

LEARNING ENGLISH SEGMENTS
WITH TWO LANGUAGES

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ABSTRACT

To discover the extent to which the bilingual's both native languages influence the sound system of English we have made a phonetic analysis of the errors made by Algerians at the segmental level. It appears that for Algerians, the native language with the most complex sub-system will have a major influence on the corresponding sub-system of the target language.

1. INTRODUCTION

The phonological system of an average adult speaker is so firmly rooted that any attempt to alter it may encounter resistance. In the production of the sounds of another language, this resistance is expressed as phonic interference which mainly consists of the transfer of some phonological habits of the first language(s) into the one being learnt.

Is the expression of this phonic interference the same for the monolingual as well as the bilingual? Evidence exists to support the influence of the native language of the monolingual on the target one [4], while studies concerned with what happens in the case of the bilingual do not abound.

The present paper is an attempt to shed some light on the influence of the bilingual's two languages on the sound system of the target language. In dealing with the errors made by bilinguals at the level of segmentals, we will try and show the extent to which each native language influences these segments.

2. METHOD

Twenty four balanced bilinguals in Algerian Arabic and French were recorded speaking English spontaneously. These advanced speakers had just graduated or were about to. Conversational-like speech has the advantage of revealing the influence of the native language(s) because of the strains that result from the conditions due to conversation [2]. The material recorded for each speaker was edited and administered later as a dictation task to ten native British listeners. Thus, a total of 240 listeners took part in the various listening sessions during which they wrote down as accurately as possible what they had heard. These British informants were selected on the grounds of their performance with an R.P speaker using a similar

but shortened version of the material used with the Algerians.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

In the final analysis of the listeners' responses, we considered only instances where miscomprehension occurred between each Algerian speaker and the ten native listeners.

The actual utterances which led to miscommunication were analysed phonetically and the causes classified along a small number of error-categories.

Segmental substitution proved the most important in the distortion of the speech of Algerians. Vowels accounted for the majority of the mispronunciations. The following pure vowels (in rank order) were the most commonly mispronounced segments: / \wedge ɒ ə e/

Note that all these vocalic sounds are lax and this tends to support the claim that R.P lax vowels are the most difficult sounds for the non-native to make [1].

When we consider the various misarticulations of the above vowels, we notice that Algerians tend to replace them with a certain regularity.

For the vowel / \wedge /, speakers produce either of the following:

- quality in the general region of secondary cardinal vowel No.11; e.g. "studies", "sumumer", "suddun".

- quality in the general region of primary cardinal vowel No.6; e.g. "young", "oother", "month".

From the above data we can state that whenever 'u' occurs in the spelling

speakers would usually produce [œ]. Orthographic 'o', on the other hand, incites subjects to produce [ɔ]. These mispronunciations are the result of a negative transfer from French as well as spelling.

R.P /ɒ/ is regularly realised as [əʊ] and occurs when speakers try to give an English 'flavour' to certain lexical items which show in their spelling certain similarities with French. Words of this kind contain an /ɒ/-type of sound spelt as 'au' or 'o' (as in e.g. "Maurice", "mosque" and "cost"). These inaccurate qualities may stem from an initial awareness of the presence of diphthongs in English and their absence in French. The realisation of words like "gone" and "knowledge" with a diphthong represents a typical error due to overgeneralisation; that is, since both "go" and "know" contain the diphthong in question, the same vocalic glide is maintained in "gone" and "knowledge". The different incorrect realisations of the schwa vowel by Algerians do not show any general tendency. However, the majority of the words involved were structural items pronounced in their strong form based on spelling and without any vowel weakening.

R.P /e/ tends to be realised as a vowel in the general region of cardinal No.2 in items such as "better", "embassy" and "definite". This could result from a confusion with the French vowel of "été" ('summer') which is negatively transferred into English.

The mispronunciation of some R.P. diphthongs is also a common feature of the spoken English of Algerians. Out of eight English diphthongs, /eə əʊ eɪ/ and to a lesser extent /ɪə/ were the most difficult.

/eə/ is commonly realised as a monophthong with a quality in the general region of cardinal vowel No.2.

Among the usual inaccurate articulations of /əʊ/ we can mention a monophthong which fluctuates between cardinal vowels No.6 and No.7, especially when the sound is spelt 'o'.

As to the mispronunciation of /eɪ/ monophthongization also tends to be the rule. A typical realisation varies between cardinal vowels No.2 and No.3.

The substitution of [i:] for /ɪə/ in words such as "here" and "really" could be related to the presence of 'e' in the spelling.

In the production of R.P. consonants, six segments proved most problematic with the plosives /t/ and /d/ being among the most difficult. These are given a dental articulation as in French and Arabic, although an affricated alveolar [tʰ] exists in a number of Algerian Arabic varieties. The misarticulation of R.P. /t/ and /d/ also lacks aspiration which is neither present in Arabic nor in French.

One of the striking features of the spoken English of Algerians is the substitution of /t/ and /d/ by the corresponding emphatic plosives. These typical realisations occur in the context where /d/,

and particularly /t/, are followed by an open and/or back vowel as in e.g. "time" and "talk".

Three R.P. fricatives proved particularly difficult for Algerians. Subjects usually replace dental /θ/ by [t] or [f] but never by [s] as in the case of French native speakers. As for the lenis dental /ð/, it is almost always realised as dental [d] and never as [z].

The mispronunciation of /h/ fluctuates between the lenis glottal fricative [ɦ] and the fortis laryngeal [h] with the former being the most widespread.

Finally, the approximant /r/ is typically realised as an alveolar tap in the spoken English of Algerians.

4. DISCUSSION

The above analysis of the various sound substitutions allows us to make a number of observations. First, in the case of mispronounced vocalic segments (pure and diphthongal) the negative transfer seems to result from the French language. The produced vowel either exists in French or is derived from the influence of spelling based on the Algerians' knowledge of the sound/letter correspondence in this same language.

Second, the inaccurate articulation of certain R.P. consonants seems to find an answer in the effect that Arabic consonants have on the Algerian speaker. The non-use of [s] and [z] for dental fricatives, the use of emphatics and the tap are evidence to support this point.

It thus appears that

interference does not occur haphazardly but seems to express itself in a specific way. That is to say, most of the vocalic errors and consonantal errors were attributed to the influence of French and Algerian Arabic respectively. Compared with Arabic, French has a more complex vowel system, whereas Arabic has a much more complex consonant system. It appears, then, that for the Algerian bilingual, the native language with the most complex sub-system will have a major influence on the corresponding sub-system of the target language. Hence, because the French vowel system is more complex than that of Algerian Arabic, speakers are more likely to be influenced by French in their mispronunciation of English vowels. On the contrary, the Arabic consonant system being more complex, it is more likely to affect the articulation of certain English consonants.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion we will exercise a word of caution. Our attempt to explain certain phonetic errors made by Algerians does not take into account all the processes involved in second language learning. In the present paper we dealt with only one such process which is language transfer from the two native languages. But we do realise that language transfer on its own is not enough to explain the various deviations from the norm made by the non-native in the process of learning a

foreign language [3].

6. REFERENCES

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