PHONOSTYLISTICS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

In learning to speak a foreign language with as little mother-tongue interference as possible, the student needs to be able to recognize and control phonetic features which occur over strings of speech, both those which characterize the language as a whole and give it its distinctive character, and those which occur contrastively within the language to express affective meanings. Illustrations are presented from a number of American Indian languages.

1. INTRODUCTION

The language learner should approach the pronunciation of the target language from two points. It is important to be able to pronounce the individual sounds, and be able to put them together into words and sentences. It is important also to tackle language from the other end, starting with longer utterances and paying attention to overall phonetic features such as rhythm, speed of utterance, pitch patterns, loudness, tongue position, lip shape.

There are two areas in which phonetic features occurring over strings of speech are important: those which characterize the language as a whole and make it sound different from another--what I'll call the overall features of a language--and those which are stylistically contrastive within the language. The term phonostylistics is used here to cover both areas.

The illustrations cited have been gathered over the years in personal conversations with SIL colleagues and in response to a questionnaire circulated among them. (Due to space limitations, I cannot list them individually.)

2. OVERALL FEATURES

Beatrice Honikman [1] has emphasized inherent differences in languages and the need to adapt the speech apparatus to the movements characteristic of the target language, that is, to shift gears, illustrating primarily from Indo-European languages. The principle of shifting gears can be profitably applied in learning to speak American Indian languages as well.

Atatlahuca Mixtec (Mexico) is characterized by tongue frontedness. It is easier for a learner of that language, who comes from English as his mother tongue, to shift gears--move the whole tongue farther front in the mouth--than to try to remember each time he comes to individual sounds such as *n, t, k, ɨ, u, a* that they must be farther front in the mouth than the similar sounds in English. Spanish is also characterized by tongue frontedness. A clue to general tongue position in a language is the hesitation forms. Spanish speakers hesitate on *e e e* or *es/e es/e* in contrast to English speakers' *ə ə ə*. As to rhythm, both Atatlahuca Mixtec and Spanish exhibit syllable timing rather than stress timing as do English and Southern Tepehuán.

Seminole (United States) is another language characterized by tongue frontedness, plus the feature of spread lips. There is very little jaw action except when the people are excited or when they are trying to speak precisely and exactly to a stranger they think wouldn't understand otherwise.

Various Indian languages are characterized by soft spoken speech. Among them are Comaltepec Chinantec, Yatzachi Zapotec, Atatlahuca Mixtec, Eastern Popoloca, Seminole and Mazatec. The Seminoles speak so quietly that sometimes they are barely audible. This is in contrast to Tabasco Chontal (Mayan) and Veracruz Tepehua where people generally do not speak softly.

The Mazatecs speak quietly. Women never raise their voices. In Huautla there is a large market, full of hundreds of people, but you cannot hear it until you are a half a block away. If you do hear loudness, it is a drunk, a Spanish speaking person, or someone in a fight.

Some Mexican Indian languages have pitch downdrift, including the tone languages Tepetotutla Chinantec, Chiquihuitlán Mazatec, Coatzospan Mixtec, Quiotepec Chinantec (over a breath segment), and Yatzachi Zapotec (within phrases and clauses). Mura-Piraha (Brazil), on the other hand, may exhibit updrift of voice over a sentence. Its many glottal stops make it sound choppy.

The ballistic and controlled syllables of Amuzgo (Mexico) give it a distinctive rhythm. Kenneth Pike has described differences between four Peruvian languages in terms of ballistic and controlled abdominal pulse types [3]: Arabela, Culina, Aguaruna and Campa.

To learn to speak well, one needs to be aware of what overall features characterize a particular language. Listening over and over to connected speech on tape early in the language learning process increases awareness of these features.

Along with repeated listening to a text, the student should begin tracking, that is, speaking along with the tape as simultaneously as possible, not concerned about missing some segments, but aiming to reproduce the overall rhythm and pitch patterns, up to speed. A person can track silently whenever he hears the language spoken and he himself is not in focus, that is, not being expected to listen and respond. This will help fix the sentence melodies in his mind.

3. STYLISTICALLY CONTRASTIVE FEATURES

In addition to features which color a language as a whole, phonetic features occur within languages over strings of speech and are stylistically contrastive. These phonostylistic variations are socially significant, carrying meanings related to moods and emotions. Features such as height of pitch, width of pitch intervals, intensity, rate of speech, creaky voice, breathy voice and lip shape are sometimes referred to under voice quality [2] or prosodies, or as subsegmental features [4].

The language learner needs to be aware of the phonostylistic features in the target language in order to understand nuances of the spoken speech, and to avoid being misunderstood, insulting, or impolite when speaking.

John Crawford reports that when he lived among the Mixe people, he could always tell when a visitor was leading up to asking to borrow money, as the visitor always used creaky voice. A mad, excited Mixe speaker used a monotone with a dive down at the end. For emphasis or excitement, the

speech was breathy.

In Huautla Mazatec anger is shown by lengthening the vowels, not by raising the pitch as may occur in American English. A Mazatec child, wanting to look at a book that another child has had for too long, may say (translation): "It's my:::: tur:::n no:::w." Urgency, on the other hand, is expressed by breathiness, as when impatiently calling for someone: "Victoria, Victoriahhh!" Sympathy is shown by lip rounding accompanied by poked out lips.

3.1. Differences In Feature Use From Language To Language

The language learner needs to be aware that the same phonetic feature may signal different things in different languages. For instance, lip rounding in Quiché (Guatemala) indicates a compliment. In some Mazatec and Mixtec languages (Mexico) the lip rounding, accompanied by poked out lips, is used in showing sympathy. In Zuni (southwestern United States), lip rounding, accompanied by poked out lips and low pitch, is used for scolding, as when a father says to his son "You're just a one feather Indian."

3.2. Some Common Meanings Expressed Phonostylistically

3.2.1. Scolding Children

For scolding children, a frequently used feature is higher pitch. The high pitch is accompanied by loudness in Highland Chontal, Jalapa de Díaz Mazatec, Alacatlatzala Mixtec, and Ocotlán Zapotec. The high pitch is sustained in Highland Totonac, without lowering. In Cuicatec and Cora (Mexico) and in Tucano (Colombia) it is accompanied by fast speech. In Cora the pitch is so high it is almost falsetto, and the rapid speech has few final pauses.

Languages for which lowered pitch is reported are Western Ixtlán Zapotec, Northern Tlaxiaco Mixtec, and Atatlahuca Mixtec. In each of these the speech is rapid, and with narrowed pitch range. In Western Ixtlán Zapotec the lips are somewhat pursed, and there is very little lip movement.

Lips are rounded and protruding in Yatzachi Zapotec. In Chatino the speech is very fast, and the tone contrasts are accentuated. In both Xicotepec Totonac and Comaltepec Chinantec the speech is stacatto. In Chiquihuitlán Mazatec there is exaggerated aspiration. Loudness, protracted syllables and some breathiness are reported for Ozumacín Chinantec. In Náhuatl of Tetelcingo and of Orizaba there is an abrupt cutoff of phrases and sentences preceded by abrupt downturn of intonation. Michoacan Náhuatl and Southern Tepehuán speakers talk quietly to their children. Tepetotutla Chinantec speakers use a "duckbill pout" (not rounded), with greater pitch spread, beginning high and ending low.

3.2.2. Talking to Babies

In talking to babies, high pitch has been observed in more languages than low pitch. However, low pitch has been reported for Lacandón and Guelavía Zapotec.

Quite a few languages exhibit general fronting, or specific consonant changes such as palatalization. In Trique not only is there replacement of alveopalatals by fronted alveopalatals or dentals, but sometimes replacement of dentals by alveopalatals or fronted alveopalatals. Atatlahuca Mixtec *tʃ* is substituted for *ʃ*, *j* for *ɟ* and initial *s* of consonant clusters is dropped. In Coatzospan Mixtec *ð* becomes *l* and *ts* becomes *t*. In Veracruz Tepehua the consonant changes are: *ʃ* > *s*, *tʃ* > *ts*, *ts* > *tʃ*, *q* > *k*. In Seri *s* > *ʃ*.

3.2.3. Showing Sympathy

We have mentioned that lip rounding is used in Mazatec and Mixtec to show sympathy. In San Felipe Otomí and in Veracruz Tepehua it is used both to express and elicit sympathy.

Creaky voice is reported for Alacatlatzala Mixtec and Trique. In Trique falling pitch is superimposed on the tone system, and increased creaky voice occurs as the pitch falls: also the particle at the end of the sentence is lengthened. Choapan Zapotec and Highland Oaxaca Chontal are soft spoken. Lacandón exhibits higher pitch and fronted tongue.

3.2.4. Showing Respect

High pitch, even sometimes falsetto, is used for showing respect in some languages. High pitch in Pame shows special respect to a comadre or compadre. Tenejapa Tzeltal women switch into a falsetto, along with averting their eyes when they want to show extreme respect, as to a person higher in rank, a town offical or a witch doctor. The falsetto shows submissive attitude and sometimes fear. San Felipe Otomí speakers use falsetto to show politeness and respect. When compadres meet, for instance, they start out in falsetto, then drop back to ordinary speech as the conversation continues. Falsetto is also used as a greeting for distance, or from outside the house when one comes to the house of a friend.

Another feature used is diminished volume. This softness is accompanied by more glottal stops utterance final in Jalapa de Díaz Mazatec, a language with all open syllables. In Alacatlatzala Mixtec the soft spokenness is accompanied by lengthened vowels and rising-falling intonation on the last syllable of the words for respectful address occurring at the end of the sentence.

3.2.5. Anger

Anger is variously shown in different languages by high pitch, low pitch, rapid speech, slower speech, or sudden complete silence. There is also variation from wide pitch range to narrow pitch range. In Ozumacín Chinantec the lower pitch is accompanied by lower volume. Tlapanec exhibits short stacatto or nearly monotone utterances.

3.2.6. Asking a Favor

In Xicotepec Totonac the voice goes up and up if the speaker is about to ask a favor. Chiquihuitlán Mazatec speakers, however, use lengthened vowels and exaggerated nasalization, which they also use when eliciting sympathy. Choapan Zapotec speakers are barely audible, with barely any mouth movement.

Falsetto is used in San Felipe Otomí when pleading for mercy. For example, a young boy being scolded and threatened with a whipping might switch into falsetto.

3.2.7. Emphasis

Heavier word stresses and wider pitch range were the most common features reported. In Mazahua there is labialization of consonants of the first syllable of roots, and sometimes lengthening of vowels. Zacatepec Mixtec exhibits word reduplication, vowel lengthening, and raised intonation. Consonants are more fortis in Jalapa de Díaz Mazatec. In Southern Tepehuán high pitch and lengthened vowels are used.

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