

# RHYTHM AND THE ALGERIAN SPEAKER OF ENGLISH

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## ABSTRACT

The paper concentrates on the rhythm adopted by Algerian speakers of English (ASE). The speech sample recorded revealed a number of features which could be held responsible for giving the Algerians' speech a typical staccato unEnglish type of rhythm.

The major rhythmic errors seemed to result from the total absence of weak forms, insertion of glottal stops before initial vowels, lengthening of unstressed syllables, and inadequate stressing.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of 'stress-timed' rhythm and/or pure isochrony in English has long been debated [8;10;3;4]. Experimental evidence has shown that what the human ear perceives as regular beats is far from representing real physical events. In fact, it is the hearer's mind which imposes a regularity which often does not exist [1; 4; 2].

However, for the sake of clarity when describing a given language, one may find it useful to say that in languages like English stress tends to come at more or less equal intervals in time. This results in any succession of unstressed

syllables to be 'crushed' or 'compressed' together so as to say them more rapidly. For that purpose, English is well known for its use of vowel elision, reduction or weakening as well as its preference for weak rather than strong forms in most grammatical unstressed words [5; 9]. The combination of those features of connected speech gives the English language its characteristic 'stress-timed' rhythm.

The present paper reports on Algerians' handling of such features. It will be shown how improper use of them by the ASE results in giving their speech this typical 'syllable-timed' rhythm.

## 2. PROCEDURE

The experiment was originally intended to investigate the intonational proficiency of a sample of twenty ASE. It consisted of ten units altogether which required the informants to read on the one hand (sentences, dialogues and a short narrative) and to speak more or less freely on the other (picture description, guided and free speech).

Note that although this experiment was not specifically designed to study

solely the rhythm of ASE, the recorded data provided a substantial amount of information about Algerians' performance at this level. A number of interesting observations were made. Some of them are briefly discussed in the following sections.

## 3. CHARACTERISTICS OF ALGERIAN ENGLISH RHYTHM

### 3.1. Weak Forms

The first thing that strikes the observer's ear in the sample of Algerian English is this staccato rhythm more like a 'syllable-timed' language. Every syllable is given the same value. This impression is reinforced by the total absence of weak forms. Nearly all function words are used in their strong forms. As a result, those words are consistently given undue importance. Below are some examples (note: F and M stand for 'female' and 'male' speakers, RP for 'Received Pronunciation'):

(1) What do you think he can do with this computer?

F2: [wat du: ju: θi:ŋk hi:kæn  
du: wi:d diskɒmpju:tə]

as opposed to

RP: /wɒt dju: θɪŋk ɪ kæn du:  
wið ðɪs kəm.pju:tə/

(2) Then where do you think he is working?

M10: [ðen wɛ: du: ju: θi:ŋk hi:  
ʔi:z wɜ:kɪ:ŋg]

RP: /æn'weədju: θɪŋk ɪz  
'wɜ:kɪŋ/

(3) I am happy

F19: [ʔaɪ ʔæm hæpi:]

RP: /aɪm'hæpi/

(4) What is his job?

F8: [wɒtʔi:z hi:z dʒɒb]

RP: /'wɒts ɪz 'dʒɒb/

(5) What kind of books does he read?

M14: [wat kaɪnd ʔɒf bu:kz  
dɒz hi: ri:d]

RP: /'wɒk 'kaɪnd əv 'bʊks  
dəz ɪ.ri:d/

### 3.2. Insertion of Glottal Stops

Also peculiar in the Algerian speech sample studied is this tendency to insert a glottal stop before vowels in syllable initial position. This is particularly striking when the word in question is a grammatical item such as 'is', 'am', 'of' as in examples (2) to (5) above. In connected speech those words are never preceded by a glottal stop in RP unless when stressed for particular emphasis. Instead, they are linked together with some kind of liaison as in [aɪ'æm] [7]. In order to avoid such insertion of glottal stops, syllable initial vowels tend to be linked to the preceding final consonant as in:

/ðɪs ɪz ə  
naɪs ɜ:ɡæst a:ftənʊ:n/

Glottal stop insertion in Algerian English breaks the

possibility of smooth transition between the words. It could also be held responsible for this staccato type of rhythm.

### 3.3. Lengthening of Unstressed Syllables

In addition, the long vowel in words like [ʔi:z] for 'is' makes this item sound more like a content word, e.g. 'ease'. Sometimes this can even lead to communication breakdown as shown in the following utterance as spoken by an Algerian informant:

[ʒø mən ʔi:z ʒi: onli:  
li:ŋk bitwi:n ʒəm]

which could mean both

- a) The man is the only link between them  
or  
b) The men ease the only link between them

although the speaker intended meaning a).

Another interesting observation was made. If R.P. makes use of two distinct qualities for the following short versus long vowels:

- 1) /i:/ versus /ɪ/  
2) /u:/ versus /ʊ/  
3) /ɔ:/ versus /ɒ/  
4) /ɜ:/ versus /ə/

it is quite noticeable that similar contrasts (particularly the first two pairs) are absent in Algerian English. The tendency is to use a vowel of the type [ɪ] for the first pair and [ʊ] for the second. Both are usually (though not consistently) long. Thus, in function words like 'you', 'do', etc... [u:] is the only

vowel used. The short variety, [ʊ], is never used. Similarly, in function words like 'is', 'his', 'he', 'she', etc... the Algerian preference is for a vowel sharing more resemblance with R.P. [i:] (closer and more front) than [ɪ] which is practically absent, e.g.

[hi: went tu: pəri:s]

instead of

/hi'went tə'pəri:s/

The use of [u:] and [i:] in such grammatical items tends to lengthen those words. The immediate result is that function words in Algerian English are less easily distinguishable from content and stressed words where full/long vowels are also used. Instead, they sound very much similar. It is as if Algerian English consisted of a series of content words with full vowels, hence giving the speech a staccato 'machine-gun' type of rhythm. Even polysyllabic words where R.P. usually stresses one syllable keeping the remaining one(s) weak, e.g. 'comfortable' /'kɒmfə'təbl/ 'literature' /'lɪtə'reɪʃ/ in Algerian English each syllable is given the same value. However, in order to match the stressed syllables, the so-called short vowels are held longer even if not stressed. This lengthening phenomenon occurred not only in function words, but also in content words. In the next two sentences, the underlined syllables were held longer than should have been by a significant number of ASE.:

- (6) 'Bill hasn't washed it, has he?'  
(7) 'She brought apples, bananas, oranges, strawberries...'

It has been claimed [6] that utterance final syllables tend to be lengthened. Therefore, one could perhaps argue that the lengthening of the utterance final syllable of, say, 'strawberries' was in fact predictable. However, this view could not hold as it still will not account for the lengthening of other word final unstressed syllables which occur medially in the utterance. This is the case of '-sn't', '-shed', '-pples', '-ba-', '-nas', '-ges', 'be+', '-rries' in (6) and (7) respectively.

### 3.4. Inadequate Stressing

In conjunction with the above characteristics the data revealed another peculiar aspect of Algerian English rhythm: inadequate stressing. The spoken sample clearly showed that function words were not only used in their strong forms, but they were also very frequently stressed. This is the case of 'do', 'you', 'he', 'can' in examples (1) and (4) above. It may give the impression that those words are emphasized. But it is quite uncommon in English to put so much emphasis on such words with similar regularity.

### 4. CONCLUSION

So what seems to come out of this pilot study is that the rhythm of ASE presents a number of peculiarities. These seem to work together

and contribute in their own way to give the informants' speech this particular Algerian touch.

### 5. REFERENCES

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