. Instead, similar to Sung (2014), learners focused more on the pragmatic considerations of accent than on the creation and display of a cultural identity. Specifically, participants noted concerns about intelligibility. Intelligibility was considered the most important learning outcome. This was also reflected in the Likert scales. When comparing the importance of a native accent to intelligibility in English, Spanish, and for a hypothetical new language, intelligibility was considered more important. Yet, the majority of participants (72%) still reported wanting to obtain a native accent in their own possible learning of a new language. Intelligibility turned out to be a key, and possibly decisive, issue. For those that saw a native accent as contributing to intelligibility, participants reported a native accent as the ultimate goal. The smaller group of participants that noted that intelligibility was not dependent on native-accentedness predominantly reported not desiring a native accent as a goal.

Researchers have long been concerned about the ethical ramifications of teaching L2 pronunciation in a way that touted nativeness as an ultimate goal. Still, L2 learners often report wanting to sound native, even when being informed about alternative approaches (Jenkins, 2013). McCrocklin and Link (2016) found that many L2 learners who had not yet mastered a second language fail to see a link between their accent and identity. Without seeing those links, learners may also struggle to understand the reasons that they may wish to maintain a non-native accent.

While bilinguals have been recognized for potentially having insight into the identity aspects that come into play in language learning (Ellis, 2006) and did show greater recognition of possible links between accent and identity (McCrocklin & Link, 2014), it was unclear to what degree that recognition would affect their language learning goals. This study sought to understand the ways that bilingual experiences, and specifically understanding links between accent and identity, might impact language learning goals. While bilinguals did perceive links between accent and identity and showed some willingness to maintain a non-native accent in a new language, the decision hinged on the pragmatic issue of intelligibility. The perception that learners held of the relationship between accent and intelligibility seemed to play a large role in determining language learning goals. Although this study cannot espouse a causation relationship, the relationship may provide insight for L2 instructors.

Implications for Second Language Instructors

This study found that a key concern for students is the pragmatic concern of enabling intelligibility through pronunciation learning. For instructors of second language learners, this study may suggest that in addition to talking about the ways accentedness may be linked to identity, it is important to facilitate discussions of the relationship between accent and intelligibility. While a native accent may lead to increased intelligibility, especially for native listeners, it is important that students learn the ways that these constructs are distinct. It may be that only through an understanding that nativeness is not key for intelligibility students could feel free to make decisions based on the identity they wish to portray.

Teachers could discuss research findings, such as Munro and Derwing (1995) which show that accent and intelligibility are overlapping but distinct aspects of speech. Teachers may find it useful to hold class discussions in which students can talk about their language learning goals, highlighting where appropriate that some language goals might be met without nativeness. Finally, teachers will likely find it useful to bring into the classroom non-native speaker models that are highly intelligible so that students have plenty of opportunities to see successful learners that have maintained a non-native accent.

Notably, it is not the goal of this paper to push students towards any particular model of speech in their learning. As accent is highly tied to identity, the choice of learning goals related to accent should be a student's choice. Learners may still decide that they wish to sound like a native speaker in their L2, but they may also reach for other goals as they establish their identity as a bilingual. However, in order to make a well-informed choice, students must be aware that intelligibility is not the same as nativeness.

Conclusion

Numerous studies have shown that learners often profess an interest in obtaining a native accent in their L2. This study focused on the perceptions and beliefs of bilinguals in a border region to better understand how participants saw links between accent and identity and how that affected language learning goals. Although this study found that the majority of participants saw clear links between accent and identity, the study found that a more important determinant of goals may be the ways that learners understand the relationship between accentedness and intelligibility. In particular, students' understanding that intelligibility does not depend on nativeness opened the door for students to choose to pursue an accented form of the language that they felt better represented their identity.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the importance of these findings, it is crucial to note several limitations. First, participant data gathered in this study did not include information about

participants' major of study. This was an unfortunate oversight, as students in certain majors, such as linguistics, may have held different beliefs than students in other fields. Second, the survey asked participants to self-select their language status. Although the follow-up choices providing possible reasons for claims of bilingualism or monolingualism may have helped participants make decisions, the survey avoided providing a clear-cut definition of bilingualism. Thus, a large number of participants, 31, were excluded from the data because they were uncertain of their status even though they may have met certain definitions of bilingualism. Future studies examining the perspectives of this group may highlight the ways that differing definitions and perceptions of bilingualism also shift perceptions of accentedness. Finally, the interviews were held in English as the researcher did not feel confident in their ability to conduct meaningful interviews in Spanish. Although participants did, at times, code-switch temporarily into Spanish during responses, the focus on English during the interview may have affected responses. Future studies conducted in the participants' heritage language or that offer a choice of language may be able to unearth additional beliefs and perspectives that could further shed light on this topic.

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APPENDIX A

Please rank your agreement with each of the following statements relating to English.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
In my own pronunciation of English, I sound like a native speaker.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I want my own pronunciation in English to sound like a native speaker.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I want my own pronunciation in English to be easy to understand.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I often have trouble being understood when speaking to people in English.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I think Americans would respond to me negatively if I had a strong accent in English.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I think people in the Rio Grande Valley would respond to me negatively if I had a strong accent in English.	○	○	○	○	○	○
I would like to have more of an accent in English, in order to show more of my cultural identity.	○	○	○	○	○	○

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

1. Could you describe your language learning experiences?
    1. What languages do you use on a regular basis? Do you use them for different activities or aspects in your life?
2. Is there anything that you would change about your previous language learning experiences if you had the chance to go back in time?
3. In what ways do you think your language learning experiences have shaped or impacted your identity?
4. How would you describe your accent or pronunciation in English?
    1. For Spanish?
    2. For those reporting a noticeable accent- If you could sound like a native speaker right now, wave my magic wand, would you take that native accent?
        Why or why not?
5. Based on your pronunciation ability in English do (would) you feel comfortable speaking with Americans?
    1. Based on your pronunciation ability in Spanish do (would) you feel comfortable speaking with Mexicans?

6. In what ways do you think that Americans respond to you differently because you have (no accent/ an accent) in English?
    1. For Spanish?
7. In what ways do you think your friends or family would respond to you differently if you had (no accent/an accent) in English?
    1. For Spanish?
8. How do (would) you feel if someone recognizes that you have a foreign accent in English?
    1. In Spanish?
9. If you were to learn a new language today, what language would you learn?
    1. In that language, what would you ultimately like to sound like?
10. Do you think your accent in English reflects something about your cultural identity?
11. Would you like to have more of an accent in the languages you speak? Why?
12. If you learn a new language, do you threaten your identity in a language you already speak?
13. Are there any questions about this topic that you feel I should have asked you about?