

An Essay on Incorrect English Pronunciation of Text Reading by Japanese College Students*

Kunihiro MIMATSU

key words : prosodic errors, pronunciation teaching, speech melody, abrupt falls of pitch, reproduction of the pitch configuration

1 Introduction

There have been many studies on the characteristics of the pronunciation of a second or foreign language from various angles (For the review of literature on this issue, see Sekiya 1994). But it seems that thorough research on prosodic errors are more or less neglected in the field of applied linguistics. The main concern of this paper is problems concerning prosodic errors in English produced by the Japanese and its implication for pronunciation teaching.

2 Aims

The purpose of the research is to analyze various aspects of English pronunciation produced by Japanese speakers, and to explore reasonable and practical instruction methods to improve their pronunciation of English. Based on the findings, the topics to be taught will be able to be selected, prioritized and arranged in a suitable order.

This preliminary paper has two aims:

*I would like to thank Guy Perring (The British Council, Tokyo) for kindly correcting my English.

- (1) to give a rough sketch of English pronunciation errors produced by the Japanese,
- (2) to find a basis for a possible instruction method on the basis of the results observed.

As mentioned above, the main focus concentrates on prosodic errors. This is partly because the aspects of prosodic errors or speech melody have not been investigated sufficiently in comparison with segmental errors. The other reason is that prosodic errors are more directly related to speech comprehensibility and intelligibility. These two factors emphasise the importance of examining these aspects in prosodic errors.

3 Method

3.1 Participants

6 female junior college students participated in this research. All the participants were native speakers of Tokyo Standard Japanese. As to their background of English education, they have learned English since they entered junior high school, which amounts to 7-8 years in total. As is often the case in Japan, however, their English proficiency level was not very high in spite of the length of their education period.

The 6 participants attended an English Phonetics Course given by the author in 1999. They were selected because they attended the course regularly (almost every time), and had had the experience of correction of their English pronunciation.

It is worth stating here that the participants only received a word -level instruction of English pronunciation in the course. Namely, they were not informed of the prosodic system of English both theoretically and practically.

3.2 Material

A two-page text printed in A4 size paper was handed out to the participants. The text consists of 502 words and 32 sentences in total. It was taken from a high school English textbook for first year students. Therefore the text itself was presumably easy for them to understand. A cassette tape on which the text

had been recorded by a male American speaker of English was also prepared and handed out to them. It took the native speaker approximately 4 minutes to read the whole text at a natural tempo. The entire text is given in APPENDIX for reference.

3.3 Task

The participants had both the text and the tape handed out together a week before the conduct of the task. On this occasion, they read the text and heard the tape for the first time. They informed the experimenter (the author) that this text had never appeared in their English textbooks in high school. The author also explained about what they should prepare for and do a week after.

The task imposed on the participants was to imitate the model pronunciation on the tape as exactly as possible. The preparation period was just one week. The author did not inform the participants about which aspects of pronunciation would be investigated. Moreover, he did not tell them that this would be an investigation of their pronunciation of English.

3.4 Procedure

The task was carried out as the final oral test of an English Phonetics Course. Therefore they were presumably nervous and did the task under pressure.

In a quiet classroom, the participants read out individually the text, which was simultaneously recorded on a DAT.

Their pronunciation was assessed by the author, who is a trained phonetician. The assessment was conducted by listening repeatedly to the recorded material in comparison with the model pronunciation. Since he was not a native speaker of English and was not able to utilize his intuition, the author only concentrated on what deviated clearly from the model pronunciation. With respect to segmental errors, attention was paid to the sounds which do not occur in English. As far as prosodic errors were concerned, the main focus was on locations where an abrupt fall of pitch occurred in the individual sentences. This corresponds roughly to the investigation of speech melody.

4 Results

4.1 Segmentals

It is not the intention of this paper to go into the details concerning the segmental errors. Therefore the following statement suffices here.

As expected, all the six types of pronunciation errors illustrated by Suenobu et al. (1992: 146-147)¹ occurred quite a few times across the whole text with all the participants. In addition, the confusion of /l/ with /r/ also occurred. This appears to be the result of hypercorrection, because all of them had had difficulty with the distinction between /r/ and /l/ and had been instructed and corrected by the author many times in his English Phonetics Course.

For the individual points of segmental errors of the Japanese, see Togo (1989).

4.2 Prosody

The first thing to be pointed out is that they not always but often succeeded in placing points of the pitch fall. It must be remembered that they imitated the model pronunciation. It is not the fact that they read the text without any aural reference. Therefore it is likely that they managed to perceive the pitch falls on the tape and remembered where the pitch had fallen in preparation for the task.

Second, it should be stated in which aspect they deviated from the model pronunciation with respect to prosody. The main points are the following:

- (3) a. the magnitude of the fall of pitch from the peak point to the bottom was relatively small,
- b. the slope of the fall was less steep in comparison with the model pronunciation,
- c. chains of the preceding syllables without stress immediately before the pitch fall were as high in pitch as the stressed syllable; they often assigned such chains a high level tone.

¹ The six types of pronunciation errors are:

1. Vowel Addition, e.g., *always* [l] → [lɪw]
2. Vowel Substitution, e.g., *work* [ɜ:] → [ɑ:]
3. Consonant Substitution, e.g., *they* [ð] → [dz]
4. Consonant Deletion, e.g., *seems* [mz] → [m]
5. Wrong Pause Insertion, e.g., *American life* → American || life
6. Wrong Accentuation, e.g., *de'velopment* → deve'lopment

The last thing about prosodic errors is that although they imitated the tape, none of the participants were able to produce English-like rhythmic patterning. Typically, they failed more or less to reduce vowels without stress. As a result, they produced every syllable with equal weight just as in Japanese. This fact indicates that they were not sensitive to a foreign rhythmic patterning which deviates from Japanese. Therefore they were not able to imitate this point. This tendency of the Japanese is also pointed out in Sato (1999: 42-43) and Togo (1989: 87-125).

5 Discussion

English has a prosodic system where the peak and bottom of pitch occur recursively in sentences. The fall is often abrupt especially immediately after the stressed syllable which is a nucleus (For the details of the prosodic system of English, see Cruttenden 1986, Takebayashi 1996, Watanabe 1994.). In this research, attention has been paid to these abrupt fall of pitch as mentioned earlier.

The results mentioned above indicate that the participants succeeded in detecting most of the falls but failed to reproduce them. This finding appears to have an implication for English pronunciation teaching.

A possible explanation for the participants' ability to perceive the pitch fall in English is a positive transfer from their native language, Japanese, which is a pitch-accent language. This ability should be made good use of in instruction of English pronunciation, because the teacher can omit this particular topic in teaching for justifiable reasons. Then, he or she can concentrate on instruction and correction of the reproduction of the pitch configuration.

In addition to the above, the teacher should correct the inappropriate rhythmic patterning in Japanese English. This has to be done in combination with the instruction of stress placement, because these two phenomena clearly correlate with each other. They also correlate with the falls of pitch.

Lastly, it may be appropriate to state the following. In the English Phonetics Course given by the author, the participants were never taught anything on the-

oretical issues of English prosody, at least not systematically. If they had been taught English prosody systematically, clearly their ability to produce English prosody would have been significantly better. This anticipation is partly based on the fact that the participants' ability to perceive speech melody has been confirmed.

6 Concluding remarks

When teaching pronunciation of a foreign language, one thing must be kept in mind. That is an empirical fact that the presence of a strong foreign accent does not necessarily result in reduced intelligibility or comprehensibility (Munro & Derwing 1999: 303). On the other hand, it is a well-known fact that intonation influence the comprehension of speech in comparison with segmental errors (*ibid*: 306). This shows the importance of prosody teaching, but does not necessarily mean that the instruction of segmentals should be neglected. Since it is unclear at present what kinds of segmental errors out of the possible many errors lead to destructive communication, one can not prioritize topics on segmentals in pronunciation teaching. Research in this direction is needed.

The author had thought before this research that the instruction of segmentals should come before that of prosody. One reason was that most Japanese have more difficulty with segmentals than prosody and they usually cannot get rid of errors in spite of their efforts. Another reason was they themselves want to be corrected especially with respect to segmentals. However, it may be more appropriate that prosody be introduced at early stages of pronunciation teaching.

Another point is whether native-like proficiency in pronunciation is really needed. As far as English as a second or foreign language is concerned, the situation where English is used is not always that a non-native speaks to a native and vice versa. A non-native - non-native situation is quite common these days. Therefore, what kind of English pronunciation would be suitable in this situation? Such a problem has not been solved so far. When it comes to the pronunciation teaching of a foreign language, there still remains many

problems to be investigated.

To conclude, this paper is only a rough sketch of the pronunciation errors of the Japanese. The illustration of individual errors and the discussion of the results have not been fully completed. The author plans to do a detailed follow-up to this research. There will be a full discussion and the implications for pronunciation teaching in detail will follow.

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APPENDIX

Americans are always on the go. We often hear visitors from other countries say to Americans: "You never seem to stay in one place. You are always moving." There are many reasons for this.

The American love for moving around can be seen in the way they move from house to house. One family does not live in the same house for generations. Sometimes they live in only one house, but most families move quite a few times in their lives. As the husband makes more money, the family either rents or buys a more beautiful or comfortable home than the one they lived in before. They may move in order to live in a climate that will be better for the health of the family. Perhaps the company the father works for transfers him, or he himself finds a better job in another town and moves out.

Moving around seems to give Americans great pleasure. Even when Americans are not moving to another home, they very often travel. Many people travel by bus, and more often by plane. Airplanes are very popular these days. However, travel by automobile is as common. The car is used for the Sunday afternoon ride, or for social engagements.

Some families travel with a trailer they can sleep in. They park the trailer by the side of the road or in a comfortable place such as a mountain valley or on the shore of a lake. Some people may have a tent and go camping, with the trailer left behind.

Americans have a long history of moving about. Their fathers all came from other countries some generations ago. But they would have stayed in the same place if they had not been willing to take terrible risks in order to find a better place. Shipwrecks, hunger, disease, and loneliness were everyday dangers when they settled themselves in the new land. They were people who faced the future, who did not spend much time in looking back. For three hundred years, America's history was one of searching for a better living and moving farther west.

The fact that the people very often move around has had a lot to do with the uniformity in American life: the same streets with the same chain stores from

coast to coast, the same type of school system, and other similar aspects of the cultural pattern. The best example of uniformity, however, is perhaps the language. The same way of speaking is used almost everywhere in the country. The English language they speak in the United States shows a uniformity which is not found in any other language in one big country. The development of communication and the school system keep this uniformity. The speech of an American from one part of the country shows only small differences from that of an American from any other part.

The fact that the American people are always on the go is a part of the history of the development of the United States.

日本人短大生によるテキスト読み上げに生起する 不正確な英語発音に関する小論

三松 国宏

本稿では、日本人の英語にあらわれる、主にプロソディーに関わる不正確な発音についての報告を行う。

日本人短大生6名に簡単な英文テキストとそれを英語母語話者に録音してもらったテープを渡し、テープの模範発音をできるだけ忠実に再現できるように練習してもらった。1週間の練習の後、同じ英文テキストを読み上げてもらい、それを録音したものが本研究の音声資料となった。筆者自身による音声資料の聴取調査の結果、短大生の発音では、

- (1) 文中に実現されるピッチ下降の規模が、模範発音に比べて小さく、
- (2) ピッチ下降の傾斜も模範発音に比べてなだらかで、
- (3) 強強勢を持つ音節に前接する弱音節連続を高い平らなピッチで発音する傾向にある

ことが判明した。しかし同時に、文の音調の最終的な実現のさせ方そのものは模範発音と異なっていたが、ピッチを下降させる位置については多くの場合模範発音の通りであった。

以上の結果から、日本人短大生が、英語らしい音調の一部を形作っているピッチ下降を聞き取り、ある程度再現できる能力を持っていたことがわかった。特に何の説明も受けていないのにピッチ下降を聞き取っていることを踏まえ、英語の音調パターンを発音指導の早い段階から導入し、理論的な背景を理解させることにより、よりスムーズに日本人にも英語らしい音調の実現が可能となるものと思われる。