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PHONETIC STEREOTYPES AND THE TEACHING OF PRONUNCIATION

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An assumption is made that the process of learning a target language consists primarily in building a set of "stereotypes" to accompany the already existing set of native-language stereotypes.

It is further assumed that a target language learner aims at establishing stereotypes on all possible levels of (a) language structure (also referred to as language "code"), and (b) in communication through language.

Before, however, any considerations of what is meant by learning a language through stereotypes are proposed, it is necessary to outline the very notion of "stereotype", as it will be employed in the present paper.

Thus, according to *Webster's New World Dictionary* (1966:1430), "stereotype" may, among other things, be defined as "a one-piece printing plate cast in type metal" or as "an unvarying form or pattern". Obviously, the former meaning does not apply, and it is the latter definition of the word that concerns us here.

It is further assumed that "stereotype", as an unvarying and fixed form or pattern which is of mental character, finds its justification both on physiological and psychological grounds.

Approached physiologically, a "stereotype" is the result of the brain's continuous *scanning* of the incoming impulses and concomitant *systematization*, *classification*, and *interpretation* of these impulses into what may be referred to as a "dynamic stereotype" (cf. Schaff 1981:13). Thus, the physiological approach enables one to treat the dynamic stereotype as a result of two very basic types of processes, i.e., *perception* (also referred to as 'scanning') and a set of *organizing* activities, i.e. systematization, classification, and integration of the impulses that the human brain is constantly confronted with.

From the psychological point of view, in turn, one may regard stereotypes as being directly linked to the philogenetically formed inborn cognitive mechanism which seems to operate through the principles of "discreteness" and "categorization". The two principles constitute the fundamental basis for both perceptual and productive processes, or cognition in general (cf.

"design features" in Hockett 1960; also Hockett 1966:10; Hockett & Altman 1968:61 - 72) which may be understood to proceed through the activation of stereotypes.

The notion of "stereotype" may be utilized on purely linguistic grounds, where it may denote a structure or element of a structure which is evoked in the native speaker's performance, in accordance with his native competence, in an act of inter- or intra-communication.

The formation of linguistic stereotypes seems primordial both from the point of view of philogeny and ontogeny of language, especially when the problem is viewed in the broad perspective of zoo- and anthroposemiotics. Considered from this point of view, human language appears to be the most efficient communicative system, transmitted from generation to generation, and endowed with the most fundamental capability for *information replication*, through storage of information, feedback, and message channelling (cf. Sebeok 1968).

Humans are capable of *learning*, which among other things, may be regarded as a process of repetition of perceived sequences of elements which may ultimately lead to their becoming highly effective as *patterns*. Thus, the pattern is considered to constitute the essence of stereotype.

The patterning of human communication, therefore, may be regarded as highly stereotyped "species-characteristic motor sequence" (cf. Klopfer & Hatch 1968) where the patterning of communication is an absolutely necessary prerequisite to a smooth handling of information, which secures the use of language code in its fundamental traits of "usefulness" and "efficiency". One may conclude at this point that learning is essentially the process of establishing effective stereotypes; this includes language as well.

Having recognized the existence of linguistic stereotypes, one is justified to acknowledge "phonetic stereotypes" as embodying a specific group of stereotypes on the level of the phonic structure of language.

Thus, phonetic stereotypes are assumed to exist both as a structure in use, evoked by the native speaker in the process of communication, and as an inborn mechanism securing the use of the phonic sub-code in verbal communication.

In terms of learning target language pronunciation, we shall regard the process of acquiring it as that of constructing a *parallel* set of phonetic stereotypes, i.e., of adding new stereotypes, appropriate for the target language, to the bulk of existing native pronunciation habits. We may also venture to say that the process under consideration consists in enriching the native basis of articulation with entirely new sensori-motor patterns, characteristic of the phonic substance of the target language.

From the point of view of the over-all goal of teaching pronunciation in advanced second language courses, the construction of parallel phonetic

stereotypes appears to be the task of utmost importance, which is supposed to lead, in its most manifest form, to the formation of two (or more) un-conflicting phonetic sets of stereotypes, i.e., the native and the target one.

A point that requires further explication is the relation between "phonetic stereotype" and "basis of articulation", since the two differ in some respects. In our general understanding of the term, "stereotype" is an evocation of an invariant and fixed pattern or part of a pattern in appropriate circumstances. For our purposes, we shall regard these as proper communicative circumstances, under which language users will indulge in fully stereotyped exchange of messages.

In a narrow sense, phonetic stereotypes are understood here as sets of feature matrices and various combinatorial possibilities which a speaker activates during speech.

The notion of the "basis of articulation", in turn, is understood as a non-dynamic phenomenon comprising "the entire sound chain and the nexus between sounds" (Kelz 1978:139) which finds further justification on the grounds that it is "the whole of neuro-muscular activity which is shared by the speakers of a language community" (Kelz 1978:140; also see Clark & Clark's notion of "articulatory program" in Clark & Clark 1977:273 ff). A similar view is expressed by Drachman (1973) who defines the basis of articulation "as a kind of unifying principle" (p. 120) and a consistent mechanism which "should be stable not only for a given individual but across whole (dialect) communities at least". (p. 127).

It follows from the above definitions, that the basis of articulation, both in the universal sense and in terms of a particular language community, should be regarded as some kind of a neuro-muscular "pool", from which speakers choose whatever articulatory complexes are required for oral communication within a particular language community.

In the light of the above considerations, the phonetic stereotype is simply regarded as an implementation of the basis of articulation, with a chosen neuro-muscular complex underlying a given phonetic pattern.

The establishment of target language pronunciation stereotypes is, in fact, a many-fold venture and includes the formation of stereotypes in the following essential areas of the phonetic manifestation of language (cf. Kelz 1979):

(1) *segmentals*: the teaching of these ought to include the information on their discrete nature, that is, their isolable auditory-articulatory parameters.

(2) *Segmental phonotactics*: the teaching of this aspect ought to focus on segment *distribution* and segment *combination*, which are operative in the target language.

(3) *Segment co-articulation*: in teaching segment combinations, emphasis is placed upon the phenomena of imposition of a particular phonetic

feature over an adjacent segment. Some co-articulation processes will be easily found in the native phonetic habits by virtue of being "universal", whereas, others will have to be acquired as specific for the target language.

(4) *Suprasegmentals*: this very large area includes the following sub-elements: stress, intonation, and rhythm.

One may notice that the building of stereotypes within points (1)—(3) is a task consisting in the establishment of purely phonetic matrices, with no recourse made to other levels of language structure. In this sense, we may distinguish "simple" phonetic stereotypes.

Whereas, the establishment in one's speech repertory of acceptable supra-segmental stereotypes (point (4)) is a much more complex endeavour in the sense that their formation requires that recourse be made to the grammatical and semantic levels of language code. Therefore, we will call the latter type of stereotypes "complex" phonetic stereotypes.

The learning of the target language's pronunciation must then be viewed as a process of acquiring the ability to coordinate the particular sets of simple and complex stereotypes into a successful production system.

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