Young people’s perspectives on the mobility of Australian English accents

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ABSTRACT: This paper draws on lines of sociolinguistic theory that have arisen in response to globalisation and current thinking about mobilities in the social sciences. Using the constructs of space, scale and centre-periphery, we set out to analyse 564 Australian high school students’ responses to a questionnaire item which asked: *‘If you moved to another country, how important would it be for you to keep your Australian accent?’* Our exploration of the students’ responses through these lenses reveals the diverse ways in which young people imagine the mobility of their own accents and also how they situate the Australian accent more broadly. Some students perceive their accent as an important marker of their identity and therefore place it at the centre, while others downscale their accent and therefore relegate it to the periphery. In contrast, other students express a more pragmatic, agentic view of accent that takes into account the broader range of communicative needs in today’s globalised world. These responses reject the importance of accent as a global symbolic resource.

KEY WORDS: accent, mobility, scale, agency, imagined space, high school students

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INTRODUCTION

The dramatic increase in human mobility in globalised times has drawn sociolinguistic attention to concepts of space, human movement through space and the language choices people make as they move across space. The shift in focus towards ‘a sociolinguistics of mobility’ (Blommaert 2010: 5) emphasises the idea of language as an object in motion. In response to this shift, our paper takes a view of language and accent as a mobile resource and sets out to analyse Australian adolescents’ perceptions of the mobility of their English accents as indicated by the ways in which they perceive its ability to cross international borders. The views of the high school students in this study, who were all born and grew up in Australia, do not represent the views of mobile populations such as immigrants or refugees but rather represent the views of the dominant majority. Our focus is also not on concrete realities but on imagined spaces. These spaces are not tangible but accessed through the power of imagination. As Kanno and Norton write (2003: 248), ‘our identities can be understood not only in terms of our investment in the real world but also in future possible worlds’. It is through imagined future worlds that we expand ourselves by transcending time and space and creating new self-images (Wenger 1998: 176). Globalised advertising has always invited us to imagine ourselves making subtle shifts in space – from one country to another, from one social domain and from one activity type to another (Blommaert, Collins & Slembrouck 2005). Today’s global media flows and high-speed communication technologies allow us to make connections that extend far beyond our countries of residence (Metykova 2013) and envision ourselves in spaces that we have not necessarily physically entered (see also Appadurai 1996). New technologies have extended the scope of our imagined communities beyond the local, enabling us to relate visions of the future to our present ‘here and now’.

In exploring the perceived mobility of accents in imagined future worlds, we draw on the centre-periphery distinction described in world systems theory (Wallerstein 1983, 2000)

and the notion of scale derived from cultural geography (Swyngedouw 1996; Urciuoli 2002). From a sociolinguistic perspective, centre-periphery dynamics – and how they are imagined – have a significant impact on the way that language resources are conceptualised and positioned in different spaces (Pietikäinen & Kelly-Holmes 2013: 1). The centre-periphery lens is a useful way to index the value that can be assigned to accent as a potential mobile resource.

In sociolinguistics, the notion of scale has been used to refer to the differential power, status and prestige attached to linguistic resources in different environments, or spaces. A number of studies have shown how people position themselves (and others) as they move across space and scale (Blommaert 2007, 2010; Blommaert, Collins & Slembrouck 2005; Blommaert, Westinen & Leppänen. 2015; Dong & Blommaert 2009). Describing immigrant language use, Li (2011, 2010) highlights how people are able to reflect on their language practices to position themselves and generate new identities in new social spaces. Other scholars have emphasised the importance of personal agency as a factor in how language varieties are considered across space and time. In engaging with this issue, Canagarajah (2013, 1999) shows how speakers’ language choices can be acts of resistance and personal agency (see also Fogle 2012). Referring to skilled immigrants’ attitudes towards their English accents, Canagarajah (2013: 206) argues that current notions of sociolinguistic scale should take more account of speakers’ ability to make decisions and choices about their accent in moving across space. We suggest that they should also consider the ways in which dominant groups negotiate their linguistic resources as they too move across space and scale.

From a scalar perspective, Australian English (henceforth AusE) offers rich potential for analysis. AusE is widely acknowledged to be a standard variety of English and from this perspective it is classifiable as being at the centre. Leitner (2004a: 1) argues that AusE acts not only as a national language but also as an epicentre of English in the Asia-Pacific region

and, as such, is a potential competitor of American and British English (see also Peters 2009). Yet, while AusE is considered to be one of the major English varieties worldwide, Australians and non-Australians alike often favour British and American English (see, e.g. Hundt, Zipp & Huber 2015). In Britain and Australia, Received Pronunciation (RP) or RP-like varieties have historically attracted the most consistently favourable evaluations (Giles & Billings 2004: 192). This tendency is part of a long-running discourse that assigns low prestige to colonial Englishes, including AusE (see, e.g. Baker 1945; Benson 2001; Mitchell 1946). However, there is evidence of these attitudes changing over time, with Bradley and Bradley (2001), for example, documenting a decline in positive evaluations of RP-like varieties of Australian English in matched-guise tests since the 1960s, and with Bayard et al (2001) noting a similar aversion to RP from Australian respondents, as well as generally positive evaluations of American and Australian voices. Accent judgements made by Australians often show complexity and contradictions when taken en masse. While some Australians regard AusE as a source of pride¹, for others it is a source of embarrassment² (see, e.g. Bradley & Bradley 2001; Willoughby, Starks & Taylor-Leech 2013; Leitner 2004b; Ozolins 1993); thus, AusE is indexed by some to the centre and by others to the periphery.

In the light of Australians' mixed attitudes to AusE and the Australian accent, this paper explores the scalar ways in which young Australians who were born in Australia engage with their accent as an imagined mobile resource.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

In this part of our paper, we justify why the highly mobile nature of the Australian population enables young people to imagine (and some to remember) themselves on the move and we justify why schools are such appropriate sites to study perceptions of accent.

As travel and international migration have intensified on an unprecedented scale, many societies can now be described as superdiverse (Vertovec 2007). Australia too has

experienced the seismic effects of globalisation in the form of greatly accelerated flows and movements of people, commodities and information, referred to by Giddens (1991) as the ‘space-time compression of late modernity’ (cited in Collins & Slembrouk, 2009: 19). Although the first 150 years of White settlement to Australia saw immigrants coming overwhelmingly from the UK (Ozolins 1993), its post-World War II mass migration policy and the post-war refugee crisis in Europe saw Australia open its immigration channels to people from northern and western Europe, Italy, Greece, the Balkan countries, Lebanon and Turkey (Martin 1978: 30-31). Since the mid-1980s, Australia has seen increased arrivals of skilled migrants (particularly from China and the Indian sub-continent); and humanitarian entrants from countries such as Vietnam, South Sudan, Syria and Iraq have added to the ethnolinguistic diversity of Australian communities. Taken altogether, this history has meant that today’s Australia has a relatively high proportion of first, second and third generation immigrants, accounting for some 30% of the Australian population in 2015.

Australians have also always had high levels of outward mobility. While the numbers of people on the move vary from year to year, many people have mobile lifestyles that cross Australia’s internal and external boundaries. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 2016 there were 36.2 million crossings of Australia's international border, representing 1.5 crossings per person in the Australian population. The majority of movements (97.0%) in 2015-2016 were short-term, with an intended duration of stay or absence from Australia of less than a year (ABS 2016³).

Short-term stays away are in part due to another aspect of Australian mobility of particular relevance to our participants – the long-standing tradition for young Australians to take time out between school and university or long-term work to travel. This tradition is not limited only to an affluent middle class. It is something of a rite of passage for young Australians to travel to Asia or Europe when they complete high school or during their

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2
3 university years (Unpacking Australia 2013⁴). The normality of long distance travel facilitates
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5 a culture of young Australians imagining themselves abroad.
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7 Schools are increasingly influenced by national, transnational and global flows of
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9 ideas, images and influences from the mass media, tourism, marketing, popular culture and
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11 social media. These flows interact with local identities, producing what has been termed
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13 ‘vernacular globalisation’ (Appadurai, 1996: 10). From these perspectives, schools are ideal
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15 locales for the study of the mobility of linguistic resources. Schools are also ideal locales for
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17 our study from a spatial perspective. The high school years are a time when questions of
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19 identity assume tremendous importance (Erikson 1968; Marcia 1980). As adolescents move
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21 from primary into high school they are involved in the process of developing an identity. One
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23 of the ways in which this identity may be manifested is in adopting particular forms and styles
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25 of speech (Eckert 2000; Macaulay 2009) or by experimenting with linguistic identities in
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27 different spaces. Through engaging in the exploration of norms in various contexts, or spaces,
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29 adolescents learn who they are and how they fit into society (see e.g. Erikson 1968).
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35 OUR STUDY

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37 We now turn to our analysis of the responses of high-school students to a single item in a
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39 five-page written questionnaire on language ideologies and nicknaming practices that
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41 explored how accent is indexed. The seven high schools in our study were selected
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43 opportunistically across two states with slightly different secondary school systems⁵. In
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45 Queensland we were able to distribute questionnaires in a private boys’ boarding school in a
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47 small regional city, which catered for the sons of affluent local families and families living in
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49 far remote areas. Questionnaires were also distributed in two co-educational state schools
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51 serving mainly low to middle income families in the same city and one co-educational state
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53 school catering for high achieving children of all social backgrounds in the state capital of
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55 Brisbane. In Victoria we were able to distribute questionnaires in one large co-educational
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state school located in a regional city, which has a very wide catchment area (including into surrounding rural areas) and a low-middle socio-economic profile. We also distributed questionnaires at two schools in the state capital of Melbourne: one a state-school with a large immigrant population and the other a co-educational private school with a high proportion of Anglo-Australian families. Both are located in relatively affluent areas and are schools that pride themselves on strong academic results. We targeted two groups of students: those who were beginning secondary school (Years 7/8) and those who were in their final years of study (Years 11/12), and were more likely to have travelled, or to have the ability to imagine themselves as travelling overseas in the coming years.

Of the 642 students in these schools, the majority were Australian-born. We used data in the background section of the questionnaire to identify students as Australian-born or overseas-born, and we focussed only on the former group for the following reasons: firstly, these students formed the majority of participants and the wording of the accent question item in the survey related directly to Australian identity (which some overseas-born students may not necessarily identify with). Secondly, this group of students also provided more qualitative responses. Of the 564 Australian-born students in our study, 158 were in Years7/8 and 406 were in Years 11/12; 168 students had a least one parent born overseas, while 395 had Australian-born parents and one student did not answer the ancestry question.

The instrument

The five-page questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section focussed on nicknaming; and the second section contained six questions on the students' ideas and beliefs (i.e., their ideologies) about Australian English. The third section elicited background details about the participants. While much of the second section of the questionnaire focussed on ideologies of Australian English in the 'here and now' (Willoughby, Starks & Taylor-Leech 2013), one question asked the participants to consider mobility of their Australian accent in a

hypothetical future. The ‘here and now’ questions in the second section of the questionnaire asked the students to consider what people said about the ways they spoke, whether they thought immigrants should be required to ‘speak like Australians’ and the first three things that came to mind when they thought about Australian English – all issues that we have written about elsewhere (Willoughby, Starks & Taylor-Leech 2013, 2015, Starks and Willoughby 2015). The particular item that serves as the focus of this paper was: *‘If you moved to another country, how important would it be for you to keep your Australian accent?’* Participants were asked to circle one of three choices:

- Extremely important: It reflects who I am.
- Important: Australians need to speak like Australians. It is where we are from.
- Not at all important: It doesn’t matter. English is English!

This question, like others in the questionnaire, attempted to evoke responses from the students rather than simply get them to ‘answer a question’. While these stimuli had the effect of loading the question, they also ensured that the students evaluated the question in similar ways. More importantly, it provided a set of stimuli that aimed to evoke a response in the comment box that followed this and other questions in this section of the questionnaire, where students could expand on their choices *if they wished to do so*. The question item provided use with quantitative numerical data, and the comment box with qualitative data. While almost all students ticked an answer, 154 students also provided comments. These comments revealed a wide range of ways in which students engage with accent as a construct, and an equally wide range of perspectives on the perceived scalability of the Australian English accent outside of Australia.

Once the schools had returned the questionnaires to us, the data were then entered into an excel spreadsheet. After the initial quantitative analysis of the data was completed, we conducted a thematic analysis of the comments provided by the students. In what follows we

briefly present the numerical data. This data is followed by the qualitative comments, which serve as the central focus of this paper.

QUANTITATIVE RATINGS

To provide a context for the qualitative responses, we first present an overview of the students’ ratings of the importance of keeping their accent if they moved to another country. Out of 564 students, 240 (43%) said it was not at all important to keep their Australian accent and 310 (54%) said it was either extremely important (119 or 21%) or important (191 or 33%). In addition, 9 students (2%) either did not answer (coded as ‘No response’) and 5 (1%) chose multiple options (coded as ‘Other’). As can be seen in Table 1, there was no significant difference between the distribution of answers across junior and secondary school students (chi squared statistic.5.04, p= 0.28).

Table 1. Students’ ratings in response to the question: ‘If you moved to another country, how important would it be for you to keep your Australian accent?’

Responses	Years 7/8		Years 11/12		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Extremely	38	24	81	20	119	21
Important	46	29	145	36	191	33
Not Important	68	43	172	42	240	43
Other	3	2	2	0	5	1
No response	3	2	6	1	9	2
Total	158	100	406	99*	564	100

*Percentage does not equal 100 due to rounding

As we have noted, 154 (28%) students chose to leave a comment, doing so at equal rates regardless of how they rated the importance of their accent. Thirty-five comments came from students who thought it was extremely important to keep their accents, 43 from those who saw their accent as important, 72 from those who considered it was not important and 3 where students had circled more than one answer⁶. In the section that follows, we discuss the students’ comments and explain how we approached the analysis. All comments are presented

with the original phrasing used by participants (spelling and minor syntax mistakes were corrected).

QUALITATIVE COMMENTS

Starting off with open codes based on our ‘sensitising concepts’ (Holstein & Gubrium 2003: 319) of centre-periphery and scale, we made a first pass through the students’ comments. Here, we grouped the comments into broad thematic categories that reflected either a scalar view or one that located accent in the centre or periphery in terms of its transportability. On our second and third passes through the data we applied a process of focussed coding (Glaser & Strauss 1967), in which we identified two further discourse strands, which we labelled ‘agentive views’ and ‘accent is a peripheral concern’ (see Table 2). Within the strands, we also identified various sub-strands based on our interpretation of the comments, which we sorted into sets of ‘perspectives’. In this process we also found that some comments had more than one discourse strand embedded within them. We placed these 24 comments into a strand labelled ‘mixed views’. We also labelled 17 comments as ‘Other’. These were comments that either rejected the premise of our question (eight comments) or that were indecipherable or unrelated to the question (nine comments) (see Table 2 for an overview).

Table 2. Discourse strands and perspectives in the comments

Strands	Perspective (p)	n	%
A. Scalar views	p1. Scaling of one’s accent by others to the centre	9	6
	p2. Scaling one’s own accent to the centre	33	22
	p3. Downscaling one’s accent to the periphery	14	9
	p4. Upscaling one’s accent to the centre	7	5
B. Agentive views	p5. Accent does not matter	14	9
	p6. Scale shifting to stand out or fit in	9	6
	p7. Accent is an individual choice	7	5
C. Accent is a peripheral concern	p8. Accent is not important	13	8
	p9. Focus is on intelligibility	3	2
	p10. No investment in accent	3	2
D. Mixed views		24	16

E. Other		17	11
	Total	153	101*

*Percentage does not equal 100 due to rounding

In what follows we discuss the discourse strands and perspectives we identified in the data. We discuss each discourse strand and the perspectives grouped within it, and we provide illustrative examples of the students’ comments.

A. Scalar views: Perspectives 1-4 (63 comments in total)

The scalar views took four different perspectives characteristic of the diversity evident in language attitude research into AusE. Perspectives 1 and 2 encompass comments that position the students’ accents at the centre. In both these sets the Australian accent is a valued and important marker of identity. The difference between the two perspectives relates to the subjectivity of the scaling. The nine comments in perspective 1 accord the Australian accent high scalar value based on how others perceive it:

- (1) People overseas like our accents. (Year 11/12)
- (2) People love the Aussie accent. (Year 11/12)
- (3) Whenever I go to visit family in London, I love how they comment on my accent. It makes me feels special and individual ☺. (Year 7/8)

In perspective 2, the 33 comments place their accent at the centre but their perspective revolves around their own accent and how it defines them as Australians. In these comments, scales are based on what the students think about their own accents rather than on what others think about them. However, the perspectives differ in some respects. In 21 cases, the comments reflect a view of the Australian accent as essentialised and non-negotiable, an important identity marker that defines who the students are and who they want to be:

- (4) I’m Australian and I’m proud, mate. (Year 11/12)

- (5) If you lose your Australian accent you lose your character. (Year 7/8)
- (6) It is part of the Australian identity. It is something that we should never lose.
(Year 11/12)
- (7) Aussie born, Aussie bred; when I die I will be Aussie dead. (Year 11/12)
- (8) I really like the Aus. accent and I think it's one of the best. (Year 11/12)

Perspective 2 responses include 12 comments that express a view of accents as an eminently transportable mobile resource that can travel across scales and still hold its particular prestige. It is also evident in this set that some students were not talking about an imagined space but rather they were drawing on experience. Their judgements were heavily affected by their previous experience of travelling overseas and being in situations where their accent had become an issue⁷:

- (9) Our Aussie accent is what defines us. When I went on a holiday I felt special to have an accent that stood out. (Year 11/12)
- (10) I feel it is my country and history and I am very proud to be Australian and I don't mind being a bit unique. (Year 11/12)

While Perspective 1 and 2 provide varying views on AusE as scaled to the centre, Perspective 3 consists of comments that are scaled differently. The 14 comments in this set, which were almost all made by senior high-school students⁸, downscale the Australian accent, relegating it to the periphery. Six of the comments take the view that their (and others') accent is simply 'bad', with no reference to mobility:

- (11) The Australian accent is horrid. (Year 11/12)
- (12) I don't like our accent and would love to lose it. (Year 11/12)
- (13) The Australian accent is ugly and [I] would not mind losing it. (Year 11/12)

Four other comments in perspective 3 assign the Australian accent to the far periphery, evaluating it negatively and showing no identification with it at all. For these students, mobility seems to be seen as an opportunity to upscale to a different accent:

- (14) I feel that Australian slang makes other English speaking countries look down on us. We have a lazy accent. It worries me that students from Japan/China/Korea etc. come to our country to learn to speak English. (Year 11/12)
- (15) Although born in Australia to an Australian family, I find it not the place for me and when I leave I will drop my accent (Year 11/12)

In perspective 4, the students take the view that mobility is an opportunity to shift scales, a view that is independent of their ideologies about AusE. In these seven comments (all but one of which came from senior students), it is not that the students dislike their accent, but rather that they perceive it as one that can be potentially upscaled. The comments evaluate accent in relation to other scales that are either related to a high-prestige accent associated with an existing specific centre or to a generalised imagined vernacular accent considered to be ‘sexier’ and ‘cooler’. In all of these comments, the students would like to take advantage of an imagined move across space to shift to an accent of the centre:

- (16) I want to have a British accent. British accents are so sexy. (Year 11/12)
- (17) I reckon it would be pretty cool having an English accent. (Year 7/8)
- (18) I would like a cooler accent. (Year 11/12)

B. Agentive views: Perspectives 5, 6 and 7 (30 comments in total)

The comments in perspectives 5, 6 and 7 do not mention scale but instead focus on the malleability of language across space. The 14 comments in perspective 5 (11 of which came from senior students) see language use as something that changes with context and

consequently, modifying one's accent is just part of the nature of change. The comments express a pragmatic view of accent and show no sense of being downscaled or assigned to a fixed scale; rather, they reflect a sense of agency and ability to consciously adapt one's accent in different spaces. They all appear to take transnational mobility – both moving and returning – for granted, mentioning how accents can be picked up and flaunted, accumulated, naturally lost in a move and how they can resurface on one's return to Australia:

- (19) You can pick up accents overseas, and flaunt [them] where you come back to Australia! ☺ (Year 11/12)
- (20) You can easily pick the Australian accent back up after a couple of weeks of being back in Australia. (Year 7/8)

Nine comments, which we have grouped into perspective 6, show more purposeful engagement with accent. These comments focus on agency with respect to spatiality. In a new imagined space, the students either want to fit in or stand out:

- (21) By keeping a strong Australian accent I may not fit in as well in the new country. (Year 11/12)
- (22) I feel that it is fairly important, as this is where I came from. Also, if I move to another country I'd want to sound different and not blend in. (Year 7/8)

While many of these comments suggest the students' desire to be their own person in a particular space, the seven comments in perspective 7 focus on the individual's desire to speak in a certain way and assert an identity that is not restricted to a particular space. For these students, accent is regarded as an agentive resource, specific to the individual concerned:

- (23) It is important because it is part of my personality. (Year 7/8)
- (24) While I don't have a strong Australian accent or any other accent, I like the way

- my voice sounds and I want to keep it that way. I think people voices can tell you a lot about their personality. (Year 11/12)
- (25) It's not that I need to speak like an Australian; I just like feeling different in another country. (Year 7/8)

C. Accent is a peripheral concern: Perspective 8, 9 and 10 (19 comments in total)

While all the previous sets of comments focus on scale, space, centre and periphery, the remaining sets are quite distinctive. In perspectives 8, 9 and 10, the students see their accent (in its totality) as peripheral, not so much because they downscale it but rather because they do not see accents as a valuable resource. The 13 comments in perspective 8 reject the importance of accent on the grounds of equality, downscaling the value of any accent:

- (26) Everyone is equal so it doesn't matter if we have an accent or not. (Year 11/12)
- (27) People shouldn't focus on accents. English is English! (Year 7/8)
- (28) From a personal point of view, I don't like the Australian accent. But I wouldn't care if my accent changed, because accents don't matter to me. We're all people after all! (Year 11/12)
- (29) We are defined by our values and morals, not the way we speak. (Year 11/12)

The three comments in perspective 9 also downscale the importance of accent but because the students see intelligibility rather than accent as important. In these comments, mobility is tied to the notion of communication and the ability to understand and be understood:

- (30) I don't think it matters how you sound when you speak, I don't think it matters UNLESS you can't understand them. (Year 11/12)
- (31) As long as it's understood, who cares? (Year 7/8)
- (32) As long as you can understand what they are saying it is OK. (Year 11/12)

In contrast, the three comments in perspective 10 reject the importance of accent because they have no investment in it. In fact, although there are only a handful of comments that fall into perspectives 9 and 10 in our data, we suspect that the majority of the students who provided quantitative ratings but did not provide qualitative comments were also unlikely to be invested in accent, and therefore the number of students who shared this view was probably much larger. We suggest that they represent a neglected voice in linguistic attitude research:

(33) I don't care about my accent. Boo! (Year 11/12)

(34) I don't really care. (Year 7/8)

D. Mixed views (24 comments in total)

A significant set of comments does not fall clearly into any single perspective, but rather reveals more nuanced views of accent. The majority of these mixed comments combine perspective 2 (I like the way my accent defines me as Australian) with shades of other perspectives, as in examples (34) and (35), which have shades of perspective 1 (i.e. they upscale their accent) and 8 (i.e. they downscale their accent) respectively:

(35) I'm very Australian and I'm proud if it so I would keep my language jokes and sarcasm but whatever happens, you can't stop it. (Year 7/8)

(36) It isn't that important in communication as accents don't really impede understanding, but it is good to be reminded of a past life in Australia. (Year 11/12)

E. Other (17 comments in total)

In this set of comments, there are other more critical views. In particular, eight students provided comments that rejected the premise of our question altogether. They either do not think that they even have an Australian accent or they take a nuanced view that Australians

have many different varieties of accent, or they simply state that they do not expect people to change their accents:

- (37) I don't have an Australian accent. (Year 11/12)
- (38) I feel that a lot of "Australians" often have many different accents. (Year 11/12)
- (39) Some people just speak the way they speak - you can't go changing the way people are, or the way they speak. (Year 7/8)

STUDY LIMITATIONS

All research has inherent strengths and limitations, and this study is no exception. We acknowledge that the findings are based on written responses to a questionnaire, which did not lend itself to drawing out the students' views and experiences as much as might have been possible in interviews or focus groups. The written nature of the responses also meant that we had no access to samples of the varieties of Australian English spoken by these students, which could have influenced their imagined identities. This limitation is counterbalanced by the fact that the questionnaire format elicited qualitative comments from a large number of students and we would argue that the rich and nuanced nature of the responses points to the potential to be found in exploring the imagined mobility of accents.

DISCUSSION

This paper has considered Australian high school students' perceptions of the mobility of their English accents. The findings show that students had no trouble in envisioning themselves and their accents in imagined moves across space. The comments encapsulate a range of scalar perspectives. While some students evidently regarded their accents as central, others explicitly or implicitly assigned them to the periphery. Others did not seem to see their accent as being either central or peripheral but rather as a flexible and adaptable resource. Another group rejected accent out of hand, as irrelevant and unimportant. What is clear is that

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3 the students construe accent as a spatial and mobile resource that has the potential to be
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5 upscaled in a move across space.
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8 However, our findings also show that some of our participants took an agentive view
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10 along the lines of the participants in Li (2010, 2011) and Canagarajah (2013). For some
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12 obviously very mobile and well-travelled young people, accent can change; it can be dropped
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14 in a move across transnational space and recovered on return to local space. Scales can be
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16 crossed and negotiated. A larger number of students adopted a globalised point of view in
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18 which accents were neither downscaled nor upscaled in relation to one another. Like
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20 Canagarajah's skilled immigrants, our Australian student participants see their English
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22 accents as highly negotiable. One's accent can be modified as an agentive resource in order to
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24 fit in or it can be retained in order to stand out from the crowd. Other students place the focus
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26 on the peripheral nature of accent as a commodity.
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30 Looking at the comments overall from a scalar point of view, we suggest that many of
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32 these young people consider their Australian accent not in terms of national varieties but more
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34 in line with a view of English in which accent is secondary to the flow of effective
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36 communication across communities and national borders. A significant number of comments
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38 reject the view that accents divide and assert that they should not matter. For some students,
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40 accent is only one of many global flows, while for others it simply is not important.
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44 Existing research on space and scale has tended to focus on language in use and to
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46 consider individuals in real diasporic spaces, rather than in imagined ones. While the former
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48 is indeed an important pursuit, it tends to contrast one variety with another, the 'here' with the
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50 'there' and the 'now' with the 'then'. By exploring the meta-pragmatic commentary of
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52 students, we can begin to unpack the imagined mobility of an accent and start to understand
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54 what it tells us about how attitudes to accent are influenced by space and scale. Taking a
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56 scalar perspective enabled us to analyse the complex data that was elicited, helping us to
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make sense of the competing discourses running through the students’ comments and offering insights into their perceptions of the potential mobility of their English accents.

A questionnaire cannot provide all the answers but it clearly does indicate that there is a place for future studies in which more qualitative, scalar approaches can yield useful understandings of attitudes to accent in today’s mobile and globalised world. They provide valuable insights into the multiple perspectives of the young people in our study and provide a set of pathways from which we can begin to explore complex data in superdiverse settings.

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NOTES

¹ cf. The proliferation of dictionaries and books about Australian slang, such as Moore (2009) and Harris (1989).

² cf. Negative media commentary about Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s accent; see, e.g. <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/politics/our-suddenprime-minister/story-e6frgczf-1225884202210>; <http://www.news.com.au/world-old/julia-gillards-accent-baffles-us-school-kids/story-e6frfkyi-1225785062567>. (21 November, 2016).

³ <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/products/961B6B53B87C130ACA2574030010BD05>. (20 November, 2016).

⁴ Unpacking Australia. 2013. <https://unpackingaustralia.wordpress.com/2013/05/28/why-young-aussies-travel-abroad/comment-page-1/>. (20 November 2016).

⁵ In Victoria the initial year of secondary school is Year 7, while it is Year 8 in Queensland. In Victoria our senior student data was collected from students in both Year 11 and Year 12, while in Queensland it comes from Year 11 students only.

⁶ In our sample we have a relatively small proportion of students who have parents born overseas. We are thus not able to draw conclusions about whether parental country of birth has an impact on attitudes, but recommend it for further research.

⁷ Our background questionnaire did not elicit information about travel experiences and we cannot evaluate this further.

⁸ In a previous publication (Willoughby, Starks & Taylor-Leech 2013) based on data from this same group of teenagers, we note that those in senior high school showed a higher degree of 'cultural cringe' towards Australian English than their junior peers. Interested readers should see this paper for more detailed discussion on this point.

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