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SOUNDING LIKE MYSELF – SERBIAN EFL LEARNERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD PRONUNCIATION AS A MARKER OF LINGUISTIC IDENTITY

The study explores Serbian English-major students' attitudes toward English pronunciation as a marker of linguistic identity, through the investigation of different dimensions such as identity, speaker legitimacy, sense of belonging and situational variability. A total of 64 undergraduate students expressed their views via a 25-item Likert-scale addressing particular dimensions. The results show that students generally perceive pronunciation development as a communicative skill rather than a threat to their own Serbian identity. Correlation analyses revealed relationships between accent awareness and identity-related perceptions, while factors such as pronunciation model preference, learning experience and social media exposure did not prove statistically significant factors for the majority of proposed constructs. Gender and year of study appeared as the only statistically significant predictors, but merely for a limited number of subscales, i.e. accent stance and self-perception. The study yields important pedagogical implications related to the relationship between pronunciation and presentation of concepts of cultural identity and legitimacy in L2.

Keywords: foreign accent, identity, legitimacy, learner attitudes, pronunciation

Introductory Remarks

Identity⁴ is believed to encompass distinguishing characteristics, such as feelings, ideas, beliefs, etc., that differentiate a person or a group of people from others (COLLINS, COBUILD 1990: 718, cited in GEORGOUNTZOU, TSANTILA 2017: 161; 2024: 236). According to Norton (1997: 410), central to the notion of identity is the sense of belonging to a certain community. Hence, the most commonly discussed component of identity

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4 The word *identity* comes from a Latin word *identitas* which means 'sameness' (SHAHREBBABAKI 2018: 217).

is cultural identity. Scholars like Hall (2003: 234) define cultural identity as that which is shared by people with common ancestry and history (GEORGOUNTZOU, TSANTILA 2017: 161). Similarly, Northon (1997: 420) sees cultural identity as a relationship between individuals and members of a group who share not only their history and ancestry, but a common language and ways of understanding the world. Nevertheless, Hall (2003) recognizes that it is difficult to distinguish common experiences, even within one seemingly uniform ethnic group (GEORGOUNTZOU, TSANTILA 2024: 236). Moreover, identity is considered to be dynamic across time and space, it evolves as people go through various changes in life that might even involve moving from one community to another (NORTON 1997: 419). This is precisely why scholars nowadays describe cultural identity as a „dynamic, ongoing and fluid process that individuals may re-evaluate throughout life“ (GEORGOUNTZOU, TSANTILA 2024: 314).

Within this seemingly unified cultural identity there is a myriad of social identities that are shared by the members of each particular social group (BEINHOF 2013: 4). Norton (1997: 420) writes that „social identity refers to the relationship between the individual and the larger social world, as mediated through institutions such as families, schools, workplaces, social services and law courts“. According to Social Identity Theory, which is a framework that was developed in order to explain identity formation, social identity is established and maintained through the individual's constant effort to distinguish his/her behavior from the behavior of the members of other social groups (TAJFEL 1981, cited in BEINHOF 2013: 4). In Morgan's (2003: 50) view, identity is a socially determined practice that encompasses both „who we think we are and what others view us to be“. Sometimes what is emphasized in communication are the parts of one's identity that conform to societal expectations in order to signal group membership, other times people may emphasize aspects of their identity that are different from the social groups they belong to in order to signal individuality (ibid.). As with cultural identity, social identity has a dynamic nature. It influences and is influenced by the personal identities that mark off the peculiarities of each group member (such as their name, manner of speaking, dressing, etc.) (LAWAL, ADEBAYO 2025: 4088). A common thread in the formation of any type of identity, be it personal, social, cultural, gendered, religious, political or other, is the established distinction between an individual or a group, and everyone else (*us* vs. *them*). Typically, the dominant group ('us') establishes a positive identity for itself while one or several dominated groups ('other') are stigmatized based on a real or fabricated difference (ibid. 4094).

Identity is considered to be constructed through language (NORTON 1997: 419; BUCHOLTZ, HALL 2005: 374). It is often maintained that language can signal to others who we are and who we want to be since we can rather easily infer people's emotions, personal traits and certain cultural conventions like femininity or masculinity, leadership, trust, etc., from the prosodic features like pitch, loudness or tempo (MORGAN 2003: 53). For instance, negative emotions such as frustration, anger or contempt are acoustically characterized by an increase in mean intensity (i.e. loudness) and fundamental frequency (i.e. pitch), as well as faster speaking rates and less frequent pauses (PAESCHKE et al. 1999: 929). Differences in the manner of speaking constitute gendered identity (LAWAL, ADEBAYO 2025: 4092). A gender difference would be that men are known to interrupt

more, use shorter sentences and vernacular forms, favor non-standard regional accents, etc. (MORGAN 2003: 53; TAQI, ALGHARABALI et al. 2018: 90). Language is therefore believed to serve not only as a means of communication, but as an identity cue, especially in multilingual environments where it functions as a distinguishing factor between different speech communities. People use linguistic varieties to signal group allegiances and simultaneously detach themselves from those that do not speak the same (SHAHREBBABAKI 2018: 218). There are authors who believe that identities are partially determined by our mother tongue and that the first identity we form is that of a member of a certain speech community (e.g. BIALYSTOK, HAKUTA 1994, cited in GEORGOUNTZOU, TSANTILA 2017: 161; TRUDGILL 2000: 44–45, cited in BLOMQUIST 2009: 10). Group membership can also be communicated through the use of a specific accent as an identity marker (BEINHOF 2013: 4). Accents can be markers of cultural, national, regional identity, or they can be related to factors like age, race or social class (ibid.). In speakers' L1, accents play a role in displaying identity aspects such as gender, race, sexuality, class and religious affiliation (MCCROCKLIN 2024: 4). In L2, accents play a role in signaling native-like or non-native-like proficiency, either of which is commonly subject to both scrutiny and praise. It is useful to note that there is still no consensus among scholars with regard to whether identity results in a specific linguistic behavior or if the causal direction is reversed (SHAHREBBABAKI 2018).

In recent years, scholars have examined the possible effects that target language attainment has on non-native speakers' identity. It has been maintained, for example, that the predominant use of loan words by a non-native speaker of English can be interpreted as the speaker's desire to highlight their belonging to the English speech community (TOŠIĆ 2021: 115). Conversely, the EFL/ESL speakers' insistence on avoiding the use of loan words, their reluctance to approximate to the native-like pronunciation or them code-switching between two or more languages can be interpreted as the speakers' desire to preserve the elements of their own culture while interacting with others (BLOMQUIST 2009: 21–22; TOŠIĆ 2021: 115). Since accent is believed to be one of the most effective markers of identity, an important issue has been raised – whether or not non-native speakers lose a part of their identity by adopting a more native-like L2 accent. Several research studies have looked into the possibility of an EFL learners' identity being shaped by their foreign accent in English. Studies have also touched upon the issue of whether or not the attainment of the native-like pronunciation necessarily contributes to the loss of one's own cultural identity. The results of such studies will be discussed in the following segment.

Previous Research

Despite the insistence of some scholars (JENKINS 1998; MOMENIAN 2011) that standard pronunciation models⁵ should be abandoned in favor of a seemingly more attainable pronunciation goal such as the *Lingua Franca Core*, developed within Jenkins' paradigm of English as a *Lingua Franca* (abbreviated to ELF), English language learners

5 A *pronunciation model* is the variety which is presented to students in the classroom for imitation, it is typically spoken by the professor or presented to students via audio materials (RICHTER, WEISSENBACK 2021: 1). In a broader sense, a pronunciation model is the accent heard in class which is spoken by peers, or the accent heard on television (RICHTER, WEISSENBACK 2022: 89–90).

commonly state a preference for native varieties (PAUNOVIĆ 2009: 525; HENDERSON, FROST et al. 2012: 20; CARRIE 2017: 431; GEORGOUNTZOU, TSANTILA 2017: 167; STOJIĆ 2017: 309; WONG 2018: 177; RICHTER 2021: 337; RICHTER, WEISSENBACK 2021: 8; 2022: 90; TOŠIĆ 2021: 121; MCCROCKLIN 2024: 1; FERRAGNE, TALBOT et al. 2024: 1). Only a small percentage of EFL learners tend to opt for a localized English pronunciation and many believe that those accents might confuse the listeners or that they will indicate the learners' lack of pronunciation skills (WONG 2018: 181; RICHTER 2021: 337). Carrie (2017: 431) believes that the preference for native-like accents comes from teachers who promote such models in their teaching practice. However, in a research study conducted with Austrian pre-service English teachers, it was observed that the teachers' influence on the students' choice of a pronunciation model was more apparent for the students who opted for a British pronunciation model (72%) as opposed to the students who chose the American variety as their reference accent (42%) (RICHTER, WEISSENBACK 2021: 6). In the study done by Georgountzou and Tsantila (2024: 321), Greek EFL teachers explicitly stated that they do not think their students need to speak English with a native-like proficiency (2017: 167). Yet, their students expressed precisely that preference (ibid.). In a European-wide on-line survey of English pronunciation teaching practices conducted in seven countries (Finland, France, Germany, Macedonia, Poland, Spain and Switzerland) it was noted that despite the teachers' use of RP, GA was preferred by the students (HENDERSON, FROST et al. 2012: 7, 20–21). Therefore, although it is generally stated that the EFL/ESL teachers can influence the learners' choice of a pronunciation model either by selecting specific teaching materials that promote one native model or by speaking a specific accent themselves, recent studies suggest that these factors do not have the same effect they used to, since students nowadays are not confined to the classroom as the only source of L2 exposure. On the contrary, in recent years, students' informal exposure to L2 has repeatedly been shown to facilitate their choices of pronunciation models.

After World War II, English surpassed languages such as French and German and became the most commonly studied language in Europe (MODIANO 2006: 223). The model variety in virtually all European countries was British English due to the fact that ELT materials that were used in EFL practice originated from Britain (ibid.). Similarly, Serbian students are mostly offered materials in British English (JEROTIJEVIĆ TIŠMA, KARAVESOVIĆ 2020: 72). Mompeán González (2004: 253–254) stresses that more than 95% of ELT materials published online have RP, GA or both pronunciation models as referent accents. In the recent decade, there has been a growing interest in American English among European students. Such tendencies were noted in Austria (RICHTER, WEISSENBACK 2021: 3, 8; 2022: 91), Serbia (STOJIĆ 2017: 312; ČUBROVIĆ, BJELAKOVIĆ 2020: 139, 141; TOŠIĆ 2021: 121), Finland, Germany, Macedonia, Poland, Spain, Switzerland (HENDERSON, FROST et al. 2012: 20–21), Norway (RINDAL 2012: 9–10, 12) and France (HENDERSON, FROST et al. 2012: 20–21; FERRAGNE, TALBOT et al. 2024: 15). Commonly cited reason for the choice of this model is the overwhelming exposure to the American variety through the media (HENDERSON, FROST et al. 2012: 21; RINDAL 2012: 61; ČUBROVIĆ, BJELAKOVIĆ 2020: 149; RICHTER, WEISSENBACK 2021: 3; 2022: 96, 101). As Richter and Weissenback (2022: 90–91) suggest, the students'

preference for an L2 pronunciation model other than that which is presented by their teachers indicates that explicit pronunciation instruction is nowadays less likely to assume the role of input compared to the students' informal exposure to the L2.

It is often stated that the teachers' insistence on a native-like fluency and on adopting a certain native pronunciation model can affect the students' self-image, especially if those students do not share such aspirations. This has been presented as an argument for the adoption of English as an International Language (abbreviated to EIL) (see MOMENIAN 2011). More specifically, it was argued that EIL is a better alternative for those who are afraid of losing their identities by approximating to native pronunciation models. There are studies that show that the learners who identify more with the target speech community tend to receive better grades which, in effect, suggests a higher language attainment (RICHTER 2021: 326). It has also been proposed that the less non-native learners identify with the target language and culture, the more likely they are to retain a foreign accent and use it as a marker of their own identity (JONES 1997, cited in RICHTER 2021: 342; GATBONTON, TROFIMOVICH 2025: 489, 492). A study conducted by Gatbonton and Trofimovich (2025: 489) tested the L2 learners' degree of ethnic group affiliation (Francophone and Chinese in Quebec). The authors found that learners see the L2 accent of their peers as a sign of their home ethnic affiliation, i.e. they perceive those speakers to be loyal to their home group (*ibid.* 489). Oftentimes, it is expressed that L2 learners are forced to choose between, on the one hand, approximating their pronunciation to a native-like accent in order to signify their acceptance and affiliation to the target language community, and preserving their foreign accent so as to mark cultural identity, on the other (GATBONTON, TROFIMOVICH 2025: 489, 492). Some scholars go as far as to question whether pronunciation training and trying to change one's pronunciation is even ethical (e.g. DANIELS 1995, cited in RICHTER 2021: 324). One of the research studies that looked into the supposed loss of one's identity in the process of attaining language proficiency in the target language, with respect to pronunciation, did not confirm that the examinees were afflicted by a fear of losing their native identity (RICHTER 2021: 323). Conversely, the subjects' goal was to approximate their pronunciation to the chosen standard pronunciation model (RP or GA) as closely as possible (*ibid.*). Therefore, the assumption that L1 accent reduction necessarily eradicates learners' first language identity proved to be false by the findings of the said research study. Another research that rejected the abovementioned premise of the loss of cultural identity in the process of L2 attainment had native Greek students as examinees (GEORGOUNTZOU, TSANTILA 2017: 162). The results showed that Greek students are successful in dissociating their cultural identity from their preference for native-like English pronunciation models and that they do not feel like their cultural identity is affected when they approximate native English accents (*ibid.* 166–170). The same observation of dissociating the Greek cultural identity from the native-like English pronunciation models was made in yet another study conducted by the authors (2024: 315, 323–324) that assessed the opinions of Greek EFL teachers. A research study conducted by Tošić (2021: 122–123) found that the Serbian EFL learners' preference for American model of pronunciation does not pose a threat to their Serbian identities given that the overwhelming majority of Serbian learners claim that they best convey their thoughts and emotions in Serbian, rather than in English, and

that the majority perceived Serbian culture to be more alluring.

Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 376) do not see identities as attributes of individuals or groups, but of situations. For this reason, identities in their view can shift to accommodate new circumstances (*ibid.*). Gatbonton, Trofimovich et al. (2025: 504–505) suggest that people are members of at least one social group, typically the one they were born into, i.e. their ethnic group. If they maintain contact with only one ethnic group „the identities they negotiate in their day-to-day interactions are limited to those of a more personal nature (identities as men or women, employers, employees, wives, husbands, parents, etc.)” (*ibid.* 505). Learning an L2 opens the door for people to establish their membership to another ethnic group (*ibid.*). As previously mentioned, several studies do not support the idea that L2 learners feel like they might lose their cultural identities in the process of attaining proficiency in L2 (MCCROCKLIN 2024: 13). For L2 learners, the attainment of a native-like accent signals the ultimate mastery of the language (*ibid.* 15), and as McCrocklin and Link (2016) have observed, L2 learners find other ways of signaling their identity – an ethnic appearance, clothing, and knowledge of their first language, etc. (cited in MCCROCKLIN 2024: 5). Richter (2021: 338) further supports this belief, adding that „rather than replacing a firmly established identity, taking on a new (L2) accent means expanding one’s repertoire of identities rather than jeopardizing existing ones“.

Serbian learners live in a predominantly homogeneous speech community where there is no imminent need to adopt a native-like accent or identify with a target language community, as there is in a naturalistic context (ESL) where migrants have to conform to a certain extent in order to be accepted in the L2 environment (MONTRUL 2013, cited in MCCROCKLIN 2024: 15). It might be that Serbian learners do not feel threatened in their attempts to approximate the native English models of pronunciation simply because of the social context in which the L2 is learned. That is, Serbian learners might not feel like their cultural identity is being challenged because they are already a part of the dominant cultural group due to them being born into it. In the research study done by Tošić (2021: 121) it was observed that only 7.6% of Serbian students wish to be perceived as non-native speakers of English. It was argued by the author that such a choice is motivated by the speakers’ desire to signal their membership to the Serbian speech community (*ibid.*). Tošić (2021: 121–122) also argues that the preference for native-like accents might be a necessity, rather than a choice, since native-sounding English is perceived as the standard in Serbia and the students who don’t approximate the native-like models risk getting lower grades. Serbian learners most likely see the attainment of a native-like accent as just another skill to be achieved. The present research was developed so as to determine if these assumptions are correct. In the following sub-sections, the methodological underpinnings of this research will be further elaborated upon.

Methodology

Aims and Research Questions

The main goal of the study is to investigate Serbian English-major students’ attitudes toward pronunciation as a marker of linguistic identity. The central question is whether students regard their accent as an expression of personal and social identity or a linguistic skill to be improved. Special attention is devoted to the perceived relationship

between native-like pronunciation and identity preservation, as well as students' sense of belonging, legitimacy and flexibility in interactions conducted in English. Hence, the general aim of the study is to provide preliminary evidence on how pronunciation is integrated into the identity positioning of Serbian English-major students.

To meet the proposed goals, the study is based upon the following research questions:

- How do Serbian English-major students perceive their own pronunciation and foreign accent?
- To what extent is pronunciation perceived as a marker of linguistic identity?
- Do Serbian English-major students perceive the development of native-like pronunciation as a threat to their identity?
- Do Serbian English-major students perceive themselves as legitimate users of English?
- Do Serbian English-major students report situational variation in pronunciation that might reflect the dynamic nature of linguistic identity?

Respondents

The study included 64 undergraduate students enrolled in the English Language and Literature study program at the English Department of the Faculty of Philology and Arts, University of Kragujevac. 45.3% of the students attended the first year and *English Phonetics* course, while 54.7% students attended the second year and *English Phonology* course. The sample consisted of 18 male students (28.1%) and 46 female students (71.9%) with an average age of 19.73 (SD=1.07). The diagnostic testing showed that the respondents were at the C1 CEFR level of proficiency⁶.

In an introductory part of the survey, the participants reported extensive prior exposure to English through formal education. Namely, 53.1% indicated having studied English for 13 years, 25% for 14 years, 14.1% for 15 years and 16.78% for 16 years. Daily time spent on social media was distributed in the following way: 10.9% reported spending less than one hour a day, 26.6% one to two hours, 31.8% two to three hours and 29.7% reported spending three to four hours a day on social media platforms. Respondents were also asked to indicate their preferred pronunciation model in the sense of the one they prefer to have, not necessarily the one they actually possess in their speech. A strong preference for General American (GA) was expressed by 68.8%, while 31.3% stated they preferred Received Pronunciation (RP). The realistic remark by their instructor, based on in-class experience, is that 100% of them use a consistent GA accent.

Survey Design and Administration

For the purpose of data collection in the present study, a specific questionnaire was developed, based on sociolinguistic conceptualizations of identity as dynamic, interactionally negotiated and context-dependent (e.g. NORTON 1997; BUCHOLTZ, HALL 2005). The item construction was also informed by previous empirical examination of pronunciation, identity positioning and native-like preference in EFL contexts (PULLEN 2011; RICHTER 2021). The final instrument consisted of the introductory part contain-

⁶ The diagnostic test taken can be found here: <https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/test-your-english/>.

ing general questions on gender, age, preferred pronunciation model, formal linguistic experience in English and social media use, while the main part of the questionnaire consisted of 25 Likert-scale items, rated on a five-point scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). The questionnaire was organized into five theoretically motivated subscales: a) self-perception of accent (items 1-5), b) relationship between accent and identity (items 6-10), c) pronunciation and sense of belonging in interaction (items 11-15), d) perceived speaker legitimacy (items 16-20) and e) situation shift and dynamic identity (items 21-25). Higher mean scores were interpreted as stronger endorsement of the respective construct.

The questionnaire was administered in person during regular class sessions in October-November 2023 and March-April 2024, and the completion required approximately 7-10 minutes. Participation was voluntary, with respondents providing written informed consent prior to completing the survey.

Due to the exploratory nature of the research and a relatively small sample size, the internal consistency analysis was not conducted since reliability estimates such as Cronbach's alpha are sensitive to sample size and are more informative when applied to larger datasets. Thus, the questionnaire was developed and regarded as a pilot instrument intended to capture a range of identity-related attitudes toward pronunciation rather than to establish a fully validated psychometric scale. The instrument is therefore treated as a theoretically grounded preliminary measure with the expectation that future studies with larger samples could allow for more comprehensive evaluation, including internal consistency and factor structure analyses.

Data Analysis

Statistical processing required for questionnaire results analysis, including descriptive statistics, t-test, ANOVA and Pearson correlations, was performed using SPSS, version 20. Given the relatively small sample, the results are interpreted as exploratory and indicative, intended to inform future research with potentially larger samples and further subscale refinement.

Results and Discussion

The questionnaire results are presented in Table 1 below, providing insight into Serbian English-major students' attitudes toward pronunciation as a marker of linguistic identity.

Table 1. *Results of the Questionnaire (%)*

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean; s.d.
1. My accent is an important element of the way I sound when I speak English.	/	/	10.9	37.5	51.6	4.41 0.68
2. I am satisfied with my pronunciation of English.	6.3	18.8	21.9	39.1	14.1	3.36 1.13

3. I want to possess native-like accent in English.	/	6.3	12.5	34.4	46.9	4.22 0.89
4. I feel comfortable having a foreign accent when speaking English.	6.3	21.9	28.1	15.6	28.1	3.38 1.28
5. I feel I have a noticeable foreign accent when I speak English.	20.3	32.8	29.7	7.8	9.4	2.53 1.18
6. When I speak English, I feel like I am taking on a new identity.	17.2	18.8	23.4	28.1	12.5	3.0 1.29
7. I am afraid that sounding like a native speaker might make me lose part of my identity.	14.1	34.4	34.4	7.8	9.4	2.64 1.12
8. I would be proud if someone complimented me on my native-like accent.	1.6	3.1	32.8	25.0	37.5	3.94 0.99
9. I feel close to English-speaking cultures, and native-like accent is part of that closeness.	6.3	18.8	35.9	15.6	23.4	3.31 1.21
10. Improving my pronunciation does not mean losing my Serbian identity.	/	/	18.8	35.9	45.3	4.27 0.76
11. My pronunciation helps me feel I belong in interactions in English.	14.1	17.2	31.3	18.8	18.8	3.11 1.29
12. I feel comfortable expressing myself in English even if my pronunciation is not native-like.	9.4	25.0	21.9	25.0	18.8	3.19 1.28
13. My pronunciation affects how confident I am when interacting in English.	9.4	20.3	20.3	17.2	32.8	3.44 1.38
14. I feel accepted by English interlocutors regardless of my accent.	4.7	18.8	40.6	12.5	23.4	3.31 1.17
15. My pronunciation influences how connected I feel to others when I speak English.	12.5	34.4	26.6	9.4	17.2	2.84 1.28
16. I feel I have the right to participate in interactions in English.	/	/	18.8	26.6	54.7	4.36 0.78

17. I see myself as a legitimate speaker of English, regardless of the foreign accent.	/	/	32.8	18.8	48.4	4.16 0.89
18. My accent does not limit my right to speak English.	/	/	25.0	18.8	56.3	4.31 0.85
19. The way my peers perceive my pronunciation is important to me.	10.9	12.5	18.8	18.8	39.1	3.63 1.39
20. I feel proud when people recognize my native language when I speak English.	14.1	43.8	18.8	9.4	14.1	2.66 1.25
21. I consciously adjust my pronunciation depending on who I am speaking to.	4.7	23.4	20.3	20.3	31.3	3.5 1.28
22. My pronunciation changes in formal and informal situations.	17.2	20.3	14.1	18.8	29.7	3.23 1.49
23. I feel comfortable shifting my pronunciation style across different situations.	10.9	26.6	15.6	17.2	29.7	3.29 1.44
24. I use my pronunciation strategically in different social contexts.	7.8	15.6	21.9	23.4	31.3	3.55 1.29
25. My sense of identity in English can vary depending on the situation.	17.2	29.7	20.3	12.5	20.3	2.89 1.39

In general, judging by the results from the questionnaire, mean values suggest that Serbian English-major students ascribe considerable importance to pronunciation while simultaneously maintaining a clear distinction between linguistic performance and cultural identity.

The first subscale (items 1-5) examined students' perception of their own accent and attitudes to foreign accentedness in English. The results show that pronunciation is perceived as a meaningful component of the students' self-presentation since the highest mean was recorded for the statement that accent constitutes an important element of how learners sound when speaking English ($M=4.41$). A large number of respondents expressed the desire to achieve a native-like accent (about 80%), confirming the assumed prestige of native pronunciation models in EFL contexts. Simultaneously, self-evaluations of their own accentedness were moderate. The lowest mean in this section ($M=2.53$) was reserved for the statement related to the presence of a noticeable foreign accent, which is understandable having in mind that the students were English majors and had been studying and using English for a considerable amount of time. Responses regarding satisfaction with pronunciation and being comfortable with having a foreign accent showed more variability and were closer to the midpoint of the scale, which may point to the de-

veloped self-reflection and critical approach to one's own learning. Overall, the results of the subscale in question confirm that accent remains an important dimension of linguistic self-perception, with the attitudes toward accentedness not being entirely uniform.

Regarding the second subscale (items 6-10) related to the relationship between pronunciation and personal and cultural identity, the results indicate that Serbian English-major students do not generally perceive pronunciation improvement as a threat to their identity. The highest mean score ($M=4.27$) belongs to the statement that improving pronunciation does not imply losing Serbian identity, showing that the respondents reject the notion that adopting native-like pronunciation means unquestionable cultural assimilation. This finding is further supported by the low mean score for the statement that sounding like a native speaker might lead to the loss of one's identity ($M=2.64$). However, some responses also revealed a certain degree of identity-related positioning. Namely, a moderately high level of agreement was noticed for the statement expressing pride in receiving compliments on native-like pronunciation ($M=3.94$), which could point to the attitude that native-like pronunciation shows high achievement and prestige. Moreover, some students reported feeling closer to English-speaking countries when speaking with a native-like accent (about 40%), supporting the view that learners may associate native-like pronunciation with cultural proximity and linguistic competence without seeing it as a threat to identity. In general, the subscale shows that students perceive pronunciation development as an expansion of their linguistic repertoire, rather than a replacement of existing identity, leading to the conclusion that L2 identity may coexist with L1 identity.

The third subscale (items 11-15) addressing the role of pronunciation in students' sense of belonging and confidence in interactions, indicated moderately positive attitudes toward the role of pronunciation in communicative interaction, since the mean scores were clustered around the midpoint. Namely, students reported that pronunciation influences their confidence ($M=3.44$), suggesting that the phonological component represents an important factor in self-perceived communicative competence. Similarly, participants demonstrated moderate endorsement of the statements on pronunciation helping them feel accepted ($M=3.31$) and on contributing to their overall comfort when interacting in English ($M=3.19$). Interestingly, the item referring to the effect of pronunciation on feelings of interpersonal connectedness received a lower mean score ($M=2.84$). This could be interpreted in the way that even though pronunciation may affect confidence and perceived acceptance, students do not regard it as a decisive factor in forming social connections. To put it simply, rather than being a determinant of interpersonal bonding, pronunciation predominantly functions as a communicative and evaluative factor.

The fourth subscale (items 16-20), measuring students' perception of their legitimacy as English users, produced some of the highest means in the dataset, pointing to a strong sense of entitlement to participate in English-speaking interactions. Respondents strongly agreed that they had the right to participate in English interactions ($M=4.36$) and that their accent did not limit their right to speak English ($M=4.31$). Students generally viewed themselves as legitimate speakers of English regardless of the foreign accent ($M=4.16$), which suggests that they do not believe that a foreign accent undermines their authority and competence as English users. A degree of sensitivity to social evaluation is, however, evident by the relatively high mean for the statement indicating that peer per-

ceptions of pronunciation are important ($M=3.63$). Even though students feel entitled to speak English, they are aware of how pronunciation can be judged by others. Interestingly enough, pride in being recognized as a speaker with a Serbian foreign accent was indicated by only about 20% of the respondents, drawing attention to the fact that respondents, as English-major students, do not seek to foreground their L1 identity through English pronunciation.

Finally, the fifth subscale (items 21-25) investigated how much of students' pronunciation behaviour depended on the context and the interlocutor, aiming to reflect the dynamic nature of linguistic identity. Overall, the results suggest that many students engage in some degree of situational variation in their pronunciation. Respondents consciously adjust their pronunciation to the interlocutor ($M=3.50$) which is additionally aided by their high level of general proficiency. Furthermore, they use pronunciation strategically in different social situations ($M=3.55$). These findings may suggest that students are equipped to use their pronunciation as a communicative resource for adapting behaviour to different interactions. However, statements related to identity variation received somewhat lower scores. Particularly, the mean score was below the midpoint for the statement that one's sense of identity in English may vary depending on a situation ($M=2.89$), which means that students demonstrate situational shifts in pronunciation use without regarding them as changes in identity. In other words, pronunciation adaptations and adjustments may be interpreted as pragmatic or stylistic functions rather than transformations of identity.

In order to explore the relationship between the subscales, a Pearson correlation analysis was performed. A moderate negative correlation was observed between the first and second scales ($r=-.468$, $p<.001$) which suggests that students who place a stronger emphasis on accent-related self-perception tend to be less concerned about identity loss when improving pronunciation. A weaker but statistically significant correlation was also found between the first and the third subscale ($r=-.257$, $p=.040$). This means that students who pay more attention to accent possess slightly lower perceptions of belonging in English interactions. The remaining correlations between the subscales were relatively weak and not statistically significant, suggesting that these dimensions may function relatively independently when it comes to students' conceptualization of pronunciation and identity.

To examine whether male and female respondents differ in their attitudes, an independent-samples t-test was conducted. Gender differences were non-significant across most constructs, except for the first subscale ($t_{(62)}=2.558$, $p=.013$). Female respondents reported significantly stronger endorsement with accent-related self-perception than males, pointing to a greater sensitivity to pronunciation aspects of speech and identity. Moreover, no statistically significant differences were observed across any of the subscales for the factor of preferred pronunciation model, which means that the accent preference does not substantially shape students' attitudes to pronunciation, identity or legitimacy. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether learning experience had anything to do with students' responses and no statistically significant difference was found for any of the subscales. For example, the first subscale yielded $F_{(3,60)}=1.862$, $p=.145$, while the second subscale approached but did not reach statistical significance $F_{(3,60)}=2.568$, $p=.064$.

The relatively homogeneous distribution of experience (between 13 and 16 years) could explain the absence of statistical significance, along with the fact that it did not substantially influence students' attitudes expressed in the current study. Similarly to the situation with gender, an independent-samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference for the first subscale between students in the first and second year of study ($t_{(62)}=2.556$, $p=.013$). Second-year students reported higher scores than first-year students, indicating that more advanced students could demonstrate stronger awareness of accent-related aspects of L2 speech. This could also reflect the influence of increased phonetic and phonological training, because, as students progress through their studies, they become more attentive to pronunciation accuracy. However, no statistically significant differences were observed for the rest of the scales. Finally, one-way ANOVA results showed that social media exposure did not significantly affect any of the five subscales (e.g. first subscale yielded $F_{(3,60)}=1.704$, $p=.177$ and second subscale showed $F_{(3,60)}=2.526$, $p=.067$). Post-hoc comparisons revealed only one statistically significant pairwise difference within the second scale between participants reporting one to two hours and those reporting two to three hours of social media use ($p=0.044$). Nevertheless, given the overall non-significant ANOVA result, this isolated difference should be interpreted with caution. Overall, digital exposure through social media did not appear as a decisive factor in shaping Serbian English-major students' attitudes to pronunciation and sense of identity when speaking English.

Concluding Remarks

The present study aimed to investigate Serbian English-major students' attitudes toward English pronunciation as a marker of linguistic identity. Furthermore, the goal was to explore whether pronunciation-related beliefs were associated with students' sense of belonging, legitimacy as English speakers and identity negotiation in interactions.

The results of the present study contribute to the growing body of research emphasizing the dynamic and situational nature of linguistic identity (BUCHOLTZ, HALL 2005). Furthermore, the correlation patterns suggest that higher awareness of pronunciation does not necessarily coincide with stronger identity tension, which supports the view that acquiring an L2 accent expands speakers' identity repertoire rather than replacing the existing identities (RICHTER 2021; MCCROCKLIN 2024). By analyzing students' responses across five conceptual dimensions – accent self-perception, relationship between accent and identity, pronunciation and sense of belonging, perceived speaker legitimacy and identity dynamics, the main aim was to examine whether Serbian students perceive pronunciation development as a threat to identity or simply as a communicative skill. The findings indicate that the respondents generally perceive it as a linguistic competence rather than a threat, while simultaneously expressing a strong preference toward native-like pronunciation models. Nonetheless, they possess a clear sense of their own cultural identity. These results align with previous research suggesting that EFL learners often aspire to approximate native pronunciation models without seeing it as a form of cultural assimilation (GEORGOUNTZOU, TSANTILA 2017; RICHTER 2021). Although a foreign accent is a natural outcome of language learning, non-native speakers can suffer certain consequences, mostly when it comes to the job market (BREITKREUTZ, DERWING et al. 2001: 59; HOLLIDAY 2006: 385; SRINIVASU, THIRUNAGARI et al. 2024:

954). Namely, employment advertisements may only call for native English speakers, which might limit the non-native speakers' job opportunities. Learners who are pre-service teachers are also likely to feel less proficient compared to the teachers who are native English speakers and who are believed to have an innate knowledge of their language. In Hong Kong, for instance, native English speakers are given higher salaries than the local English teachers (2018: 181). Hence, adopting a native-like accent seems to be necessary in order for non-native students to affirm their role as „competent teachers“ (GEORGIOUNTZOU, TSANTILA 2024: 324).

Despite the indicative findings and insights, several limitations must be addressed here. Namely, the study relied on a relatively small sample of participants and the questionnaire was designed as a pilot instrument rather than a fully validated psychometric scale. Hence, the results are interpreted as exploratory rather than fully generalizable. Additionally, the sample consisted of English-major students from a single institution, which may have contributed to the relative homogeneity of responses, due to their similar background and educational experience. Future research involving a larger and more diverse sample would allow for more comprehensive examination of the constructs addressed in the present study. Moreover, future studies could extend the present findings by combining questionnaire data with qualitative methods such as interviews, or employ longitudinal designs to explore how attitudes and identity perceptions evolve with learner progress.

From a pedagogical perspective, it seems of utmost importance to note that students conceptualize pronunciation development as a professional and communicative competence that enhances their participation in English-speaking interactions. The latter has important pedagogical implications, especially regarding the ongoing debates on native-speaker models and English as an International Language. Teachers might benefit greatly from framing pronunciation practice as an expansion of learners' communicative repertoire rather than an attempt to erase learners' linguistic identity. A more reflective understanding of learners' role as multilingual speakers could be developed through explicitly addressing the relationship between accent, identity and linguistic legitimacy.

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DA LI TI ZVUČIM KAO JA – STAVOVI SRPSKIH STUDENATA ANGLISTIKE PREMA
IZGOVORU KAO INDIKATORU JEZIČKOG IDENTITETA

Rezime

U radu se ispituju stavovi srpskih studenata anglistike prema izgovoru engleskog jezika kao markeru jezičkog identiteta, kroz upitnik sastavljen od nekoliko različitih dimenzija kao što su identitet, legitimitet govornika, osećaj pripadnosti i situaciona varijabilnost. Ukupno 64 studenata osnovnih studija anglistike izrazilo je svoje stavove putem ankete sa 25 izjava na Likertovoj skali, u kojoj je po pet izjava pripadalo svakoj od istraživanih dimenzija. Rezultati pokazuju da studenti generalno doživljavaju poboljšanje izgovora kao razvoj komunikativnih veština, a ne kao pretnju po sopstveni srpski identitet. Analize korelacije otkrile su veze između svesti o akcentu i percepcija vezanih za identitet, dok se faktori poput preferiranog modela izgovora, iskustva u učenju i izloženosti društvenim mrežama nisu pokazali kao statistički značajni faktori za većinu predloženih koncepata. Pol i godina studija pojavili su se kao jedini statistički značajni prediktori, ali samo za ograničen broj podskala, tj. stav prema stranom naglasku i samopercepciju izgovora. U radu se ističu važne pedagoške implikacije koje se odnose na povezanost izgovora sa načinom na koji se prezentuju koncepti poput kulturnog identiteta i legitimiteta u nastavi stranog jezika.

Ključne reči: strani naglasak, identitet, legitimitet, stavovi učenika, izgovor