



Accent reveals identity

By EVELYN YAMINE

A MASKED man with an Australian accent goes on television and threatens revenge on Western countries in the name of al-Qaeda.

Although it is still unclear if he was born in this country, linguists believe, based on his accent, he has had some "Arabic influence" in his lifetime. So how do they draw this conclusion?

Language experts from Macquarie University have embarked on research into understanding how a language

changes according to a person's sense of identity, based on their ethnicity.

Although the university's Dr Felicity Cox does not believe the man in the black mask making threats to bomb Western countries is from an Arabic background, she says based on his speech, "he displays some of the characteristics of Arabic-influenced Australian English".

"Some particular vowel sounds are similar to some of the speech analysed by the research we have begun," she said.

"He probably has

had contact with people who use this form of Arabic-influenced English but that doesn't mean that he is a member of that ethnic group.

"It means that he might identify with them because that's how we develop our accent, by being with people and interacting with people who have a particular accent."

The research, conducted with Macquarie University linguistics lecturer Verna Rieschild, analyses the grammar and sounds of the people from Arabic-speaking backgrounds and compares

them to Australian-English accents.

They are studying the link between language and identity in Australia's multicultural community.

"If you identify as an Anglo-Australian and use the Australian English speaking standard, you're telling the world how you want to be seen by them," Dr Cox said.

"If you're a speaker with Arabic-influenced speech, that's telling us that you identify to a certain group and express that identity through your speech and language."

During the past 20 years there has been a rise of a new variety of Australian English.

"This is the first time we've seen a new variety other than Aboriginal or standard Australian English used by people born in Australia," Dr Cox said.

"This new variety is of great interest because it tells us now there are second generation Australians who have a need to express something else about their identity, other than the fact that they're Australians."