

Why Pronunciation Should Be a Priority

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The purpose of this article is two-fold: 1) To provide a concise summary of the most recent research relative to pronunciation, and to discuss the pedagogical implications of those findings in a Danish context, and 2) to demonstrate that pronunciation is *not* a subject that can safely be ignored in the classroom in favour of more important matters. Thus, the first part of this article discusses the consequences of having a non-nativelike pronunciation. The second section reviews briefly some of the most recent findings that have been made in the field of pronunciation in Denmark and abroad.

Is pronunciation important?

At the moment, pronunciation is not a top priority anywhere. On the contrary, a frightening number of colleagues at my own department and other English departments around the country take the view that teaching phonetics and phonology to our students is a waste of time. They fall roughly into three categories: Those who think that teaching pronunciation to adolescent and adult learners is a waste of time because they are too old to acquire anything close to a decent accent; those who think that pronunciation is simply not important enough to justify taking time from the American Civil War and 16th century English literature; and those who think that Danes are so good at English that they must have a natural talent for it. What those three groups have in common is that they are all sadly mistaken.

There is plenty of empirical evidence to suggest that speaking with a foreign accent can have both social and communicative consequences. A large number of studies have demonstrated a clear correlation between degree of foreign accent and the evaluative judgements of native speakers towards non-native learners. For example, Ladegaard (1994) made an investigation of native reactions to speakers of non-standard varieties of Danish. A group of native Danish speakers evaluated speech material from four speakers of different origins: A native of Copenhagen, Funen, Western Jutland, and Poland. His results showed, not unexpectedly, that the Danish raters consistently judged the native Polish speaker to be less intelligent, less eloquent and less well educated than the native Danish speakers, despite the fact that she was a university lecturer in physics and had passed the language proficiency test required by Danish Universities before entry. Ladegaard's results are in agreement with a large number of studies conducted abroad (e.g., Brennan & Brennan, 1981; Bresnahan et al. 2002; Ryan et al., 1975), which show that stereotyped impressions of non-native speakers can easily be called forth in native speakers by a foreign accent alone.

Moreover, Canadian researchers have demonstrated that foreign accents can have communicative consequences as well. In an interesting study from 1995, Munro and Derwing demonstrated that, contrary to general beliefs, the biggest communicative consequence of a foreign accent is not reduced comprehensibility (although that is often one of the costs too), but extra processing time on the part of the listeners. They found that while accented speech may be perfectly comprehensible to native speakers, it generally takes longer to process than unaccented speech. Munro and Derwing interpreted this to mean that the irritation they have often observed in native speakers may well be a result of the extra mental effort that the processing of accented speech requires.

Thus, as demonstrated by the findings reported above, there is every reason to focus on pronunciation. Although most people would probably agree that the stereotypes evoked by a foreign accent reflect a crude generalisation of non-native speakers, they are still a fact of life in the society in which the foreign-language learners have to function. We can always discuss whether we ought to try to change native speakers' attitudes to foreigners, or whether we should focus on helping non-native speakers reduce their accent. But we are certainly letting the language learners down by simply pretending that there are no social and communicative costs of speaking with a foreign accent.

Is pronunciation modifiable?

The notion of a critical period for language acquisition has been with us for some time now. Many people have been led to believe that there is a biologically timed critical period for language learning (often thought to end with the onset of puberty), during which language acquisition must necessarily take place in order to be entirely successful. Proponents of the Critical Period Hypothesis believe that we should not waste too much energy trying to teach foreign language pronunciation to adult and adolescent learners since they are biologically prevented from making any significant progress. Support for this view is seemingly found in a large number of immigrant studies (e.g., Johnson & Newport, 1989; Patkowski, 1980), which show that immigrants rarely attain a native-like pronunciation of the new language. However, it must be kept in mind that what these studies really test is whether immigrants *typically* attain a native-like pronunciation when moving to another country, not whether it is actually possible. The question is how they would have fared if they had received systematic instruction in the phonetics and phonology of the new language. Recent results suggest that it can make a significant difference. Two studies conducted by a group of Dutch researchers (Bongaerts et al., 1995; 1997) have demonstrated native-like competence in adult Dutch learners' pronunciation of English. Further support is found in Højen's study (2003) of Danish learners' pronunciation of English /s/ and /ʃ/ (as in "sure"), and my own study (Andersen, 2001) of

Danish learners' pronunciation of English consonants, which both demonstrated native-like competence in adult Danish learners of English. Moreover, many studies have shown a significant approximation to native norms in the pronunciation of adult foreign language learners. So although a native-like competence is perhaps not attainable for all learners in all areas of the language, there is no reason to give up on pronunciation. With the right instruction, adult learners can make significant improvements.

Are consonants and vowels more important than intonation?

Now that we have established that teaching pronunciation to mature students is worth our while, the next question is: Where should we concentrate our efforts? Are individual sounds more important than the suprasegmentals (stress, rhythm, intonation, etc.)?

Up to now, "intelligible pronunciation" seems to have been the highest ambition of language teachers, possibly because accent-free speech seems unrealistic and unattainable in the wake of the Critical Period Hypothesis. Thus, most traditional Danish textbooks on English pronunciation focus on individual sounds rather than suprasegmentals which are considered a luxury in terms of teaching.

Evidence has been obtained which, to some extent, supports this downgrading of the suprasegmentals in favour of individual speech sounds. In 1994, Christian Jensen conducted a very interesting study of the relative importance of individual speech sounds versus intonation in terms of perceived degree of accent. Jensen collected renditions of the same English sentence from one native speaker of English and four native Danish speakers. The renditions were merged digitally, and a set of new sentences were produced. In one half of the new sentences, the original Danish-accented consonants and vowels were retained, whereas the intonation pattern of the Danish speakers was replaced by that of the native English speaker. In the other half, the original intonation pattern of the Danish speakers was retained, whereas the individual speech sounds were replaced by the native English speaker's. The sentences were rated for accent by a group of native English speakers. Jensen's results clearly show that the individual speech sounds played the biggest role in terms of perceived accent. Sentences with native English speech sounds and a Danish-accented intonation pattern were consistently perceived as more "English" than sentences with Danish-accented speech sounds and a native English intonation pattern by the English listeners.

However, the fact that intonation seems to play a lesser role than individual sounds in relation to how nativelike the speaker sounds does not mean that intonation can simply be discarded as an unnecessary luxury in the classroom. On the contrary, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that inappropriate intonation contours can have both communicative and sociocultural consequences. To take our own situation first, Danish speakers' intonation has often been reported to convey the impression to English speakers that the Danish learner is

bored, uninterested or even depressed (e.g., Davidsen-Nielsen, 1984: 33; Livbjerg & Mees, 1997: 40). (In all fairness I must add that, to my knowledge, the evidence for this claim is mainly impressionistic. As far as I know, it has never been investigated in a large-scale empirical study).

Moreover, a number of foreign studies have found that a transfer of intonation contours can have very unfortunate consequences for non-native speakers. For example, Gumperz (1982) reported that Indian and Pakistani waiters in a staff cafeteria at a major British airport were perceived as surly and uncooperative by both customers and management. A closer inspection revealed that their intonation contours were the root of the matter. For example, the waiters would annoy the English customers by saying "gravy" with falling intonation when offering gravy, instead of "gravy" with rising intonation which signals polite uncertainty. The falling intonation pattern was perfectly appropriate for making a polite offer in their own languages. However, to the native English customers, the falling intonation signalled a statement, i.e., "This is gravy", which was a rather rude utterance to make under the circumstances (p. 173).

In summary, what the empirical evidence suggests is that although individual speech sounds may contribute more to the perceived degree of accent than intonation, a transfer of native intonation contours to a foreign language can still have serious consequences for the speaker. So concentrating on individual sounds in the classroom and ignoring the suprasegmentals is not helpful to the language learners.

Are "exotic" sounds really more difficult than sounds which we already know?

In the previous section, the importance of intonation versus individual sounds was discussed. This section discusses the question of whether some individual sounds deserve more attention than others in the classroom.

Most Danish textbooks on English pronunciation available to EFL instructors take a Contrastive Analysis approach to pronunciation acquisition. The general prediction in these textbooks is that whenever there is a difference in the native and foreign language, a problem will occur. As a result, a disproportionately large amount of space is devoted to a description of "exotic" sounds such as English /r/ and /w/, which did constitute a problem for my grandparents' generation, but are hardly ever mispronounced by the younger generations nowadays.

A more sensible approach has been suggested by Flege (e.g., Flege, 1995). Flege believes that the main reason why learners retain a foreign accent when learning a new language is that they fail to perceive finer phonetic differences between native and foreign sounds. More specifically, Flege argues that in the beginning, learners tend to perceive all foreign sounds as realisations of their native phonetic categories. As they get more

experienced with the new language, learners will gradually begin to notice the more obvious differences between foreign and native sounds, such as the front English /r/ sound in "right" ([ɹ]) as opposed to the back Danish /r/ sound ([ʁ]) in "rille", and eventually establish new phonetic categories for the foreign sounds which do not match any of the native phonetic categories very well. However, more subtle differences between foreign and native sounds, such as the voicing in English [z] (as in "zoo") as opposed to the voiceless Danish [s] in "sole" will be filtered out as irrelevant variation by the learners. Thus, foreign sounds which resemble native ones quite closely will continue to be treated as realisations of native categories. In other words, learners will notice obvious differences but ignore subtle ones unless they are somehow made aware of the importance of those less obvious differences. Thus, according to Flege, we had much better focus on sounds like English /p, b, t, d, k, g, f, v, s, z/ which Danish learners *think* they know because they differ only slightly in Danish and English, and spend less energy on "exotic" sounds like /r/, /w/, and the notorious 'th' sounds as in "think" ([θ]) and "they" ([ð]) which will, to a larger extent, take care of themselves.

Conclusion

We have seen that there are compelling reasons for giving pronunciation a high priority in second language teaching. Speaking with a foreign accent may have both social and communicative consequences for non-native language users, and we are letting our students down by pretending that pronunciation does not matter. The good news is that mature students are not automatically barred from attaining a nativelike pronunciation. But if we want our students to become more proficient communicators, the pedagogical aim of "simply getting the message across" will have to go. And if our aim is that students are to develop a language proficiency which is both comprehensive *and* socially acceptable, suprasegmentals must be an integral part of foreign language teaching alongside individual sounds. Seen in isolation, learning to produce individual sounds correctly may contribute more towards an accent-free pronunciation than learning the right intonation contours. But if our students are to learn to communicate in a socially acceptable way, they have to be taught such social conventions as how to ask a question politely. Learning appropriate intonation contours can no longer be considered icing on the cake in foreign language teaching.

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