NATIONALLY SPECIFIC: COMPARING DISTINCTIVE PHONETIC FEATURES IN KOREAN ENGLISH AND CHINESE ENGLISH

Research article

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Abstract

The study provides linguistic data and sociocultural interpretation of distinctive phonetic features found in comparative analysis of two East-Asian languages through the prism of accented Korean English and Mandarin Chinese English. Starting with vowels, consonants and phonotactics which are well accounted for in linguistic and pedagogical literature, the present authors focus on their own research in the prosody of the English varieties selected for identification: the Korean English and the Mandarin Chinese English. Distinctive prosodic features are found in the temporal characteristics, rhythm and pitch patterns of boundary tones. The results may be practically applied in teaching the two distinctive languages as L3 to Russian-speaking learners who first acquired English as their L2.

Keywords: phonetics, prosody, Korean English, Mandarin Chinese English.

НАЦИОНАЛЬНЫЕ ОСОБЕННОСТИ: СРАВНИВАЯ ОТЛИЧИТЕЛЬНЫЕ ФОНЕТИЧЕСКИЕ ЧЕРТЫ КОРЕЙСКОГО И КИТАЙСКОГО ВАРИАНТОВ АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА

Научная статья

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Аннотация

В статье представлены лингвистические данные и социокультурная интерпретация отличительных фонетических характеристик, обнаруженных при сравнительном анализе двух восточноазиатских языков через призму английского языка с корейским и китайским акцентом. Начиная с гласных, согласных и фонотактики, которые описаны в лингвистической и педагогической литературе, авторы концентрируют внимание на собственном исследовании просодии этих двух вариантов английского языка с целью их идентификации: корейского и китайского (мандаринское наречие) вариантов английского языка. Национальные особенности просодии выявлены в темпоральных характеристиках, ритме и мелодических моделях пограничных тонов. Результаты могут быть использованы при обучении корейскому и китайскому языкам русскоговорящих обучающихся, которые уже изучали английский язык как иностранный.

Ключевые слова: фонетика, просодия, корейский вариант английского языка, мандаринский китайский вариант английского языка.

Introduction

The theme of the current research was prompted by the introduction of the University courses in Mandarin Chinese and the Korean languages as majors for the Russian-speaking learners who first did English as their principal foreign language at school. Intercultural communication in English with people whose national standards are developing on the bases of typologically different languages presents a new challenge to Russian-speaking learners whose target in English traditionally, as everywhere else in Europe, was native British pronunciation (RP).

We claim that knowledge of nationally distinctive features will facilitate successful communication which involves:

a) identifying regional affiliation of the interlocutor;

b) providing for maximum intelligibility on both sides;

c) securing mutual comprehension;

d) giving an appropriate cultural interpretation of the other party's manner of talking;

e) projecting a positive image of the speaker as a personality.

Phonetic and pedagogical issues which are involved in the process of adapting to another variety of English are widely commented upon and perceptually researched. Thus, for instance, the slow tempo of Chinese English is an issue which worries the Chinese speakers who are aware of being unfavorably socio-culturally assessed on account of their accent [9], [11], [12]. Modifications of English consonant clusters in both the Korean and the Chinese varieties were also an object of criticism: in perception tests they were called "mispronounced" and "funny-sounding" by Russian-speaking students of English [15], [16].

In contrast with the Chinese learners, South Korean students of English are described as fast-talking English speakers [4], [5], [6], which might be accounted for by the country's policy in English education since 1990s: due to the American presence in the country and economic aid, millions of dollars were spent on teaching and testing English, from elementary school to university level, with emphasis on communication skills and the "fluency over accuracy" leading principle in English education [1]. The English language is now viewed in South Korea as a symbol of professional success and a tool for global interaction; it was practically established by the government policy as the second national language.

In the People's Republic of China, the English language is also an important subject in the school curriculum; there are more Chinese learners of English in the country and abroad than in any other country of the world. As more and more people in China become fluent in English, the new variety might emerge and become the forefront of the evolving language in the world [2], [3].

Discussion

1) Segmental features: common and specific:

A number of most salient features in the production of English consonants and vowels are shared by the two varieties:

– phonotactic rules of most Asian languages do not allow clusters of consonants which are plentiful in English; to avoid clusters, an epenthetic vowel is inserted, thus destroying the syllabic structure of the English word;

– the TH-sounds are a stumbling block for speakers of most of the Asian languages (as well as of many others, including some native speakers in the British Isles); often they are replaced by dental stops;

– the sounds /l/ and /r/ are positional variants of the same phoneme: /l/ is used at the end and occasionally at the beginning of words, while /r/ is used in the intervocalic position; many speakers do not distinguish them;

– there is no vowel reduction in unstressed syllables to the same degree as in English, which is another feature (together with epenthesis) affecting the syllabic and, consequently, the rhythmic structure of English.

Besides the above-mentioned common cases there are specific Korean degrees of aspiration in lax and tense /p/, /t/, /k/ and the affricate /ts/; the consonant /N/ is not pronounced at the beginning of words; fricatives are a special difficulty at the end of words; devoicing of the initial consonants [4], [5], [7].

In addition to the common features mentioned above, specific Mandarin Chinese features are named in [3], [8]: they are concerned with heavily nasalized vowels before /n/, vocalization of /l/, pronunciation of /r/ instead of /z/.

Both Korean English and Chinese English do not distinguish the length of vowels.

2) Prosodic distinctive features:

Prosodic typology attributes Korean and Chinese languages to different classes: Korean is an *intonation language*, while Mandarin Chinese is a *tone language*. In prosody, the most disputable point is the presence of stress in either case [14]. Korean English and Chinese English, however, sound like languages with too many stresses, some of them misplaced in comparison with the standard English pronunciation. At the word level, misplaced stress distorts the phonetic shape of the word and hampers its quick identification; at the phrase level, shifting the focus may pose a difficulty for comprehension.

It is controversial whether Korean has fixed *stress* at the word level or phrasal stress. Those who believe that Korean has word level stress, note that it is sensitive to syllable weight: word-initial syllable is stressed when it is heavy; if it is not, the second syllable is stressed. It was claimed to have longer duration. However, the perception of "stressed" syllables was later proved to depend on the initial position in an accent phrase and cued by high pitch. So, it was referred to the phrase level prosody [14]. Misplaced word stress is a common mistake in Korean English, one of the inaccuracies teachers of English comment upon [4], [5], [6].

In Mandarin Chinese, there were also arguments for and against the presence of *word stress*. Earlier studies by Russian scholars of Chinese and recent perception experiments in China support the idea that it is pitch contour patterns (lexical tones) that shape the word [17], [18]. When the tone is distinct, the syllable is full, it is strong, and it sounds 'stressed'. If the underlying tone is obscure, the syllable is weak, i.e. "unstressed". The Chinese speakers treat tones as stress in English. Another point of controversy is whether the dominant stress pattern is a trochaic rhythmic unit [18] or the iambic one [19], [20]. The new data obtained from lexicon is that out of 30 000 disyllabic words in the big dictionary only 2 000 words are stressed on the first syllable, whereas 80% of words are stressed on the last syllable. Chinese is, therefore, called "right-prominent", contrasted to English which is "left-prominent". The difference is claimed to cause most of the misplaced stresses in Chinese English [20].

The issue of *temporal characteristics* of Chinese and Russian speakers in L2 and L3 production was investigated by the current authors. The slow-down of Chinese reading in English was explained as a natural code-switching effect, evidenced both by the Mandarin and the Russian-speaking students' reading [8]. We also registered normal mean syllable duration of the Chinese in their L1, whereas the Russian learners were faster readers in English as L2 [10]. When switching from L1 to English, the Chinese students increased the number of pauses, which suggests the division of English sentences into shorter intonation groups, because text processing in a foreign language is a cognitive challenge [13]. Speakers of Korean English, it was found, are known for their fast tempo implementing "fluency over accuracy" principle, which is the result of intensive speaking practice which was developed to the detriment of their English sounds accuracy.

One more remark is concerned with the most frequent *pitch patterns* which are employed by speakers of Korean English compared to speakers of Mandarin Chinese English. The Koreans have a wide repertoire of boundary tones in their mother tongue, but in English they resort mainly to midlevel tone (incomplete phrase) and low fall (complete phrase). On the whole, two thirds of the boundary tones end in a suspended tone (level or rise), which make Korean English sound non-categoric or overpolite. The Chinese pitch patterns are grouped in descending series, which sound as cascades with pauses between them. The general unidirectional falling pitch patterns give the impression of serious, weighty sort of statements. Thus, falling pitch patterns prove to be decisive in creating rhythm units and boundary tones, as well as identifying Chinese English from Korean English.

Rhythm is known to be created by regular recurrence of similar events. In Korean English stresses at the accentual phrase level which constitute intonation phrases with boundary tones and pauses to separate them, are the main rhythmic units which create phonation-to-pause ratio at 3:1. The impression of fast tempo is produced by the specific incomplete articulation of initial and final consonants clusters.

Conclusion

Korean English and Mandarin Chinese English are two independent East-Asian varieties of "New Englishes" which are based on typologically different substrate languages and developed under different sociocultural conditions. Phonetically the two varieties share a few common areal features in coping with English phonology, the main difficulties being phonotactic

constraints, consonantal inventory and stress system. Articulation errors and other inaccuracies as well as stress misplacement may be in the way of intelligibility and comprehensibility.

Tone system (Mandarin Chinese) and intonation system (Korean) appear to function equally successfully for differentiating the basic communicative functions (question vs. statement, incomplete vs. complete) in speech. However, the two opposite trends in boundary tone usage, namely, the suspended termination of tones in Korean and the falling tones in Mandarin Chinese, give two different impressions of the nationally specific tone of voice. Tempo variation, either fast (Korean) or slow (Mandarin Chinese), may also affect the partners' attitudes and personality evaluation in intercultural communication.

The teaching practices in the two countries could also be assessed on the grounds of specific pronunciation features in Korean and Chinese varieties, which are the basis of their identities. We believe that social motivation, exposure to native teachers' instruction and emphasis on communication skills benefited the fluency of Korean speakers, though not their accuracy. The range and quality of teaching English pronunciation in the education system of the People's Republic of China is likewise very impressive. At the same time, one finds the necessity of improving the fluency aspect of learners by focusing on connected speech instruction and regular speaking practice.

Конфликт интересов

Не указан.

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

Рецензия

Все статьи проходят рецензирование. Но рецензент или автор статьи предпочли не публиковать рецензию к этой статье в открытом доступе. Рецензия может быть предоставлена компетентным органам по запросу.

Review

All articles are peer-reviewed. But the reviewer or the author of the article chose not to publish a review of this article in the public domain. The review can be provided to the competent authorities upon request.

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