

PHONETICS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING?

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims at finding out if Phonetics as a branch of study has got something to do with the manner we learn a language, English in this case. Attempts will be made to find out how various aspects of phonetics such as word stress, accent and rhythm, intonation etc. help one in learning English. It need not be stressed here that most of these aspects play a crucial role in how we pick up a language, especially the spoken part, for we need to be aware of how each syllable or a word or a group of words is pronounced. In order to learn English well, it is necessary that the learner understands the phonetic nuances of the target language because her or his mother tongue do not use the same stress pattern or the tones. It is therefore challenging to master all the stress patterns and tones of English. It is significant to note here that the manner in which a learner pronounces a word/phrase; or puts the stress/tone; or combines/substitutes one set of words/sounds tells us about the learner's social/geographical/literacy/economic/emotional status. We have tried to present only a cursory outline of the steps that may be taken to learn the sounds of the target language. We have not dealt with many other essential technical information on sounds, their combinations, the contexts in which 'similar' sounds could be grouped together and used as if the group is a single sound unit, etc.

INTRODUCTION

Phonetics deals with the study of It is an interesting discipline in itself. However, mastery of the science of phonetics or even the mastery of the phonetics of our target language is not our goal. We would like to use certain aspects of the science of phonetics in our quest to learn to recognize, discriminate and produce, in some adequate manner, the sounds of our target language and their combinations. By remembering some of the points we have discussed so far, the learner should be able to describe, explain, and reason out the characteristics of the 'difficult'

and 'strange' sound that she/he encounters in the target language and seeks some demonstrations and remedial help from one's language helper.

It may not be out of place to state that sounds are not learned in isolation nor are they used in isolation. They are part of a word, phrase or sentence in almost all cases. The behaviour of a sound in isolation may be dramatically different from its behaviour when it occurs with another sound or when it is doubled. Sounds are subject to socio-linguistic rules as well. Even among the native speakers of the target language the learner could notice glaring differences in the selection, use and combination of sounds in terms of their socio-economic status. Whatever is considered 'normal' and 'standard' by the target language group should be learned.

STRESS

There are several aspects of the sounds and rhythm used in the target language which the learner should understand and use. But for the sake of convenience, we are taking up only three aspects. English uses 'stress' to distinguish meanings between words and phrases. Stress may be simply defined as the relative prominence a syllable has in a word. Syllables in every word in the English language must carry a primary stress which is more prominent than the stresses carried by the other syllables of that word.

Often second/foreign language learners of English find it almost impossible to master the stress patterns of English. There are several rules which help the learner to give the right stress on the right syllable of the word. While most English words are subject to such general rules, there are a number of frequently used words which do not follow the general pattern. This causes a lot of heart ache to the second/foreign language learner of English.

The target language may not follow the same stress patterns as one's first language, that is, English. Similarly, the target language may not have a stress system too, for there are many languages which do not have any stress system at all. And if the stress system of the learner's language is imposed on that language it will sound funny and strange to the native speakers of that language. So, there are two things we need to be careful about. a) to master the stress

system of one's own language, if that language has a stress pattern, the way the target language uses it; and b) try to unlearn the stress system when one learns that language, in case it does not have a stress system. Some examples of the use of stress in English are as follows:

cónduct -- condúct
pérmít -- permít
cónflict -- conflíct
contest -- contést
contract – contract

TONE

Many languages in the world use tone instead of stress to distinguish between words. Tone does not make a syllable prominent, but tone is a musical note type. While the consonants and vowels may be identical between two words, the tone for one word may be different from the tone used in the other word. Tone alone makes the difference in meanings between these words.

It is also important to remember that the tonal of one language may differ from another. Scholars have identified different types of tonal systems in the tonal languages. It is easy to detect whether a language uses tones to distinguish meanings or not. But it is more difficult to specify what kinds of tones are used in that language. Whenever, there is a doubt as to the target language having a tonal language, the learner should ask the language helper to give her/him a monosyllabic word and ask her/him to pronounce it in as many different ways as to bring out all the meanings that word may have in her/his language. This is one way of checking the possibilities of tones used in that language. The changes in the musical tones attached to each meaning of the word also need to be noticed. Then the target language helper may be asked to imitate. The tones may be placed following certain general rules and often such rules are cumbersome to remember.

The best way is to build the learner's knowledge of the tones by imitation, repetition, and recording the tones of individual words in her/his note book on top of the letters used to write the word. Each citation of the same word may have different notations for the tones. By context, and by diligent memory one may be able to build a personal dictionary of words along with the

correct tones attached to them, in one's memory. Constant practice, and a willingness to learn and correct oneself are more than ever demanded when one wants to master these supra-segmental features of any language.

Another suggestion often made to help the learner master the tones of a language is to ask one's language helper to act as an orchestra conductor. She/he may move her/his hands in tune with the raising, levelling, and falling tones. Native speakers of the languages, which use tones to signify differences in meaning, can produce and use the tones easily. They can detect whether the tones are produced appropriately to express a certain intended meaning. They can detect the wrong tones. but it may not be possible for them to describe the tones for the benefit of the learner or explain why the learner's tone is wrong. It is through constant imitation and internalization that the learner will ultimately succeed in creating a mental dictionary of her/his own which correctly recognizes, assigns and produce correct and acceptable tones with the words.

It is important that the learner does not postpone the learning and mastery of the tones used in her/his target language to a later date. Even as one focuses on the segmental sounds, usually by using these sounds in words, focus also on the correct pronunciation of the tones simultaneously. It is a good idea to identify the minimal pairs involving the tonal contrasts and start practising these pairs of words.

INTONATION

We are familiar with the speech melodies of our language. We make a statement with a 'normal' intonation, and may produce the same sentence to give another meaning to it. A statement may be so uttered that it carries the meaning of a question, negation, or exclamation or a combination of some of these elements. Sarcasm, cynicism, exclamation, doubt, question, indifference, etc., may be expressed through the melody or intonation we impose on a sentence we produce. While such intonations are natural to us in our language, it is possible that the target language may make its own intonation patterns to express those meanings.

It is also important to remember that in no language talk is possible without intonation. Even though some of the intonations may be universal and may sound alike across languages, we

should look for an appropriate imitation of the intonations in our target language. Also with varying emphases and inflections in tone and stress of words, individual languages may have their own specific intonation patterns. Brewster and Brewster (1976) give some interesting examples of the English intonation system. They point out that the English 'system carries a large number of distinctions.' Emotion, for example, is often expressed through intonation. One can notice how intonation alone can change the meaning of the word 'what' in the following interchanges:

I just ate it.

What? (Slightly rising intonation in - i.e., Repeat your statement.)

I just ate it.

What? (Slight falling intonation - i.e., What did you eat?)

The snail.

What? (Extra high intonation - i.e., Surprise or disbelief.)

It is also pertinent at this juncture to remember that when the learner opens her/his mouth and make an utterance in her/his first language English, the sounds she/he uses and the way she/he pronounces them and combines them, and the way by which she/he substitutes one sound for another may reveal the learner's geographical and social positions. It may also reveal her/his literacy and economic status. It may also reveal her/his emotional status. These tiny little elements carry so much information about the learner! One should expect such things in the target language as well.

CONCLUSION

Phonetics really plays an important role in learning a language. This is mainly because one needs to know the sound system of the target language in order to learn another language. There is therefore a close link between the two: phonetics and language learning. To conclude this chapter, we have tried to present only a cursory outline of the steps that may be taken to learn the sounds of the target language. We have not dealt with many other essential technical information on sounds, their combinations, the contexts in which 'similar' sounds could be grouped together and used as if the group is a single sound unit, etc.

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