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The Perception of Non-Native Pronunciation of English by Native Speakers

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This project, which should result in a PhD dissertation, is based on a decade's experience teaching pronunciation. Improvements could be achieved by finding out how native speakers of English perceive non-native pronunciation and whether their criteria correlate with an experienced Czech teacher's. Fifteen audio and video recordings of first-year students reading and speaking were assessed by five native speakers of English. Assessments are yet to be fully evaluated, partial results were presented. Sociolinguistic and phonetic aspects of pronunciation were discussed, such as articulatory settings and suprasegmental features, and four different accents of English were used in the presentation.

1 Introduction

While the acquisition of the written form of English is traditionally very successful in the Czech language-teaching system, speaking skills even at relatively advanced levels tend to be inferior to writing abilities. If we look at a successful speaking performance in a foreign language as a synthesis of capacities that have to be used "here and now", pronunciation sticks out as a specific tool to get the message across to native speakers, one that has to be automatic. For a variety of reasons, it is difficult for less gifted Czechs to eliminate their "harsh accent" and to improve their listening comprehension. As I shall try to prove below, both these essential difficulties lie in two very characteristic features of Czech pronunciation respectively: the devoicing of final voiced consonants and the fundamentally different stress and rhythmic structures of the two languages.

Objectives. Over the past twelve years teaching Phonetics and pronunciation and exchanging experience with colleagues worldwide, I have set up a system of assessing students' pronunciation when they first enter University and when they sit their Phonetics

examination at the end of their first year. The criteria include the qualities of sounds, the voicing and linking and suprasegmental features such as stress, rhythm and intonation. In my project, I am trying to find out what native speakers' criteria of good speech are, besides understandability; in other words, which of the pronunciation errors commonly made by advanced Czechs matter more and which less.

Methods. To make audio and video recordings of 15 Czech speakers of English reading fictive reactions to the verses of the "Twelve Days of Christmas" carol and commenting on them briefly. To have six evaluators (one Czech, self; one British; two American; one Canadian; one Australian) watch and listen to the recordings and fill in simple questionnaires. Evaluation of responses should reveal how native speakers' assessments correlate with those made by an experienced Czech teacher; how clear, confident and eligible for a hypothetical childminding job they find students to be; what they see as the speakers' greatest strengths and weaknesses.

2 Sociolinguistic point of departure

It is well-known how a person's pronunciation of English, particularly in the U.K., influences the perception of her as a person regarding her background, education and social position; studies written by J.C.Wells, P.Trudgill, J.Honey who coined the new term "sociophonology" quite recently, and W.Labov in the U.S. are well known. While foreign speakers' accents are a source of much parody, serious studies of specific features and impacts of their pronunciations will have yet to be written by foreign linguists. This subchapter lists a few authentic quotations collected over the past twenty years, mostly referring to the author's pronunciation of English. They are very contradictory, as are the first two, generally referring to Czechs speaking English: "*The Czechs speak very well,*" as opposed to "*The Czechs have the harshest accents around.*"

- "*Ty nemluviš jako Britka. Mluviš jiným tónem.*" (*You don't speak like a British person. You use a different tone.*) Not a very flattering remark from the author's son, then eleven, showing that the difference between the use of voice and suprasegmental features in the two languages was big enough even for a young child to notice.

- "*I didn't know you were foreign,*" and "*I knew at once you were foreign*", both on the same day in England, the former by a student of foreign languages herself who appreciated the acquired skill, and the latter by a truck driver who showed none of this appreciation.

- "*How many O-levels have you got?*" by a working-class friend who applied criteria on education similar to his own finding the speaker rather sophisticated.

- "*You speak a bit American.*" Frustrating for someone trying to speak British, implying "There is something unfamiliar about the way you speak and I cannot quite identify what."

- "*You sound very British, we'll work on that.*" Example of American humour.

- "*I normally can't understand a word of what the British are saying, but you, I can understand your every word.*" Another example of American humour, one that illustrates that reductions comparable to a British speaker's are hard to produce.

- "*Someone speaks with an Irish accent here. Keep it!*" A comment from a passing native speaker to the speech of a student just back from Northern Ireland who had adopted some new stress patterns. Intonation seems to be very important in the identification of an accent.

- "*Té angličtiny jsem nechala. Připadalo mi, že ze sebe dělám blbce.*" (I quit studying English. I felt I was making a fool of myself.) A comment from a middle-aged learner which shows the general reluctance to make unfamiliar "unnatural" sounds and the conviction that foreign suprasegmentals make one sound affected. This psychological block is even noticeable with some of our students majoring in English. As observed by scholars who study accents within

one language (Wells 1982), the speaker feels it as a betrayal of their roots, as a violation of their identity to speak in an unusual way. Very few Czech speakers have been able to change their voice quality speaking English.

3 Phonetic point of departure

In the acquisition of one's mother tongue, pronunciation is based on extensive example and experience. In lay terms, a talented foreign speaker arranges her speaking organs correctly for the language she intends to speak. In phonetics terms, this arrangement of the mouth includes appropriate articulatory settings, and the realization of the essentially concave/convex characters of English/Czech, i.e. using the tongue's apex/blade for making sounds (for more, see Honikman in Skaličková 1982). Our ideal intuitive speaker encompasses not only the repertoire of sounds she needs for the language/accents intended but also their placement in the correct positions. The typical Czech mistake of devoicing, e.g. pronouncing *above all* with [f] rather than [v] liaising the two words has been commented on in my collection of observations in a rather unkind way: "*You speak like a Russian spy in a James Bond film*". Last but not least, and certainly involving a great deal of experience speaking and listening to authentic spoken English and a detachment from Czech speaking habits, is the use of stress, rhythm and intonation. If the foreign speaker/hearer ignores the role of suprasegmental features in English, she can complain that "*Já jsem tomu Angličanovi všechno říkala tak zřetelně, a on dělal, že mi nerozumí,*" (*I was so distinct speaking to the English person and he pretended not to understand me*) not realizing there was no pretence and her speech without reductions was truly incomprehensible. To sum up and to take a different point of view, let us compare the above to Laver's (1994: 399) definition of settings as articulatory, phonatory, settings of overall muscular tension and prosodic settings.

While a gifted speaker sets her organs intuitively, the average learner needs a sufficient amount of example and experience and perhaps streamlined training and practice to acquire an unconscious competence in pronunciation.

4 Raters' comments and correlations

In the initial stage and throughout their work, the five native speakers of English were only too keen to be of some assistance. A slight misunderstanding occurred when the British speaker asked if she would be the only native speaker involved. When informed there would be another four, two Americans, a Canadian and an Australian, her response was, "*I mean, will I be the only one speaking proper English,*" later on her answer sheet describing her activities as a British army officer's wife as "*... hosting and entertaining extremely high profile guests at private functions at a diplomatic level,*" when asked about her accent and its importance for her professional/private life. The two American speakers made interesting points here: "*Yes – I have had to work to rid myself of this [Kentucky] accent in my professional life. A Southern accent is sometimes associated with poor education or experience,*" and "*Yes, in my current job (teaching English in the Czech Republic) I routinely encounter discrimination based on accent.*"

The questionnaires for the evaluators to fill in about each Czech speaker were rather straightforward, asking about the speakers' intelligibility, confidence, eligibility as their child(ren)'s tutor, appropriateness of their speech, with space for any other comments. Here are some of them: *monotone; strong accent; no intonation/stress; seems to intone by incorrect method; bi-lingual?; fluid speech but sloppy pronunciation; accents in the wrong places; th*

sounds not clear; nice bass; confident, good speech, but skips over words like a good Czech. Since the raters were not linguists, they found it difficult to name what they did not like and sometimes falsely accused speakers of typical native-speaker errors: *some of the endings of words are missing; some words run into each other*, where the problem was quite conversely in lack of reductions. For the same reasons, evaluators were unable to characterize devoicing and consequently wrong liaisons and generally roofed it under “harsh accent”. With the recordings being both on video and audiotapes, the speakers’ visual impact played its role, and against all odds, with the two youngest male assessors female attractiveness was a disadvantage. Two objectively good female speakers, and both of them attractive, lost a few points on “eligibility as a tutor”, while all the female assessors remained objective.

Correlations. The four speakers rated as best by an experienced Phonetics teacher were also best in the raters’ assessments. Two speakers originally in the “weak” group moved to “mid” and two made the opposite move. Those who were thus promoted were students with clear voices and suprasegmentals that compensated for their far from perfect sounds.

5 Practical implications, conclusion

Too many of our students enter University completely unaware of the existence of suprasegmental features and the impact they make on the quality of their spoken performance. Confronted with the facts and unfavourable initial assessments, the gifted ones improve their pronunciation substantially, the less so retain their harsh accents and carry them into their professional lives. If they teach, the wrong speaking habits disseminate and the vicious circle is complete.

Now that reasons for teaching suprasegmentals at all levels are obvious and wonderfully explained in books such as Martha Pennington’s (1996), it is up to English teachers at elementary and secondary levels to not only use the teaching ideas but above all to provide their students with their own good speaking examples. The limitations are, among others, psychological, and it will take many years to overcome them.

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