

Towards the Strategies for English Phonetic Study

Take the Differences Between GA and RP as an Example

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Abstract—This paper explains English Phonetic study from two aspects of strategy and practice. In order to improve the phonetic study and strengthen learning effects, students must have a clear understanding of necessity and significance of learning English Phonetics and ways to master it and then we can form effective strategies for Phonetic study.

Keywords—learning strategies; English Ponetics; GA and RP

I. INTRODUCTION

Three basic elements consist of every language, i.e., pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, but pronunciation is the essential point we must grasp in advance before we come to learn the other two points. As a branch of linguistics, phonetics is the scientific study of speech sounds. It deals with the internal sound system of the English language. It covers strategy of learning English phonetics; description of English phonemes; sound changes in connected speech; rules of stresses; rhythm and its pattern and the study of intonation.

Professor A.C. Gimson once noted that “to speak any language a person must know nearly 100% of its phonetics, while only 50-90% of its grammar and 1% of the vocabulary may be sufficient.” From the words we know that we must spend much more time on the study of pronunciation in order to grasp English as a whole. In fact phonetic study has been far more overlooked in English language teaching and learning. Some students even do not know the term of syllable, sound changes, stress, rhythm and tone; the others blindly think that correctly pronounced phoneme can ensure a good command of pronunciation. Without proper rhythm and intonation, we can not speak good English. Renowned professor once said: “Just as every broadcasting station in the world has its own carrier waves, so every language has its own rhythm and intonation. A receiving station that is tuned to receive a certain carrier wave receives that wave, and all the sound waves carried by it, easily and accurately. Every Englishman is a receiving station tuned to pick up sounds and speech transmitted on the carrier wave of English rhythm and intonation. If these are not normal, then reception, which in this case implies understanding, is made difficult, if not impossible.” If we want to study English well, we must study rhythm and intonation besides study of pronunciation. So we strongly emphasize the idea of rhythm and intonation.

II. AIMS OF PHONETIC STUDY

The study of English phonetics has both practical and educational value. A language consists of three important elements, namely speech sounds, vocabulary and grammar. Speech sound is the material form on which word and grammar rely for existence. Divorced from speech sound, word and grammar are non-existent. But it is difficult to say which of them is more important. However, more and more people, even those who take English as foreign language, have come to realize that the first step of mastering spoken English is to determine its pronunciation. We emphasize on the study of phonetics because we want to be able to understand other people easily when they speak or read English and also be able to speak English well with a pronunciation which can be easily understood by other people.

Phonetic study serves as a basis for further study and research work in the field of linguistics. Linguistics is the comprehensive study of English language. Phonetics always takes the first step in mastering the theoretical knowledge of the English language. Through this course, students will be trained to speak on the principle of self-monitoring of speech production, to form the habits of speaking good English, to develop their ability for observation and analysis. In one word, we apply English phonetics to communication better.

III. SIGNIFICANCE OF ENGLISH PHONETICS

Language serves as a tool for human communication; meanwhile, all the languages take voices as a primary tool to fulfill communicative function. Thus, it is held that phonetics is the most fundamental form of language, a shell of language. The initial task of the mastery of a language is to acquire phonetics. Conclusively, phonetics is the most important basic training, the key prerequisite to promotion and development of listening and speaking, the necessary accelerator for development of reading and writing.

Accuracy in phonetics attaches great importance to one's oral abilities. One, without appropriate phonetic knowledge, tends to result in misunderstanding or even becoming a laughtstick.

Accuracy in phonetics plays an important role in listening abilities. One, without appropriate phonetic knowledge, usually has difficulty understanding phonetic information

transferred by others correctly and promptly; for such information has no way to accord with the phonetic forms of these sentences and phrases in his mind.

Accuracy in phonetics can also be useful for vocabulary learning. On one hand, it can assist memorization of words. On the other hand, the pronunciation and the meaning of words are connected.

Moreover, phonetics can also help and promote reading and writing levels.

IV. GENERAL STRATEGIES OF LEARNING ENGLISH PHONETICS

English is an alphabetic writing. As early as around 1000 years ago, its spelling and pronunciation is quite identical. Generally, each letter represents a particular spoken sound. Once knowing a word's spelling, one knows how to speak it. However, the development of English didn't provide such convenience for its learners. From 1400 to 1750, the whole system of vowels experienced considerable changes, which is called "Great Vowel Shift". Moreover, after several invasion and ruling by other races, such as Germanic invasion and long-term ruling, and influence from European Renaissance, many foreign words such as French, Latin, Greek and Italian have come into being in English. At the same time, the spelling of English is relatively fixed, which resulted in largest variation between pronunciation and spelling among European languages. In modern English, one sound can have several different spellings like the following examples: Sauce lawn stalk stork warm board broad floor thought taught. Vice versa, one spelling can be read as different sounds. For instance, the letter of "a" can have the following 8 different pronunciation: name father bag many about village what

Since English pronunciation is so irregular, does it mean one can ignore the pronunciation principles in learning phonetics? Absolutely Not! Various pronunciation principles can help us remember a lot of words conforming to principles, or read the unknown words when dictionaries are unavailable. Despite this benefit, one cannot fall back on pronunciation principles completely. The more often one refers to dictionaries, the more one reads and remembers the words, the more mispronunciations can be avoided.

As we all know, theory and practice go hand in hand. Language learning begins with practice, reaches the theoretical level through practice, and then returns to the better practice. So is learning English phonetics. First of all, we should listen to the tapes carefully and attentively and hear the accurate and correct pronunciation of each phoneme, the authentic stress, rhythm and intonation. In the process, imitation plays an implacable role. We can say imitation is imitation and nothing can replace imitation in the study of English pronunciation. A good pronunciation is based on more efforts of imitation. And then we read aloud. Loud reading can leave deep impression on our mind and benefit to cultivate good language habits.

Generally, with some practical knowledge of phonetics, it is desirable to study its theory. With study of its theory, we can investigate its inner laws, the way of its pronouncing. So

long as we keep on practicing with the help of theory, we will have a very good command of English phonetics.

V. TO DIFFERENTIATE THE RECEIVED PRONUNCIATION AND GENERAL AMERICAN

English is widely used throughout the whole world. It is said that English is spoken by the largest number of countries in the world comparing with other languages. There are a lot of English speaking countries, for instance, Great Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. There are also a lot of countries which take English as their official language, for instance, Singapore, Philippines, Thailand and Holland. But British English (usually called Received Pronunciation, shortened into RP) and American English (usually called General American, shortened into GA) are two most influential ones. Wherever English is taught one of these two types of English is most likely to provide the model for pronunciation.

RP is based on London dialect and used by the educational people in southern London. This form of speech is now widely used by London middle class, BBC announcer, or spoken at universities or public schools. RP is now easily understood throughout the English speaking countries and generally recommended where English is taught and learned as a foreign language. In our countries RP has always been adopted as a teaching model in middle schools and colleges for a long time. However, in recent years, more and more people tend to learn American English, known as General American. GA, like RP, is spoken by the majority of the American people. It is widely used in textbooks, radio and TV program in the U.S.A. Yet we can not say which English is better. The students can learn either RP or GA, however, they are strongly advised not to mix them up.

Differences between British English and American English reflect in kinds of aspects, for instance, pronunciation, spelling, grammar. In the phonetic course, we mainly deal with the differences in pronunciation between Received Pronunciation and General American. The differences between RP and GA can be divided into three parts: the differences in vowels and consonants, the differences in word stress and the differences in intonation. But pronunciation differences between RP and GA are quite obvious, so in this thesis, we just take their differences in word stress and intonation.

A. The differences in word stress

Rhythm in RP is very prominent. RP speakers pronounce the unstressed syllables weakly and unclearly. They use a great deal of weak forms, while GA speakers tend to pronounce both stressed and unstressed syllables very clearly. The differences between RP and GA word stress are as follows.

1) Words ending in -ary, -ory, -ery have one stress in RP but two stresses (primary and secondary) in GA. e.g.

secretary testimony stationery territory

2) In RP two-syllable verbs in -ate have their stress on the last syllable while in GA the stress occurs on the first syllable. e.g.

dictate donate vibrate

3) *Many French loan words are stressed on the last syllable in American English but earlier in British English.*
e.g.

ballet café resume salon

Note that moustache and souvenir follow the opposite stress pattern.

B. The differences in intonation

The greatest difference between RP and GA lies in intonation. This can be proved by quotations from two phoneticians. English phonetician, I.C. Ward once said, "it is perhaps in intonation, stress and rhythm that the greatest general differences are found between British and American English." "in American speech a falling intonation in a succession of stressed syllables appears to be common. This usually denotes emphasis in British English, so that a non-emphatic statement with these frequent falls gives the impression of emphatic speech...American speakers on their side feel British English to be less stressed."

American phonetician, A. C. Baugh said, "we speak more slowly and with less variety of tone. There can be no gainsaying the fact that our speech is much more monotonous, is uttered with much less variety in the intonation, than that of England."

Generally speaking, GA intonation has narrow voice range and less variety than RP.

1) Main difference

The main difference in intonation between RP and GA is the pattern of intonation. The general pattern of RP intonation is like a stepping scale or like a slope. The typical pattern of GA intonation is like battlements or like waves. e.g.

He felt in his pocket and was glad to find his latchkey and his money.

2) *GA speakers usually begin their utterances with a mid or rather low pitch but this is not often the case with RP speakers especially when a stressed word begins the utterance.*

3) *In GA, most yes-no questions are usually said in falling tone. It is more formal and polite to use rising tone. But RP speakers use rising tone. When they show statement or command, they use the falling tone.*

4) *In farewells, for example, good-bye, good night, so long etc., GA and RP speakers are different.*

VI. CONCLUSION

To sum up, people speaking English in this world are just next to the people speaking Chinese in number. The countries taking English as their official language is the most in number. English also enjoys the most widespread language in the world. So there's a large variation in its pronunciation, but the most acceptable ones are RP and GA.

RP and GA have their own distinctive characters in vowels, consonants, stresses, and some words' pronunciations, especially in the case of tones.

For a long time, RP takes the major role in China's English Education. But recently, more and more people are becoming confused for the English they get from different means like tapes, DVDs, movies, TV programs, is GA, general American, rather than the one they learn from class. Therefore, Chinese should adapt this history trend in learning English. Only when one understands, familiarizes their own characters and attends to their differences, can one use them fluently in oral communication.

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