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ASPECTS OF CONNECTED SPEECH IN THE ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

To the native English speaker, the operations of connected speech and its ensuing rhythm are crucial aspects of Spoken English, especially in relation to intelligibility, yet most learners and users of English as a second language find it difficult to employ the characteristic English rhythm despite their skilful use of English vocabulary and grammatically correct constructions. Part of the difficulty, may be traced to ignorance of connected speech patterns of the English language. Although some attention is given to related areas like word

stress and intonation, other vital aspects like context-based syllable weakening, elision, linking, and contraction are inadequately or sometimes barely treated in the typical English language class. Consequently, this paper examines the neglected aspects of connected speech in an actual language class, and presents the typical response of learners to the operations in order to highlight the problem as well as find creative solutions for it.

Key Words: Connected speech, weakening, linking, elision, rhythm.

Background to the Study

No matter how proficient a user of English as a second language (ESL) is in terms of lexical choices and adherence to the rules of English grammar, one major factor that differentiates him or her from the speaker of English as a native language is the failure to observe certain requirements of connected speech in Standard English. These requisites in connected English speech are what give the language its rhythm. To some linguists, rhythm is one of the most fundamental aspects of spoken English. For instance, Allen (1961, p. xiv) asserts that, "Broadly speaking, a reasonably correct flow [rhythm] is more important for intelligibility than correct sounds." In the case of ESL in Nigeria, researchers, in the past two decades have paid more attention than before, to the study of suprasegmental features of English as spoken in Nigeria (Udofot, 1997; 2003; Eka, 1985; Ufomata, 1996; Jowitt, 2000; Gut, 2001; Akinjobi, 2006, 2012). However, this interest is still limited in scope as the focus has been more on word stress, sentence stress, and intonation while other equally important features of native English rhythm in connected speech are ignored.

Since rhythm is important in native English, but vital portions of it are generally neglected in the ESL classroom, the aim of this paper is to highlight what the ESL speaker typically does that contravenes the operations of English rhythm and makes his accent stand out, sometimes even to the point of unintelligibility. This is followed by

suggestions for innovative teaching strategies that are more student-friendly rather than the traditional exam-focused classroom approach.

Native English Rhythm

English rhythm is achieved by the alternation of strong and weak syllables at regular intervals of time. To allow the weak stresses to be successfully rushed in, and squeezed in between two strong syllables, the basic operations carried out include the following:

1. Context-based realisation of strong and weak syllables
2. elision
3. linking
4. contraction

For the examination of user's strategies in realising the four processes listed above, data were collected from a group of 30 undergraduate students who were interviewed and recorded on audio tape in a language laboratory. The interview started with extensive casual conversation involving all the respondents: they were encouraged to give their opinions on various current issues, using participant-observation. Each respondent was then required to read a series of sentences that involved one or more of the above four operations from Gimson's book (1975), *A Practical Course of English Pronunciation*. The analysis of the respondents' data is discussed below. The control was the native-speaker voice on the accompanying audio tape to Gimson's book; whose model is referred to in this paper as Standard British English (SBE).

Context-Based Realisation of Strong and Weak Syllables

All function words in English, that is, auxiliary verbs (*is, are, be*), prepositions (*to, in, from*), conjunctions (*and, but*), and articles (*the, an, a*) have strong and weak forms. Depending on the context in which they are used in a sentence, function words are usually weak forms and therefore have weak syllables, commonly signified by the schwa /ə/. The same weak form may however be changed to a strong syllable when it is being contrasted with another word in the sentence

or is being emphasised. To determine the strategies learners used to perform the contrastive and emphatic function of strong versus weak forms in English rhythm, respondents were told to read the following sentences paying particular attention to the underlined function words:

John and Mary came. (insisting that both came)

This is the Mr. Jones. ('the' implying the special, famous)

Not at London in London.

I voted for the motion.

He said of not in.

She's coming to London not from London.

All respondents showed an unawareness of, or difficulty in understanding the link between strong and weak forms, and semanticity of sentences. Even after being told to emphasise the underlined words, the following interesting strategies were employed:

- a) Nodding the head vigorously or jabbing the index finger in the air – all words were stressed and spoken very slowly.
- b) Raising the voice, at times to the level of a shout. Placing particularly strong stress on the wrong words often ignoring the most important one. E.g /'dʒɒn ən 'meri kəm/ with extra strong stress on *John* and *Mary* instead of on *and*.
- c) Using an additional lexical item to indicate meaning. E.g. adding "both" to give: *Both John and Mary came*.
- d) Whenever a negative adverb "not" occurred, this alone was sometimes given special prominence.
- e) Pausing considerably before and after the underlined word e.g. *she's coming /to/ London not /from/ London*.
- f) Whenever emphasis was placed on the correct word it involved mainly the doubling not lengthening or strengthening of the vowel. Therefore,

at /æɪ/ in RP became /aat/ in NE

to /tu:/ in RP became /tuu/ in NE

from /frɒm/ in RP became /frɔ:m/ in NE

Where obscuration of vowels and syllable weakening ought to abound to accommodate characteristic native English rhythm, there was a profusion of strong vowels in the NE output of respondents:

What are you going to bring us from London?

SBE: /wɒt ə ju ɡəʊɪŋ tə brɪŋ frəm lʌndən/

NE: /wɒt ə ju goɪn tu bring ɔs frəm lɒndən/

I told them that there was a lot of it about.

SBE: /aɪ təʊld ðem ðæt ðə wɒz ə lɒt əv ɪt əbaʊt/

NE: /aɪ told ð(d)em ð(d)at ð(d) wɔz ɛ lɒt əv ɪt əbaʊt/

The profusion of strong vowels in Nigerian English (NE) is mainly due to the unemployment of the weak schwa vowel /ə/ resulting in all words in a sentence being accented. This confirms similar observations made by Bamgbose (1982); Jibril (1982); Akinjobi (2012). Although it is phonetically described as the weakest vowel, the schwa is often described as the most important sound in English. According to Gimson, “Indeed, we have come to doubt the relative importance of vowels as a help to intelligibility, since we can replace our twenty (20) English vowels by the single vowel /ə/ in any utterance and still, if the rhythmic pattern is kept, retain a high degree of intelligibility” (1980, p.6). The schwa is however absent in many Nigerian languages, therefore making it difficult for NE speakers to articulate without deliberate and conscious effort. Hausa has been confirmed to have the schwa sound but it does not act as a weak vowel in the language (Jibril, 1982).

Elision

In SBE, sounds are deleted for two purposes: to weaken function words, and to maintain a steady rhythmic pace to ensure the smooth transition from one sound to the other across word boundaries. Except

at the beginning of a sentence, the ‘h’ in weak forms like *his*, *her*, *have*, for instance is usually deleted. Though common, especially among Yoruba speakers of English, the h- deletion in NE is not a result of following English connected speech patterns but that of wrong pronunciation: in which case, /h/ was usually deleted in all words rather than function words only. When asked to read out sentences in the language laboratory, the result was unexpectedly different; the glottal fricative was clearly articulated. For example:

I thought he'd get more votes that he did.

SBE: /ai 'θɔt i:d get 'mɔ: 'vɔʊts ðn i: 'did/

NE: /ai 'θ(t)ɔt 'hi:'wɔd 'get 'mɔ: 'vɔts 'ð(d)an 'hi:
'did/

When questioned, respondents said they felt that an h-deletion in those words would be wrong or improper pronunciation – a case of hyper correction of the need to articulate /h/, which itself does not occur as a glottal fricative in many Nigerian languages.

Alveolar stops /t, d/ are also usually deleted in SBE in the middle of a consonant cluster. For example,

I tol(d) them that (t) there was a lot of it about.

Can I get to the Stran(d) by bus?

Nigerian English usually contained no such deletion resulting either in a pause or most often the insertion of vowel sound or an aspiration of the final /t/.

NE: / k^han ai get^h t^hɔ ð(d)i: strand^u bai bɔs/

At times in SBE, /t, d/ is replaced by a glottal stop such as *get to* /geʔ to/ in order to avoid the aspiration of NE.

The schwa /ə/ is usually deleted in some but not all polysyllabic words in SBE. While this process is successfully adhered to in the NE pronunciation of words like *cigarettes*, *interest*, *secretary*, *library*,

different, it has been erroneously extended to a word like *magazine*; making it pronounced like two words instead of one. Additionally in SBE, syllabic consonants are created and a consonant sound, most often /l, n/ is made to act like a vowel especially in words that end with ‘le’ spelling and when ‘n’ occurs after an alveolar plosive or fricative: *cattle, parcel, puzzle, lethal, muddle, lantern, written, hidden, frighten, burden*.

Generally, respondents in the present study showed a deliberate avoidance of sound deletions, which is probably due to the interference of orthography – a desire to pronounce words as spelt. It is for this same reason that some people say [komb] *comb* and /plɒmbə/ *plumber* in NE instead of deleting the /b/ sound as done in SBE.

Linking

The most common linking device in SBE is the linking *r*-. The word final letter *r* in spelling, always silent in isolated pronunciation, is usually articulated in connected speech when it occurs before a vowel at word boundary. Another linking device used to ensure smooth transition and give SBE its characteristic rhythm is the insertion of a glide /w/ or /j/ to connect two vowels across word boundaries. Examples are (linking devices in bold print):

He was waiting at the corner for an hour.

SBE: /hi: wəz weitiŋ ət ðə kɔ:nə fə **r** ən a:ə/

NE: /hi wɔz weitin ət ð(d)i kɔnə fə (h)ən a:ɔwə/

Jack's not sure if he can come.

SBE: /dʒæks nɔt ʃʊ: **r** if i kən kʌm/

NE: /dʒaks nɔt ʃʊə if hi kən kɔm/

They were the first to arrive at the entrance.

SBE: They were the /fɜ:st tu **w** əraɪv/ ət / ði **j** entrəns/

None of the 30 respondents used the linking r- or glides when reading the above sentences. Rather than forming mergers, respondents deliberately broke up words by pausing briefly where SBE would use a link; as if to ensure that both words are kept separate in connected speech. Again, like the reason for the absence of deletions in the data, the problem lies with unawareness of the difference between the written and spoken media. Kenworthy (1987, p.52) explains this succinctly: “Influenced by this convention of written language, (where words are written as units, separated from other words by a space) most people assume that there is an equivalent to this boundary in the spoken language, that a period of silence separates spoken words.” Many Nigerians in the past came in contact with English mostly through the written medium. Those of the present generation who learn English through verbal contact have only the already affected version of their teachers to imitate; a case of “error-recycling” as explained by Oyeleye (1997, p.107); and this continues to influence NE accentuation greatly.

Contraction

In casual speech or writing, a combination of a proper noun and an auxiliary verb is usually contracted in SBE. Though the process involves sound deletion, this is not the same as the deletion earlier discussed, particularly because contractions have graphologic representation:

I + am → I’m

She + would → she’d

They + are → they’re

Jack + will → Jack’ll

Sarah + is → Sarah’s

Analysis of data for this paper revealed that only a few of the more common contractions like that between a pronoun and *am* (I’m) or *is* (Jack’s) occurred with any significant regularity in Nigerian English.

Words like *had* were not contracted after a pronoun as found in the example below despite the double occurrence of *had*:

He could have come if he had had a basket.

Whereas SBE contracts *he + had* /if hi:d 'hæd/, none of the 30 students sampled contracted the two words not even after the option of contraction was suggested by the teacher. The closest to any form of verbal economy was by one student who deleted /h/ to give /hi ad had/. Most of the others simply deleted the auxiliary verb completely, as a way round the otherwise clumsy double occurrence.

It was also observed in the tape recording of the respondents' casual conversation that when an auxiliary verb + *not* was contracted, there was an insertion of other sound segments. For instance, *are + not* in SBE = /ɑ:nt/ but in the data from respondents, the sequence was pronounced as /ɑ:rint/. Generally, the avoidance of contractions in NE conversational or casual style gives the impression that formality is a characteristic of Nigerian English – again, this is mostly due to the influence of the written medium.

Suggestions

Employing similarities between a familiar language and a target language is one of the easiest and most efficient methods for language teaching. Contraction and sound elisions are common features of Nigerian languages. In Yoruba for instance, *Ade tin lo* (Ade is going) is usually contracted to form *Adenlo* (Ade's going). Pointing out such similarities could be used to encourage learners to employ this system when speaking English; while definitely not forgetting to mention that the rules for contraction/elision differ in both languages. It would also be helpful for students to be made aware of the difference between formal and casual English speech and to differentiate their speech styles accordingly. In as much as detailed attention is given to the teaching of correct pronunciation of sound segments and lexical items in isolation, commensurate care should be taken to ensure that the

rules of occurrence for linkages, elisions and mergers are properly learnt in the classroom.

Teachers should also discourage as much as possible, the use of written language or reading aloud as a stimulus for oral production. Tapes of informal English or transcriptions of colloquial speech should be used instead. It is advisable that the accent be that of native British English speakers. Entertainment films with actors speaking SBE, and interesting documentaries may be shown in the language lab as part of the curriculum; listening to radio stations and watching cable/TV channels like BBC and Sky should be made mandatory for language students.

Students should be made to realise that not all words are important in speech; some words only serve to make an utterance grammatically, not necessarily semantically correct. Teachers should de-emphasise the use of strong forms and focus more attention on the employment of weak alternatives. To achieve this, the need to master the pronunciation of the schwa /ə/ is very important. Going by Gimson's assertion that the 20 English vowels can be replaced with the schwa, it would not be too radical to say that any lessons on English vowel pronunciation should at least begin, if not also end with the learning of the schwa /ə/ sound.

Conclusion

While not advocating an absolute approximation to a native-speaker accent like SBE, there should be a greater awareness and respect for the crucial function of English rhythm on the part of both teachers and learners of English in Nigeria. The usual experience of teachers of ESL in the language classroom or laboratory is that the students often respond hilariously when it gets to the practical teaching sessions of English accentuation and rhythm. This general lack of seriousness is not evident when teaching the segmental aspects of English pronunciation – there is usually eagerness, sometimes akin to desperation to master the proper articulation of English sounds. No student wants to be caught saying /ʃikin/ or /sikin/ instead of /tʃikin/

chicken or /fidəʊ/ instead of /vidəʊ/ *video*. He, however, appears not to be too bothered about saying *ma'dam*, *inte'resting* or *cha'llenge*, instead of *'madam*, *'interesting* or *'challenge*; and baulks completely when it comes to imitating the rhythmic pattern that is characteristic of native English speech. Perhaps this negative attitude will change if ESL teachers can make learners realise that the effect of incorrect rhythm in English speech can be likened to the effect of the indiscriminate use of tone on intelligibility, in many Nigerian languages.

Apart from adding to the gradually growing data on the peculiarities of an identifiable Nigerian English, it is expected, more importantly, that this paper's examination of learner's/user's strategies in the employment of native English rhythm would provide suggestions for less complex and practical teaching methods for English pronunciation in Nigerian schools at all levels.

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