Phonological Interference in Learning English through Tamil

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New and Emerging Dialects of English

English is by far the most widely used language in the world. Barriers of race, colour and creed are no hindrance to the continuing spread of the use of English. It is used by such a large part of the world that many "dialects" are used by the native speakers themselves. English is also spoken by the educated people all over the Commonwealth and a number of "foreign dialects" have therefore come into existence, each showing certain features of the speaker's mother-tongue.

Indian English

English was introduced by the British for "administrative purposes." It has played a significant role ever since. The Indian English is explained by R.K. Bansal in his book *The Intelligibility of Indian English as* follows:

> English as spoken by educated people in India does not differ radically from native English in grammar and vocabulary, but in pronunciation it is different from both British and American English. Even within India there are a large number of regional varieties, each different from others in certain ways, and retaining to some extent the phonetic patterns of the Indian language spoken in that particular region.

Bansal's statement makes one point clear that each regional variety of English has developed specific characteristics because of the influence of the regional languages spoken in the area.

Neutral Form of Indian English

Most of these regional varieties may not be fully intelligible to speakers of other regional varieties. But, at the same time, in every region there are speakers who have shaken off the regional accent to great extent and speak a more 'neutral' form of Indian English. Certainly, there are more speakers of English in whose case the influence of the regional language reduces the intelligibility level of their English.

Language Interference

Language learning involves the reproduction of the sounds and patterns used by other human beings around the speaker/s. In the learning of a second language, the habits already acquired in connection with one's first language stand in one's way. Each language has a different system, and in foreign language learning one tends to hear and speak on the basis of the system of one's own language. When one begins to learn a second language, the pattern of L1 which he has learnt already begins to "interfere". This interference has to be overcome consciously. The learning of a second language is thus a more deliberate activity than the learning of a first language.

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Transfer

Technically, the use, by the learners, of the rules of the mother tongue in the production and understanding of the second language, is called "transfer." That is, the learners transfer what they already know about performing one task to performing another similar task. The learner does not know what the full nature of the new task is. Until he has learned in what way the two tasks are different, he will perform the second task in the only way he knows.

The learner of second language commits errors, which can be explained by the notion of transfer. Two types of transfer are there – "negative transfer" or "interference", means the two languages are different and the mother tongue interferes with the learning of the target language. Where the nature of the two tasks happens to be the same, this tendency to transfer is an advantage. This is called "positive transfer" or "facilitation".

Types of Interference

There are different types of interference – "phonic or phonological interference", if the sound system is different in both source and target languages; "grammatical interference", if the grammar and structure are different; "lexical interference", if the choice of words is different or "graphological interference", if the writing system is different in both languages. Language is a system of communication through speech, and written language is only an attempt to represent the spoken language. It is mainly by the speech one's English is mainly known. Interference takes place at all the levels of language, but the phonological level is more easily recognized.

Phonological Interference

The problem of phonological interference concerns the manner in which a speaker perceives and reproduces the sounds of one language in terms of another. The language which causes the interference is called "Primary"; and the language which receives the interference is known as "Secondary". P-Tamil means Tamil as the Primary language in a contact situation and S-English means English as the Secondary Language. Thus, Phonological interference would mean 'Language-S' (English) spoken with a P-accent (Tamil).

Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Factors

While studying the phonological interference, a distinction has to be made between "Syntagmatic" and "Paradigmatic" factors. The syntagmatic factors refer to relations between sounds in a sequence (i.e. the spoken chain) but the paradigmatic factors concern the relations between sounds in the pattern (i.e. sound which might occur at a given point in the spoken chain). Phonological interference is mainly due to phonological factors. This includes the differences in the stock phonemes of the languages in contact, in the componential analysis and in the distributional patterns of their phonemes.

Vowels

The Vowels in Tamil and English are mostly different. Tamil has five pairs of short and long vowels and two diphthongs. In English there are twenty vowels – twelve pure vowels and eight diphthongs. Since most of the pure vowels correspond with the English vowels, not much of a difference is heard, but when coming to the pronunciation of diphthongs interference spoils it.

For example a Tamil learner pronounces the English vowels/ iː, ɪ , e, ɑː, ʊ, uː, ʌ/ without any difficulty. It is because these vowels are almost equivalent of the Tamil

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[ஈ, இ, எ, ஆ, உ, ஊ, அ] respectively. Through there is a difference between the English and Tamil sounds listed above, it is only minimal. The Tamil [ஈ], for example occurs at a more close position then the English / i: /. But, all the same, it does not interfere.

There are difficulties with regards to the pronunciation of other pure vowels of English. The vowel /æ / poses some problem because the Tamil learner thinks of two possibilities with the two nearest sounds (எ) or (ஆ) in Tamil. We can hear the word 'act' being pronounced as 'ஆக்ட்' or the word 'fancy' being pronounced as 'பேன்ஸி'.

Many learners face similar difficulty in pronouncing / ɒ/ sound. This is a new sound to the speakers of most of the Dravidian languages. / ɒ/ is articulated with rounded lips. It is very often pronounced without lip-rounding.

The long vowel / ɔ::/ also is difficult in two or three ways. Mostly the Tamilians use either [ஆ] or [ஒ] as suggested by the spelling of the word.

The central vowel /ɜ:/ is also interfered with. The learners use two forms to represent this sound – [ər] or [ʌr]. Hence the word *bird* / bɜ:d / is pronounced as [bərd], while the word *nurse* / nɜ:s / is pronounced as / nʌrs /.If one closely watches the Tamil Pronunciation one could notice that there is only one vowel used to represent many vowels discussed above.

The neutral vowel / ə / has the highest frequency. It occurs only in unaccented syllables. Though in Tamil, a slightly similar system exists as *"kutriyalugaram"*, unaccented syllables are not common in Tamil. Hence, Tamil speakers accent the syllables in which it occurs. For example, the words development / dɪvələpmənt / and liberty / lɪbətɪ / are pronounced as [develʌpment] and [lɪbertɪ] respectively.

In the case of diphthong, the interference is greater because Tamil uses only two diphthongs [ஐ , ஔ] whereas English uses eight/ eɪ, aɪ, ɔɪ, aʊ, əʊ, eə, ɪə, ʊə /. Again, in English, the length of the diphthongs is equal to that of a long vowel but in Tamil they are shortened. That is why many speakers shorten the speech. They pronounce / aɪ/ and / aʊ / correctly but only shorten the length.

The diphthong / eɪ / is not heard as the nearest pure vowel [e:] is substituted. For example, the word *late* / leɪt / is pronounced as [le:t].Also, the diphthong /əʊ/ is pronounced as monophthong [o:]. The tendency to use a monophthong is due to interference. For example, the words *load* / ləʊd /and *post* / pəʊst / are pronounced as [[lo:d] and [po:st] respectively.

The diphthong / ɔɪ / is pronounced without the lip rounding. It is brought close to the nearest Tamil pronunciation [a:ɪ]. So, in the case of Tamil speakers the first element of this diphthong becomes unrounded. They pronounce the word *boy* / bɔɪ / as / ba:ɪ /

The three centring diphthongs are also pronounced different because centring diphthongs do not exist in Tamil. They are / / eə /, / ɪə /and / ʊə /.. The substitution of nearest sounds is not uniform. When the speakers know the pronunciation of a particular word for certain they pronounce it correctly; Otherwise monophthongs are used. So, in place of the diphthongs / eə /, / ɪə /and / ʊə /, the Tamil speakers substitute the monophthongs [e:], [i:] and [u:] respectively. For example, the

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word *care* / keə / is pronounced as [ke:r],*period* / pɪərɪəd/ is pronounced as [pi:rɪəd]and *tour* / tʊə/ is pronounced as [tu:r]. Hence, in the case of vowels the difficulty seems to be considerable.

Consonants

Phonological Interference can be traced in the pronunciation of consonants. But the difference is minimal when compared with the vowel sounds. English has more fricative sounds, but Tamil has more plosives. Hence as expected the difficulty arises often in the case of pronouncing fricatives.

The English R.P. system has three pairs of plosives - / p, b/, / t, d /, and / k, g /. The first and the last pairs are pronounced without much difficulty. The alveolar plosives /t/ and /d/ are made "retroflex" sounds [,ɖ].

Among the fricatives of English, the Dental Fricatives / θ / and / ð / are difficult because of the absence of similar sounds in Tamil. Hence, they are replaced by Tamil speakers by dental plosives [t] and [d]. Also, fricatives like / z / and /ʒ / are not differentiated properly; both the sounds are rare in Tamil.

Another interesting feature of L1 Interference is seen in the pronunciation of the fricative /v / and the semi-vowel /w/. The Tamil speakers of English have only one sound for both [v]. So they do not distinguish / v / from /w / and as a result, they use labio-dental fricative / v / in place of the semi-vowel /w/. For example, the word *wet* /wet/ is pronounced as [vet].

The frictionless continuant /r/ is a peculiar sound in English. Very often it is written but not pronounced. Generally speaking, /r/ is pronounced only in the syllable initial position and between vowels and also when it occurs after a consonant. It is silent in all other positions. The Tamil speakers do not leave a sound unpronounced in a sequence. They always pronounce it and because of this the English pronunciation differs very much from Standard English pronunciation.

Features of Connected Speech

We have so far discussed the interference owing mainly to the absence or existence of different form of a particular phoneme in Tamil language. Interference has also to be studied in relation to other features of English Pronunciation and how they are affected by the first language. Those features that merit special discussion are syllable structure, stress and intonation.

Regarding syllable structure, in both languages a syllable is made by bringing a vowel and consonants together. But in English it is possible for us to have "Consonant clusters." In Tamil the custom is to have a vowel preceded or followed by one consonant only. Because of this a Tamil speaker finds it difficult to pronounce the following clusters.

It is because of the same reason; the syllabic nasals or syllabic laterals are not heard among the majority of the speakers.

Placing stress on the right syllable is very difficult as Tamil is not a stressed language in the sense English is. There is a kind of a level stress used in English. That is why the Tamil speakers speak English with a kind of regular stress pattern mildly stressing all the syllables. The concept of strong and weak form is not observed because such a system does not find a place in the L1. Hence;

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we can understand that Interference is one reason why English is spoken in a particular form in Tamil Nadu.

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