

INFLUENCE OF SIMILARITY OF SOUNDS AND MEANING UPON THE IDENTIFICATION AND REPRODUCTION OF SPEECH

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This paper is based on a material drawn from a vast project of machine-aided teaching of a foreign language in elementary school, which has been going on in Sweden since 1956. The project is called *English without a book* and was presented at the VIIIth International Congress of Linguists, in Oslo, 1957, and a preliminary report is found in the Proceedings of that Congress.

The teaching itself is based on the use of sound film strips, i.e., magnetic tapes plus film strips. The method has been elaborated and the material has been produced at the Phonetics Institute of the University of Stockholm, and it has been used in controlled experiments, in collaboration with the school psychologists of the Swedish Board of Education, in about 40 classes, in Stockholm and in the province. The audiovisual material has been the teacher; a school master has been present at the teaching, and his rôle has been uniformly limited. Thus, the teaching has been kept a constant, and the pupils have been the variable.

The result of this teaching was tested at the end of the school year, in early June, 1958, and from that testing the data are drawn which I shall use in this paper.

The aim of the experimentation of this first year (there was a "zero" year of experimentation in 1957-1958, which was also tested, but that experimentation period is not taken into consideration) was just to see the results of pure imitation without the teacher's interfering; the aim of the next period, 1958-1959, was to study which rôle the teacher should have in order to make such a kind of teaching effective. Thus, the test of June, 1958, gives the results of a period of one year of pure imitation.

The same phrases were used in the test as the pupils knew from the teaching period. The first part of the test contained some words or phrases, offered by the sound tape, and the respective images, projected on a screen. The pupils were instructed to say after the phrases, and what they said, was recorded on tape.

The items of this first part of the test were: 1. red; 2. black; 3. white; 4. blue; 5. yellow; 6. brown; 7. green; 8. I'm tall; 9. You're short; 10. What's this? - It's a dog; 11. Is this boy old? 12. Come here! 13. Where's the bird? - Is it under the chair? 14. Good morning, John!

Already during the teaching period, some of the teachers had observed that the pupils had been influenced by the similarity of sounds and meanings when imitating the phrases. Thus, the English word "red", corresponding to Swedish *röd*, had been

said after as *röd*, and the English word "short", corresponding to Swedish *kort* /koʔ/ (pronounced with supra-alveolar *t*), had been said after as *kort* or as *shot*, with a very short vowel and a long consonant. There were, however, no clear cases of such errors in the test.

But there was a remarkable error: the phrase of item nr 12 "Come here", corresponding to Swedish *Kom hit*, was said after as *Kom här*. Now, *kom* corresponds to English "Come", and *här* to English "here", but only in the sense of "being in a place", locative, and not "direction to a place", which in Swedish is *hit*. Thus, *Kom här* is not correct Swedish syntax, but each of the components exists. Furthermore, the intonation curve of the English phrase was used, not the normal Swedish one.

Out of 114 recorded pupils, representing 306 pupils distributed over 9 school classes, 38 cases of *Kom här* were recorded, that is about 33%. Even with a certain allowance for subjective rating, there are enough cases left to state that the error is relevant.

Now, if similarity of sounds and meanings leads to a relevant error in imitation, after saying, one should take into new consideration the principle, well established in manuals on modern language teaching, that it is useful to put "the common denominator", the cognate words, of both languages in the early stages, as they are easily understood and thus easy to retain. But if the aim of modern language teaching is aural-oral ability, and if the above observation of the error produced by the similarity is correct, the cognate words should be avoided.

Certainly, many teachers have made the same observations; e.g. when reading aloud a Spanish text, a Swedish pupil will mispronounce *general*, which also exists in Swedish, alone out of a long series of Spanish words correctly pronounced; the initial *g* will not be pronounced as /X/ but as /j/, like in Swedish.

CONCLUSION

From the point of view of pronunciation, words similar in sounds and meaning, as cognate words, are difficult and should not, in aural-oral methods, be the first part of the vocabulary to teach.

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