Sample Essay #5

It is a common sense that an important component of personal identity is the way we speak - our language, accent, and dialect. The vast majority of people speak in a way which identifies them as coming from a particular place. And there would be nothing wrong with any accent if not an unspoken rule of 'the perfect voice', that plays an important role in distinguishing people as those who belong to upper-class and those who "sound like a hick." There are two articles from Carl Elliot and Raymond Hernandez that offer perspectives on the effect of accent on perceptions of class and social status.

Carl Elliott in his article "The Perfect Voice brings up a question about "How exactly is a voice related to an identity?" And then he tells about an "accent-reduction clinic' in Greensboro, North Carolina called The Perfect Voice, where "clients come for help in learning how to diminish, change, or erase their Southern accent." People may change the way in which they speak during their lifetimes, especially if they move around, but most of us carry at least some trace of our accent and dialect origins with us all of our lives. Moreover, America is a country that is blessed with a wide range of regional accents and dialects. And there is such a common thing that Southern accent creates an impression that is shameful even for many Southerners, "Why do they always pick these kinds of people to be on TV?... They sound like such hicks."

Therefore, people, who use a help of speech pathologists to reduce or erase their accents, are those, "who were worried not so much about sounding southerner as about sounding like hicks." Then, going further through the article, we see that the problem about having an accent for many people is much deeper than just a worry about a jarring sound coming from their mouths. The author says that "southerners, of course, usually understand the connection between accent and identity," like anyone "from the United Kingdom, where accent is a very public market of social
class." "The worry in the South is not to get rid of their accents...but rather to transform it to a better one (which generally means something closer to..."standardized American" accent." That is why there are people who for some reason want to hide their regional accents or origins. It happens to them, because of a common believe, that "southern accent needs to be moderated, if not effaced, or else you will not be taken seriously." So, those who want to succeed at work and their lives, to move higher up the social scale, have to get rid of their accents, of their identity—to reject something of who they are.

Raymond Hernandez in his article "When Accent Becomes an Issue" keeps going with Carl Elliot's idea. He brings up examples of people whos accents give them a hard time while trying to go further and succeed in their lives. The author points on relationship between a person's accent and the way in which society perceives that person. He tells about people who feel embarrassed and uncomfortable everytime they say something, because when they speak with accent, they are not taken seriously by others, by native speakers. "John Castillo, a 22-year-old from Columbia" tells about his feelings: "My accent sets me apart from other, even though I have lived in America for nine years...I was practically raised in this country...But I have this accent. Does that mean I'm not an American?" Or another example of "a Dominican woman, who earned a master's degree in business at St. John's University," who got problems at the corporation she worked just because of her accent. She says that "she is suspicious an angry, wondering if the criticism about her accent was concocted to keep her from being promoted, as she hopes to be." And then the author tells how that kind of people are eventually forced to go to "accent-reduction clinics, to such clinics as "The Perfect Voice", where "social status and success at work are being sold."