

A CONTRASTIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION FOR SLOVENE STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

In trying to identify problem areas of foreign-language pronunciation training, teachers often neglect the apparent interaction between the mother tongue and the language in question. However, in terms of pronunciation training, it has often been observed that students' awareness of features of their mother tongue and the differences between their first and the foreign language increases considerably their perception and production of the language of instruction. The paper describes the main differences between the English and the Slovene sound systems from the points of view of manner and place of articulation, voicing and fortis/lenis contrast, including certain features of connected speech, such as assimilation and elision. The most common pronunciation errors of Slovene university students of English, observed in their speech and phonemic-transcription assignments, are analysed by contrasting the two systems and by considering the pronunciation of English loan-words in Slovene and the pronunciation of 'international' words in both languages.

1. THE SOUND SYSTEMS OF ENGLISH (RP) AND STANDARD SLOVENE

1.1. Vowels. The main difference between the two systems is in a greater number of English vowel phonemes. Thus, for each of the English vowel pairs /i: - ɪ, u: - ʊ, ɑ: - ʌ/, Slovene only has a close front and a close back vowel /i, u/, and an open central vowel /a/, which are all relatively long in accented and relatively short in unaccented position [1, 2]. This leads Slovene speakers to neutralise English vowels, e.g. in:

beat vs. bit, pool vs. pull, and fast vs. fussed

The nearest equivalents of English vowels /e-æ/ are the Slovene mid-close /e/ (closer than the Eng. /e/) and mid-open /ɛ/ (closer than the Eng. /æ/; for both, see the vowel diagram in [2]). While one might expect simple replacement of the two English vowels with the two Slovene counterparts in Slovene speakers' English pronunciation, this is seldom the case. The reason for this is most probably the fact that the Slovene /e/ is (correctly) perceived by Slovene speakers as too close to be applied for the English /e/. Instead, both English vowels are (again correctly) identified as the nearest equivalents of the Slovene /ɛ/, with the degree of opening between the two English vowels. Although they are generally distinguished by Slovene speakers in identification tests based on recognition of vowels in words used in isolation (e.g. *pet/pat, Ben/ban* etc.), they are very often neutralised in pronunciation.

Although the situation with the back English vowels /ɔ: - ɒ/ is more or less the same as in the case of /e - æ/ (i.e. the Slovene /o/ and /ɔ/ are mid-close and mid-open respectively), neutralisation seldom occurs and, generally, these two vowels do not present a particular problem for Slovene speakers. The same seems to be the case with the remaining, i.e. central vowels (/ə/ and /ɜ:/), except that the /ɜ:/ in the pronunciation of Slovene speakers is often too short [3]. This can be explained by the fact that Slovene (again) only has one vowel of this type; while this vowel is longer in accented position, the difference in length is considerably smaller than the one between the English /ə/ and /ɜ:/.

With regard to allophonic realisations of vowels, the variation of length (duration) in English (pre-fortis clipping and pre-lenis lengthening) is perhaps the most important difference between the two languages. It should be pointed out that in standard Slovene all obstruents are strong and voiceless in final position [4], so that while vowel length is an important feature in differentiating between e.g. English *bat - bad*, in standard Slovene words like *ped - pet* ('span' - 'five') have the same pronunciation. This explains why Slovene speakers tend to neutralise also pairs of English words such as:

rise-rice, badge -batch, bride-bright, etc.

The Slovene diphthongs are generally considered phonemically as combinations of two phonemes, a vowel and /j/ or a vowel and [w] (often written as [u]). The latter is considered a bilabial realisation of the approximant /v/. The Slovene phonetic diphthongs are [ew, ɛw, aw, ɔw, ej, oj, ɔj, aj, uj]. There are no centring diphthongs in Slovene. The diphthongs [aw] and [aj]. can safely be used as equivalents of the English /aʊ/ and /aɪ/, while [ɔw] differs from the RP /ɔʊ/ in the 1st element. The first element of the RP /ɔɪ/ is mid-way between the closer Slovene /o/ in [oj] and the more open /ɔ/ in [ɔj].

1.1.1. Elision of Vowels in Unaccented Position. While in English (at least in RP) elision of vowels seems to affect in particular vowels in the vicinity of approximants /l/ and /r/, e.g. in *temporary, cancelling*, etc., it is more common for vowels in Slovene to be elided in word-initial and word-final position, e.g. in *mam (imam), prid (pridi)*. Notice, however, that such elisions are not considered acceptable in Standard Slovene. They are only used in non-standard dialects, e.g. in the Slovene capital city, Ljubljana.

1.2. Consonants. In terms of systemic differences, the most important is the lack of the dental fricatives /θ, ð/ in the system

of Slovene consonants. Slovene also has no /ŋ/ as a separate phoneme. This nasal only occurs as an allophone of /n/ when followed by a velar consonant. Slovene also has no labio-velar semi-vowel /w/ as a distinctive sound unit; the sound does occur, however, as one of the realisations of the Slovene /v/ (before consonants). On the other hand, Slovene has three affricates - /ts/ in addition to /tʃ/ and /dʒ/.

The Slovene labio-dental /v/ is an approximant rather than a fricative, so that the Slovene /f/ has no voiced-lenis counterpart on the phonemic level.

The Slovene /r/ is an alveolar tap /ɾ/. While the approximant /ɹ/ in RP is only pronounced before vowels, the Slovene tapped /r/ is always pronounced.

Other differences between the two systems concern the place of articulation. Thus, the nearest equivalent of the English glottal fricative /h/ is the velar fricative /x/. Also, the Slovene /t, d/ and /n/ are dental rather than alveolar.

With respect to some important allophonic realisations of English consonants, Slovene differs from English in that:

- /p, t/ and (questionably) /k/ are always unaspirated,
- glottal reinforcement (i.e. the glottal stop /ʔ/) only occurs before word-initial vowels, never before consonants,
- nasal and lateral release of plosives do not occur in word-final clusters of plosives and nasals/laterals, as e.g. in Eng. *written, bottle*.
- nasals and approximants are not devoiced by the preceding fortis obstruents

1.2.1. Assimilation of Consonants. Only regressive assimilation in the two languages can be compared; progressive assimilation does not occur in Slovene.

Regressive Place Assimilation: As in English, /n/ assimilates also in Slovene to the following labio-dental, bilabial and velar consonants. On the other hand, /t/ and /d/ do not. The Slovene alveolar fricatives /s, z/ often coalesce with the following palato-alveolars as in English, but not with the following /j/.

Regressive Voice Assimilation: While voice assimilation is supposedly rare in English [5], it follows a consistent rule in Slovene, according to which a lenis obstruent cannot precede a fortis obstruent and vice-versa [4]. Thus, a sequence of two obstruents (both within a word and on the word boundary) is always either lenis/voiced + lenis/voiced or fortis/voiceless + fortis/voiceless, e.g.:

odstraniti 'remove' /ts/, *od strahu* 'out of fear' /-t s-/; *risba* 'drawing' /zb/, *res bom* 'I really will' /-z b-/

1.2.2. Elision of Consonants. In comparing the occurrence of consonant elision in the two languages, it should be noted that there are a number of differences between English and Slovene in their structures of consonant clusters. In both languages, however, it is (not surprisingly) mostly in clusters of two or more consonants that one of them is elided, in particular in rapid informal speech. In English, the consonants that most often undergo elision are the alveolar plosives /t/ and /d/, when they

occur between consonants, e.g. in *first three, world-wide*, etc. In colloquial Slovene (as spoken for example in the capital city Ljubljana), the same can be observed for these two consonants (e.g. *tistega* 'that one', acc. sg., pronounced /'ti:zga/); among the sonorants, the most commonly elided is /j/ when preceded by a consonant or in final position (e.g. *zjutraj* /'zu:tri/ 'in the morning'), which can be contrasted with elision of this semi-vowel in English (e.g. in GA and optionally also in RP pronunciation of *suit, nudist*, etc.). Note also the alternative pronunciations of e.g. *Monday* as /'mʌndeɪ/ and /'mʌndɪ/.

2. OTHER ASPECTS OF CONTRAST

2.1. Loan-words and international words. On the one hand, the process of 'transphonemisation' of English loan-words in Slovene generally reflects the systemic differences between the two languages explained above. On the other hand, the pronunciation of English loan-words has often been influenced by the spelling and, when borrowed via other languages (e.g. German or Serb and Croatian) by the pronunciation in those languages. A typical example of this influence is the pronunciation of initial *st-*, e.g. in *start*, as /st-/

In the same way, the pronunciation of the so-called 'international' words (e.g. *conversation* - Sl. *konverzacija*) is influenced by the Slovene equivalents.

2.2. Influence of American English. One of the aims we consider important in teaching English pronunciation to students at tertiary level is that of achieving consistency within the selected standard accent. In Slovenia, the model is traditionally and still prevalently that of British English. The majority of textbooks, tapes, dictionaries and other teaching materials used at all levels of English classes are British rather than North American or Australian. On the other hand, outside the classroom, pupils and students are more often exposed to American English accents, in particular by way of television, popular music, computer games and the Internet. Although in most aspects their pronunciation is closer to RP than to General American, they find it difficult to attain consistency in either RP or GA. Once they become fully aware of the differences between the two accents, however, they can gradually overcome this problem. Needless to say, the choice between the existing standard pronunciations should be left entirely to the student, as long as their speech is consistent.

3. CONCLUSION

It is often argued that non-native speakers of English (or any other language for that matter) can never achieve native-like pronunciation competence and that (in accordance with the communicative approach to foreign-language learning) there is no particular need for them to acquire it, provided that their speech is sufficiently intelligible to other speakers. I strongly believe, however, that a 'foreign accent' is only an intermediate stage in the learning process, and that along with improving all other language skills, students can and should continuously develop and improve also their pronunciation. Being aware of the main differences between (in our case) English and their mother tongue is perhaps the most important prerequisite for all ambitious student to advance from the 'minimum general' to the 'high acceptability' pronunciation standard [5].

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