

AN EXPERIMENT ON PERCEPTION OF LITHUANIAN
VOWELS BY ENGLISH SUBJECTS

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ABSTRACT

The English base of perception has been checked by an experiment on the correspondence between Standard Lithuanian vowels and Standard English ones. It was found that the Lithuanian vowels /i/ and /u/ were the most difficult for the English listeners to respond to. It is suggested that the above vowels are characterized by some specific features which are not common in the vowel system of English.

INTRODUCTION

The present experiment was stimulated by a lack of objective data on vowel perception in the methods of teaching English pronunciation to Lithuanians. Such experiments also provide a useful check in elucidating the process by which vowel sounds of a foreign (quite unfamiliar) language are perceived and compared to the native ones. According to the theses of perceptive phonetics /1/, the perception of segmental and suprasegmental speech units is based

on the comparison of these with the "standards". The rules of comparison stand for a program of operations by which a given signal is being compared with the standards.

The linguistic perceptive basis is formed in man in the process of mastering a given language (dialect). Different language systems correspond to different perceptive linguistic bases.

With this in view, we find it rather difficult to select a uniform group of naive listeners with a uniform perceptive basis of English though all the subjects might understand RP and use it in practice.

EXPERIMENTAL TECHNIQUE

A tape recording of Standard Lithuanian monophthongs and two "diphthongoids" (isolated and in /t/+V position) spoken by an experienced phonetician was presented to 25 phonetically naive listeners (first year students from Great Britain staying in Minsk State Pedagogical Institute of Foreign Languages). Each vowel with a nor-

mal duration was repeated three times and followed by a two-second pause. An instruction was played by tape recorder using RP (the text spoken by an Englishman, a teacher of English).

The first session of the experiment ended in failure. The listeners were not adapted to listen to the signals presented. Then the second session was arranged in which the subjects were asked to listen to the whole recording twice for aural adaptation before being given an answer sheet.

THE RESULTS

The results of the second session revealed a group of 10 listeners who were rather constant in their responses. Basing on the data obtained we find that all Standard Lithuanian vowels (including the "diphthongoids" /ie/ and /uo/) as perceived by the English subjects fall into 3 groups:

1. Vowels that readily find their correspondences in RP. Such Standard Lithuanian vowels are /a:/, /u:/, /o:/, /i:/, /ò/, /è/.
2. Vowels that are perceived as similar correspondences in English. Such are Lithuanian long diphthongized vowels /e:/, /æ:/ (which were accepted as the English diphthongs /ei/ and /Eə/, respectively) and the "diphthongoids" /ie/, /uo/ recognized as /iə/ and /uə/.
3. Vowels that find no correspondences in

English. No regularities were observed in perceiving the short Lithuanian vowels /i/ and /ù/. This may be explained by different spectral as well as prosodic features for these vowels as compared to the English /I/ and /U/.

The alternative perception of /a/ (marked by "æ/a" in most answers) confirms the tendency of /æ/ being retracted to /a/.

The data obtained suggested some new clues to the methods of teaching English pronunciation to Lithuanians. These data were also applied in compiling a simplified phonetic transcription for a Lithuanian-English phrase-book /2/.

REFERENCES

- /1/ Z. Japaridze, *Perceptivnaya fonetika*, Tbilisi, 1985. 96-104.
- /2/ B. Svecevičius, *Lithuanian - English phrase-book*, Vilnius, "Mokslas", 1980. 3-233.