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# UNUSUAL MISTAKES IN HEARING AND PRONOUNCING FOREIGN SOUND-SEQUENCES

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When arnileng the pronunciation of a foreign language adults often fail to utter the right sounds and sound-sequences because of their own speech habits which are deeply fixed.

We have considered that, apart from such usual mistakes due either to native or to some assimilated foreign articulatory habits, there may also occur some unusual hearing and pronunciation mistakes due to the influence of the memory of certain sound-sequences representing words acoustically similar to the foreign words. The present paper attempts to prove that.

In teaching English to adults during the last few years, we have met among our Romanian students some of whom, along with their mistakes typical of Romanian speakers, also make mistakes of a French type. As they learned French at school for a few years only, it could not be a matter of French sounds having penetrated deeply into their native articulatory habits. These students have some important characteristic features in common:

1. as to their backgrounds, all of them are peasants' children, born and brought up in purely Romanian villages of Transylvania, and they had not even heard any other language spoken there. Their acquaintance with foreign languages was acquired at school, where they learned some French and very little Russian. From the village public school they came to the university and, apart from their main subject, they took English for their three-year foreign language courses.

2. During this period of time, they have learned to master English pronunciation with greater difficulty than other Romanian students.

3. Their French-type mistakes never appear when they practice the pronunciation of isolated English sounds; they only appear in sound-sequences.

4. Their substitution of French sounds for English sounds does not occur in all sequences of the same kind, but only in those with such acoustic forms as can remind them of previously learned French words. For instance, they utter correctly the personal pronoun *you*, but, incorrectly the word *view*, pronounced either [vjy, vy] or [vjø] depending on the French word [vy] (vue) or [vjø] (vieux) they have in mind.

5. Their mistakes have nothing to do with the French reading rules.

6. Their French-type mistakes occur in English new words they are learning, as

well as in words already learned if these disappear for some time from the given exercises and then suddenly reappear.

The exercises we have used to convince ourselves of the real cause of this kind of mistake have been speech exercises with words in isolation or in sentences, the students having either to imitate the teacher's pronunciation—the written form being present or absent—or to try first to utter those words with the written form before them and afterwards to listen to the teacher's pronunciation. (On the accompanying tape we recorded the pronunciation of two beginning students, a girl and a boy, the former during the first term of the first year, the latter during the first term of the third year. The text on the tape includes their French-type mistakes in pronouncing the English [ju:] sequence of certain words, as well as in pronouncing some other words to prove that their mistakes are not influenced by French reading rules.)

In conclusion, we think that the variety of mistakes made by adults learning the pronunciation of a foreign language may also include the mistakes here mentioned in which the memory of the acoustic forms of certain words (those belonging to a previously imperfectly learned foreign language) plays the main part. At the same time we believe that this kind of mistake is more possible and is fully verifiable with speakers who have not in mind the acoustic units of several foreign languages. In this way their mind is still very receptive and the acoustic images not having overlapped, are clear and strong enough to exercise their influence on occasion.

## DISCUSSION

### *Martens:*

When students learn a second foreign language one must always bear in mind that the student will subconsciously be somehow guided by his knowledge of structure of the first foreign language he has learnt. A student ought to be without reading knowledge, if we want to know whether a pronunciation of Engl. "view" as French "vue" is not subconsciously guided by a faint resemblance of the spelling.