



# Faking Ze French Haccent: An Analysis of French Accent Imitation by Comedians and Native English Speakers

By Chantal Dufour  
Supervisor: Lynne Cahill

## Introduction



People with exposure to certain accents are able to identify and reproduce certain phonological features which differ from their own accent. This paper identifies and analyses certain salient phonological features: /ð/, /θ/, /ʒ/, /h/ and cognates and looks at how these are realised by comedians and native English speakers when they are imitating the French accent. The accent imitations are then compared to native French speakers in order to test accuracy.

## Research Questions

- What do comedians and native English speakers perceive as the key phonological features of the French accent?
- Do comedians and native English speakers have an accurate perception of the salient phonological features of the French accent?
- How do native English speakers and comedians take advantage of these features when imitating the French accent?



## Why is this an interesting area of study?

- Indicates areas of contrast between English and French pronunciation which are evident to native English speakers.
- Creates a link between how people perceive an accent and how they reproduce the accent, highlighting our ability to pick up on salient features of foreign accents.
- Looks at the accuracy of stereotypes of the French accent.



## Background

Not much work has been done on accent imitation and there are no papers which focus on the imitation of the French accent and the features which are identified of this accent. However, a study was carried out looking at how native Swedish speakers imitate the British Swedish accent (Tortensson et al., 2004).

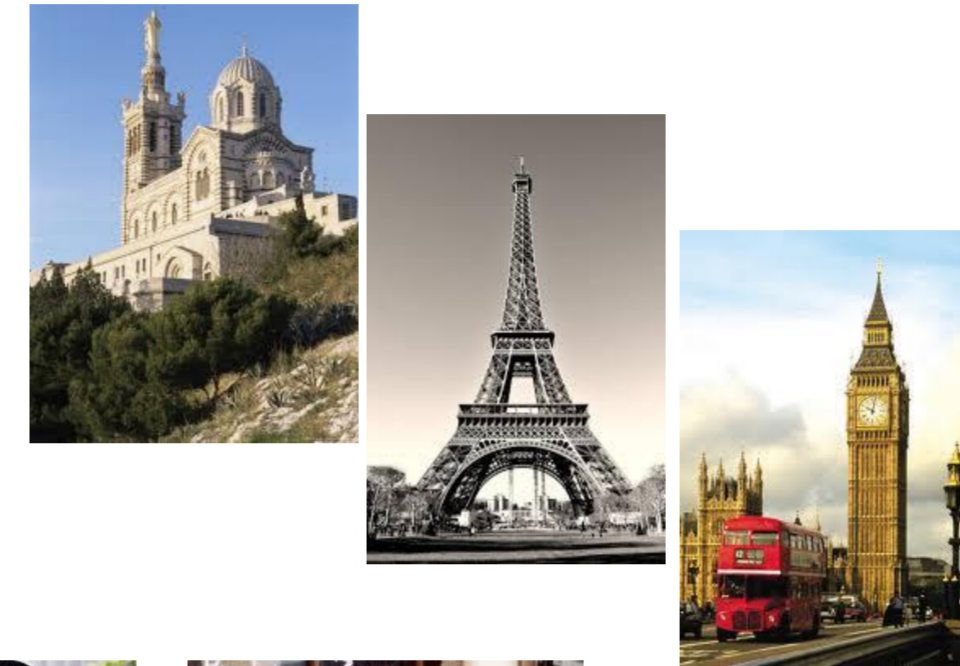
## Other areas of research include:

- **Foreign Accent Syndrome** which illustrates that people are able to identify foreign accents due to the salient features which differ from their own accent (Coughlan et al., 2004)
- **Attitudes Towards Accents**, indicating that people are aware of typical features of accents and judge these accents by these features (Giles, 2006).
- **Sounds of French and English** which looks at the differences between French and English, providing a better understanding of why French people pronounce certain features the way that they do (Tranel, 1987).
- **French Accent Imitation**- A guide on how to imitate the French accent is provided on a website used to teach English speakers French. Certain key features are explored (french.about.com, 2013)

## Methodology

### Who?

- 4 native French speakers from Marseille.
- 4 native French speakers from Paris.
- 4 native English speakers.
- 4 comedians (films/stand-up/series).



### What?

- Native French speakers read an extract from the children's book Mr Happy in English, while native English speakers read the same extract in French-accented English.
- Comedians imitating the French accents are analysed for the chosen features.

### How and How Many?

- Participants are recorded using a dictaphone or participants record themselves using basic recording equipment such as mobile phones.
- Pronunciation is judged by ear as consonants are fairly easily classified and analysed, as is the pronunciation of cognates.
- All occurrences of each of the features are analysed.

## Examples of Data:

### /h/

England: [ʃi:ns **ɒ**tɛɪ **ð**æn **ɪ**ə]: shines hotter than here

### /ð/

Marseille: [plɛis **d**æt i:vən **z**ə]: place that even the

### /θ/

Paris: [sʁu: **z**ə **j**ævə **z**in dɔ:weɪ]: through the rather thin

### /ʒ/

Comedians: [fɔ: **f**ju:tʃə **d**ʒɛnə**j**eɪʃənz]: for future generations

## Cognates

French pronunciation of cognates mainly found in English recordings: **6 VS 4**

Examples of Cognates in Mr Happy Extract: **miserable, large, lake, cottage.**

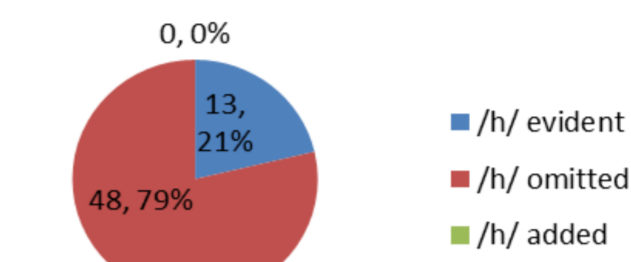


## Factors Influencing Data

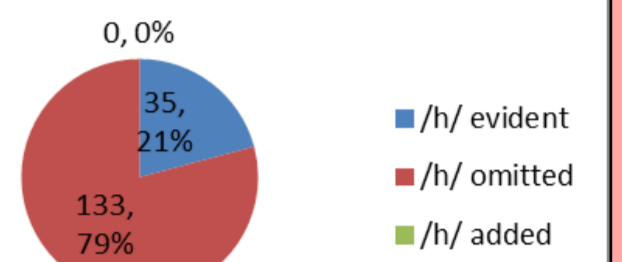
- Age of participants.
- The representation of the French accent by the comedians is staged.
- Steve Martin is American and so this could influence his interpretation of the French accent.
- Knowledge of French/ English.

## Results in Graphs

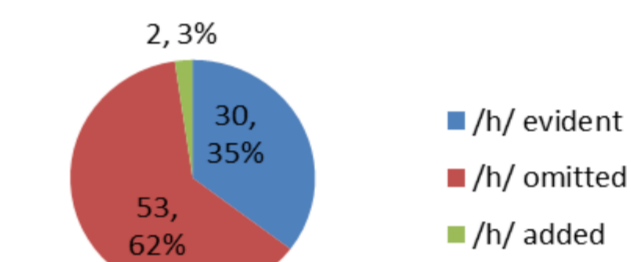
### Comedians: Production of /h/



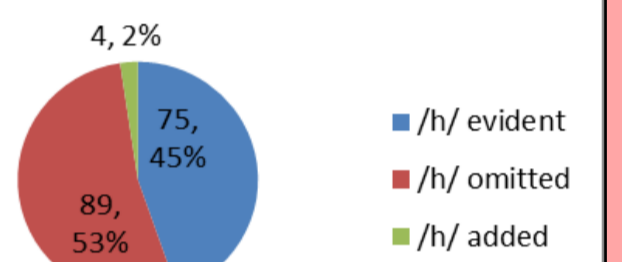
### England Natives: Production of /h/



### Paris Production of /h/



### Marseille Production of /h/



## Discussion of Graphs

- /h/ is omitted more in accent imitation than it is by native French speakers **79% and 79% VS 53% and 62%**.
- /h/ is evident **21% and 21%** in accent imitation VS **45% and 35%** in native French speakers.
- /h/ is added by native French speakers where it is not usually apparent; comedians and native English speakers do not pick up on this feature.

## Conclusions

- Comedians and native English speakers perceive and identify the salient features of the French accent and are often accurate in producing these features during imitation (Giles, 2006) (Coughlan et al., 2004).
- Some features however do appear to be exaggerated. E.g. /h/ and pronunciation of **cognates**.
- Some of the features identified by native English speakers are: **omission of /h/**, realisation of /ð/ and /θ/ as (primarily) /z/, **French pronunciation of cognates** (more than native French speakers) and realisation of /ʒ/ as uvular /ʁ/.
- Comedians identify: **omission of /h/**, realisation of /ð/ and /θ/ as /z/ but mainly pronounce these as /ð/ and /θ/ and the French pronunciation of cognates occurs sometimes but less than native English speakers (french.about.com, 2013).
- As Tortensson et al. (2004) found, there is a significant correspondence between what was expected and what was found (known accent= ability to pick out key features) and the pronunciation of cognates is exaggerated during imitation.

## References

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