



INFLUENCE OF PHONETICS ON NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS: A STUDY ON THE PROBLEMS OF LANGUAGE TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

The major drawback in foreign language learners is poor pronunciation. It is very difficult to listener to understand the conversation by a non native speaker speaking a foreign language particularly like English. The poor pronunciation makes frustrating and unpleasant. The responsibility of correction of these drawbacks is on Language teachers. Unfortunately they realized it very lately and now try to introduce them at higher education level. Actually the foundation for proper pronunciation of a foreign language should be made only at the primary and kinder garden level. The Segmental and Suprasegmental level of improving language pronunciation skills plays a crucial role in learning foreign language. This paper titled, “Influence of Phonetics on Non Native speakers: A Study on the problems of Language Teachers” focuses on errors in intonation and stress in foreign language (English) learning. The students at High School and Higher education naturally possess knowledge on sentence pattern and its usage. In a multi cultural class room where students are with different social and cultural background, it is very difficult to handle the class and see the students learn proper pronunciation.

Keywords: Phonetics, difficult, conversation, multi-cultural society, language teaching.

INTRODUCTION



Stress and intonation play an important role in communication. They not only convey linguistic information but also take a key role in regulating the discussion. They are the indicators of language speaker identity mirroring identifications such as physical and psychological state, age, gender sociolinguistic nature. The use of inappropriate intonation pattern gives a scope for miscommunication. Major or minor, whatever the miscommunication may be mistakes in stress and intonation depending on the context lead to wrong meaning of the word pronounced. Generally native listeners are habituated to deal with proper pronunciation with a great deal of variation in the choice of stress and intonation pattern irrespective of their local dialects. Some patterns of intonation and stress are not acceptable in local dialectical pronunciation. The cumulative effect of continuously using slightly inappropriate intonation is not underestimated. We the language teachers derive much of our impression about a speaker's attitude and disposition towards us from the way that speaker uses intonation in speech. But the listeners may form a negative impression of a speaker based on the constantly occurring inappropriate use of intonation. For example, the relatively flat and low intonation of Tamil learners of English may make them sound dogmatic and as a result, English listeners may consider them uncompromising.

It is not out of context to discuss commonly occurring problems in non-native intonation and stress to provide a real analysis of some past and current research findings in terms of a framework of intonational analysis that separates phonological representation from phonetic implementation. It also tries to project the possible influences in non-native intonation and explains its importance of making a distinction in intonational influence. It also discusses the implications of the real analyses and new results for teaching and research. The major international journals in English Language acquisition carried out by personal communication for the last 25 years. It is found that only a few studies investigated on intonation and stress. Out of these some concentrated at perception of intonation and some other are production of phonological studies. The major studies are carried on:

- i. Backman 1979
- ii. Buysschaert 1990
- iii. De BOt 1986
- iv. Grover, Jamieson, and Dobrovolsky 1987
- v. Jenner 1976

These studies provide evidence that transfer or interference from the L1 is an important factor in the production of L2 as far as phonological variations are concerned. Many similarities of errors are found in these studies, leading to assumptions about whether there are universal patterns in acquiring the intonational system of a second language. Errors in the production of L2 English intonation by speakers with different language backgrounds which appear similar



across these studies. Although it is true that some of the observed errors are similar, it should be emphasized that they all appeared in studies of English as a second language. So the similarities might be due to idiosyncrasies of the English intonational system. Furthermore, the similarities cannot be explained by developmental factors alone. For example, the fact that both Telugu and Tamil acquiring English intonation produce a smaller pitch range compared to native English speakers does not necessarily indicate that a reduction of pitch range is a universal tendency in L2 acquisition. The smaller pitch range in the data of the learners could simply be a case of transfer, since both Telugu and Tamil are reported to have a smaller pitch range than English. It is therefore more likely that there is more than one process involved in the acquisition of L2 intonation, a conclusion which has also been reached in other fields of L2 acquisition.

It should be noted that comparison of the findings described in above is not an easy task. The studies differ considerably with respect to the proficiency level of the learners, the languages under investigation, the number of subjects, and the framework or methodology used in the study. These differences in methodology prevent us from coming to any reliable conclusions about the similarities and differences between the languages investigated in these studies and the process of L2 acquisition of intonation. In order to establish intonational differences and similarities across languages which could cause the L1 and L2 intonation systems to influence one another, a mutual agreed framework for evaluating intonation needs to be used. Without such a model it is difficult to compare and analyse the importance of similarities and differences across languages in a reliable and uniform way. Together with other studies that have begun to emerge using this model in studies of L2 intonation it shows the enormous potential of this model for cross-linguistic studies.

The distinction between a phonetic and phonological component in intonation is important as it suggests that languages can differ at both these levels. As a result, the L1 and L2 intonation systems may influence one another both at the level of phonological representation as well as at the level of their phonetic implementation. A *phonological* influence would result from intonational differences in the inventory of phonological tunes, their form, and in the meanings assigned to the tunes. A *phonetic* influence would result from a difference in the phonetic realisation of an identical phonological tune (Ladd 1997). An example of *phonological* influence is the use of rises where native speakers would use falls and vice versa, found in many studies of L2 intonation. These types of influence roughly correspond to the types of influence evidenced at the segmental level, where phonological influence would result from cross-linguistic differences at the phonemic level and phonetic influence resulting from differences in phonetic details. Separating phonological representation from its phonetic implementation in non-native production of intonation makes it possible to determine the actual source of the L2 intonational error, beyond just establishing that it is due



to interference from the L1. Once the source of the problem has been established it can be appropriately addressed by the language teacher and learner.

Here I would like to describe some intonational properties which are likely to be affected in L2 speech production. Particular attention will be given to distinguishing phonetic from phonological influences in L2 intonation, where this distinction may not have been made in previous studies, and where results may have been interpreted incorrectly because no distinction has been made between phonological and phonetic influences. I don't like to go an exhaustive description of all intonational properties which can be influenced by differences between the L1 and L2 intonation systems. It is intended purely as an illustration of why it is important to distinguish between phonological and phonetic influences, and where this becomes relevant for language teachers.

Cross-linguistic differences in alignment have not been investigated extensively. However, Ladd (1996) suggests that such differences can be found when comparing the intonation of languages. He illustrates this with an example of a certain type of fall, which he describes as

"a local peak associated with the accented syllable, followed by a rapid fall to low in the speaking range, followed by a more gradual fall to the end of the phrase or utterance" (Ladd 1996: 128).

This fall can occur in Italian as well as in English. However, its realisation is different in these two languages. Where the peak in English is rather late (at or near the end of the stressed syllable), it is early in Italian. As a consequence, English learners of Italian, may use their native alignment pattern when producing an Italian falling tune. In other words, the learner gets the phonological association right but fails to produce the correct phonetic detail. It is therefore important for language teachers to establish what the source of the error is, as well-meant exercises to teach non-native speakers. As it is suggested in the literature that temporal properties of speech may influence the intelligibility of utterances produced by non-native speakers (Tajima, Port, and Dalby 1997), it is well possible that an adjustment of peak alignment will lead to improved intelligibility and less foreign-accented speech. However, perception studies would need to be carried out to establish the relative contribution of alignment patterning on intelligibility and the perception of foreign-accent.



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