

The Negative Transfer of Sichuan Dialect to the Study of English Pronunciation

— Error Analysis on the Supra-segmental Phonemes

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Supra-segmental phoneme is one of the most important factors in distinguishing meanings in English. Due to the influence of Sichuan dialect, many students in Sichuan tend to speak English without noticing the striking features in the continuous speech such as word stress, liaison, loss of explosion, or elision. The monotonous tones and pitches result in their non-fluency in the communication. Based on the theory of contrast analysis and error analysis, this paper analyzes the common errors in their pronunciation and the reasons so as to make some suggestions on how to teach and learn English pronunciation.

Keywords: English Pronunciation; Supra-Segmental Phoneme; Language Transfer; Contrast Analysis; Error Analysis

Introduction

Language acquisition strategies have been the concerns of linguists and language teachers for many years. In order to find better ways for learners to learn foreign languages, linguists compare the differences when young children learn mother tongue and when adults learn foreign languages. By observing children's mother tongue learning process, linguists find that the differences lie in that children start from the very beginning while adults have already had comparatively systematic knowledge of mother tongue before they start to learn foreign languages, thus learning foreign languages seems more difficult for them. What kind of influence would mother tongue have on foreign language acquisition become the concern of linguists and language teachers. The contrast analysis hypothesis was put forward in the 1950s (Fries, G./Lado, R), based on the transfer theory which insists that mother tongue habits would influence foreign language acquisition, that is, language transfer defined by linguists. It is positive transfer, if learner's native language helps in learning the second language, otherwise, the negative transfer. (Wang Chuming, 1990).

Despite the conflicting views on the significance of language transfer in historical linguistics, the notion of language transfer remained uncontroversial among language teachers well into the twentieth century. As early as the schools of the ancient world, teachers were writing down contrastive observations about the languages students knew and the languages they wished to learn(Kelly, 1969). And as recently as the schools influenced by figures such as Sweet (1899/1972), Jespersen (1912), Palmer (1917), Fries (1945), and other proponents of new (or seemly new) methods of language teaching, there is a widespread acceptance of the idea that native language influence could greatly influence second language acquisition (Terence Odlin, 2001), especially when learning the pronunciation (Rod Ellis, 1994). Chinese is categorized into Sino-Tibetan family while English belongs to Indo-European family thus

they differ greatly in all aspects. From the prospective of language acquisition, the lack of social and family language learning environment leads to the negative transfer rather than the positive one.

English as the second language had not been taught in most of the middle schools in China until 1957. Most learners begin to learn English from the first year in middle school (Fu Ke, 1986), so they miss the best time for learning the second language, that is from 6 to 12. The sound system, grammatical system and syntax have already rooted in their knowledge long before they get contact with the second language. Some linguists believe that language acquisition is a process of getting into habits, not that of learning. If learners drill repeatedly in listening, speaking, reading and writing, they would gradually master the second language. But the result goes against the prediction of the theorists. According to Full-time Six Years Middle School Teaching Plan, the required time for English learning is: 960 hours for arts majors, five hours per week; 932 hours for science majors, five hours per week in the first two years, and in the last year, four hours per week. (Fu Ke, 1986) The Chinese students in fact spend a lot of time in learning English before entering colleges, and they are excellent in listening and reading comprehension, but very poor in oral English, especially in Sichuan dialect area. Due to mother tongue's negative transfer, students' poor pronunciation seriously influence their spoken English.

Supra-segmental phoneme is one of the most important factors to distinguish meanings in English. Due to the influence of Sichuan dialect, many students in Sichuan tend to speak English without noticing the striking features in the continuous speech such as liaison, loss of explosion, elision or stress. The monotonous tones and pitches result in their non-fluency in the communication. Based on the theory of contrast analysis and error analysis, this paper analyzes the common errors in their pronunciation and the reasons in order to make some suggestions on how to teach and learn English pronunciation.

Error Analysis on the Supra-Segmental Phonemes

Word Stress

There is a large vocabulary in the English language and the English words are much more complex than any other languages in the world. English words mainly originated from two sources: Germanic languages and Romance languages, and it has also borrowed a lot of words from most of the languages in the world(Xu Tianfu, 1985). As A.C.Gimson explains in his "An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English", "The accentual pattern of English words is *fixed*, in the sense that the main accent always falls on a particular syllable of any given word,but *free*, in the sense that the main accent is not tied to any particular situation in the chain of syllables constituting a word, as it is in some languages......" (A.C.Gimson, 1972). Thus English word accentual patterns differ greatly, not easy for learners to master.

As one of the most important supra-segmental phoneme, word stress is the base of learning rhythm and intonation and plays an important role in communication. Mispronouncing word stress may leads to ambiguity in understanding. Therefore, it is of vital importance for learners to master correctly the word stress patterns. However, many students in Sichuan Dialect area make mistakes when pronouncing words: misread word stress, neglect the differences of vowel sound quality in stressed and non-stressed syllables.

According to English pronunciation rules, in most disyllabic words, word stress falls on the first syllable, only a few falls on the second syllable. Our students tend to mispronounce the following words with two syllables:

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        correct
        wrong

        prefer
        /□□\(∃\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\mathcal{\P}\math
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In English, quite a few words can be both noun and verb but with different word stresses. Generally speaking, word stress falls on the second syllable when it functions as a verb, and on the first syllable when it is a noun. For example:

```
Noun
                 Verb
       / #□M &; ® Ω/
                              record
present
       / ∰□□M #☜■♦/
                               / □□∺⊞∺M ■◆/
       / ∰മൊ\£മ⊕M • ♦/
                               / ♣େ�M • ♦/
digest
refuse
       /\Bom \arg er \•/
                               /□H # × er ◆ = #/
subject / 🗄 • → ស្១៤៣ •/
                             / ◆ © Q 🖁 으 🕈 M ♦/
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In Chinese, it is the tones not stress that distinguish meanings, so Chinese is Tone Language. The pitch of syllable is the striking feature to distinguish meaning ,while the intensity of sound is its redundant feature, that is to say, the meaning and part of speech of Chinese words have nothing to do with the sound intensity.(Xu Tongqiang, 1993). In most parts of Sichuan Dialect area, there are four tones: high and leve, rising, falling rising, falling. In some parts of Sichuan, such as in the east and south of Sichuan, there is still Ru tone (the fourth tone in the old Chinese pronunciation), and tones decide the meaning of words as those in the standard Chinese. In Sichuan dialect, each word is stressed if it is a monosyllabic word. The word stress always falls on the first syllable in most disyllabic and trisyllabic words but sometimes on the second syllable. In quadrisyllabic words, there are usually two stresses, one on the first syllable and the other on the third syllable. So it is common to

find word stress misplacement in students' pronunciation, as are shown above. They tend to read English words in the accentual pattern in Sichuan dialect and usually stress the first syllable whether the word is a none or a verb.

The stress is also closely related with the quality of vowels. Generally speaking, the quality of vowels is complete only in the stressed syllables; in the unstressed syllables, vowels are often weakened to/[/, /i/, /u/. (A.C.Gimson , 1972)If the stress of a word is misplaced, the vowel would be mispronounced. Many students in Sichuan often pronounce the vowels in the unstressed syllables as they do in the stressed ones:

```
correct
                           wrong
                                              /\BO\\\&;\\\\\\&\\\\\
  breakfast
/80□M&x×®•◆/
              /∰♦→■<u>Ω</u>)<del>(</del>/
                                            /∰♦≯■≏M )<del>(</del>/
  Sunday
             /® ∰ M<sub>O</sub> ® ∯/
                                            /20mm 中/
  ago
  suppose /◆電量□電骨器/
                                            /◆→ 🖁 🗖 🖘 🕆 Ж/
  forget
            /x7 => ₽100 M ♦/
                                               /×7 $ 8 76 M ◆/
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Sentence Stress and Rhythm

Most English words have their own accentual patterns when they are uttered one by one, but in the connected speech, the native speaker expends relatively great articulatory energy on those parts of the utterance to which they wishes to attach particular accentual meaning, while the remaining words or syllables are weakly and rapidly articulated. An utterance containing a high percentage of content words is likely to receive more stresses than one with the same number of syllables but a higher proportion of form words. Nevertheless, the syllables uttered with the greatest stress constitute, for the speaker, hubs with which unstressed syllables will be associated to form rhythmic groups. (A.C.Gimson, p.260)

Rhythm is one of most important supra-segmental phoneme. It is a feature of English that the utterance is delivered as a series of close-knit rhythmic groups, ...and the rhythmic beats of an utterance occur at fairly equal interval of time. As a result of this, the speed at which the unstressed syllables are uttered will depend upon the number occurring between the strong beats. All the unstressed syllables occurring between two strong beats may not, however,be uttered with equal rapidity. (A.C.Gimson, p.261)

Rhythm in English is stress timed, that is to say, the length of the speech is decided not by the number of the syllables but by the number of the stress. So the native speakers will not articulate each syllable very clearly and usually they utter the stressed syllable stronger, longer and clearer but the unstressed weaker, shorter and vaguer. In Chinese rhythm is syllable timed, and the length of the speech depends on the number of syllables. The more there are the syllables, the longer time the speakers will take. The Chinese speakers are used to articulating each Chinese word very clearly and for each word they will take roughly the same length of time except for special purpose. Thus, many learners in China utter each English word very forcefully and clearly as they speak their mother tongue.

Students in Sichuan dialect ares error in sentence stress and rhythm in the following two cases:

(1) They utter each word very clearly with same stress, and vowels, no matter in stressed syllables or unstressed syllables, are usually articulated completely:

Example:

I am an English teacher.

Correct: / \circ O \circ \blacksquare \exists H $_{\circ}$ Y $_{\circ}$ O $_{\circ}$ H $_{\circ}$ H $_{\circ}$ H $_{\circ}$ H $_{\circ}$ O $_{\circ}$ H $_{\circ}$ H $_{\circ}$ H $_{\circ}$ H $_{\circ}$ D $_{\circ}$ H $_{\circ}$ H $_{\circ}$ H $_{\circ}$ H $_{\circ}$ H $_{\circ}$ D $_{\circ}$ H $_{\circ}$ H $_{\circ}$ H $_{\circ}$ H $_{\circ}$ D $_{\circ}$ H $_$

(2) They expend same time on each word in the strong-weak-strong-weak patterns:

Example:

He often talks loudly in public.

Correct: He 'often 'talks 'loudly in 'public. Wrong: 'He 'often 'talks 'loudly 'in 'public.

In the Connected Speech

In oral English, the native speakers usually join the adjacent words in one sense group in one way or another, such as: liaison, assimilation or elision, so their speeches sound smooth and fluent, which is the prominent feature of oral English. However, most words in Chinese begin with consonants, only a few with vowels, and even if some words begin with vowels, all the initial syllable with /H, H, would be semi-vowels with slight frication, and the others would start with a slight sound / ? / (Huang Borong, 1988) Thus, it is rare in Chinese to hear two syllables uttered jointedly into one except in some dialect area, such as: Tian An Men or Xi'an.

In Sichuan dialect, vowels in the initial place are either turned into semi-vowels /er, ◆/ or completely changed into consonants, for example, an quan (安全) /理⑤■ □□⑤■/, so it is impossible for speakers to link two syllables into one. As a result of that, English learners in Sichuan usually add a slight /□before a syllable with an initial vowel. For example,

This isn't the one I ask for.

Correct: / 寒��•サЖ�■♦ 寒� ョ•→■⑤ℋ醤雪♂७≒島・炎 ■スゥロ/

Wrong: / 閏卷升• 閏升器◐■◆ 卷升 閏•→■ 閏⑤升 閏卷三•&; 閏爻○□ /.

So their speech doesn't sound fluent and smooth.

Intonation

Intonation not only provides a means of accentuation, but also serves to dist inguish sentence types(e.g. statement and question), and indicates the emotional attitude of the speaker as well. (A.C. Gimson, 1972, p.277). American linguist Fries insists, that "it is not just what you say, it is how you say it, that counts." Because English speakers pay much attention to "whether a sentence is spoken with a smile or with a sneer. If one says something insulting, but smiles in face and voice, the utterance may be a great compliment; but if one says something very complimentary, but with an intonation of contempt, the result is an insult" (C.C. Fries, 1962, p20-21) If a learner make mistakes in pronunciation, he might be forgiven, but if he misuses intonation, his utterance might lead to misunderstanding. Thus, intonation plays a very important role in communication.

Leaners in Sichuan dialect area usually make mistakes in the following two situations:

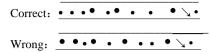
1) In the intonation group

In English, especially in British English, the speaking voice may start from the highest pitch (on the first stressed syllable) and fall to the lowest pitch(on the last stressed syllable in one sentence) until to the nuclear syllable. If it is a statement, the tail of the intonation may proceed to fall, but if it is a question, the tail may rise up. Many learners in Sichuan are used to ut-

tering each syllable at the same pitch, and rise or fall at the last syllable, which sounds really odd.

Example 1:

It is a very interesting hobby.



2) Misuse of intonation

There are three fundamental intonations in English: rising, falling, and mid-level. Of course, in the real communication, it is more complicated. O'Connor lists seven intonations in his Intonation of Colloquial English (O'Connor, 1961). Many other types of intonation such as rising-falling, falling-rising or falling-rising-falling are used. Generally speaking, rising intonation is used in general questions, alternative questions and imperative sentences while falling intonation is used in statements, imperative sentences, exclamatory sentences and special questions. Mid-level is often used for the unstressed syllables before the nuclear. But sometimes a statement form of words may be made into a question if a rise nucleus employed instead of a fall, or a general question may be made into a statement to show the different meanings or attitudes of the speaker's. For example: He doesn't lend his books to anybody. If the speaker uses a falling nucleus on "anybody", it means " he lends his books to nobody"; but if a falling-rising nucleus is used on "anybody", it means "he does lend his books to somebody". (A.C.Gimson, 1972)

Most students choose intonations only considering the sentence types but neglecting the meaning the sentence conveys. They tend to read or speak with the same intonation, mostly, the falling one, which makes their speech sound dull and boring.

Example 1:

Wrong: Waiters → and waitress → work → in restaurants →, hotels, → clubs, → cafes, → and snack bars. → They → serve all kinds of food → and drink. → Their → job is to → give good → service to people. →

Correct: Waiters and waitress work in restaurants, ∕ hotels, ∕ clubs, ∕ cafes, ∕ and snack bars. ↘ They serve all kinds of food ∕ and drink. ↘ Their job is to give good service to people. ↘

Example 2:

Wrong: After he finished his work, \ he went home. \ Correct: After he finished his work, \ ⊅ he went home. \ Example3:

Wrong: --- Lovely weather, \searrow isn't it? \nearrow

---Yes, \ isn't it? ✓

Correct: --- Lovely weather, \(\sigma \) isn't it? \(\noting \)

--- Yes, isn't it? (showing agreement)

We here only list some of the mistakes the students make in Sichuan dialect area, and there are surely many others not included due to the limit space of the paper.

Advice to Teachers and Students

Supra-segmental phoneme is one of the most important factors to distinguish meanings in English.It is of vital importance for students to master stress, rhythm, intonation and liaison in order to improve their spoken English. Teachers should make

full use of the similarity of the two languages to help the students master the correct pronunciation. As for the differences between them, teachers should help them grasp the basic knowledge of English phonetics and drill on them. For young children, imitating is the most effective way to learn the pronunciation of one language, but for adults it is much more difficult because they have already had learned the rules of pronunciation in their mother tongue, thus negative transfer influence on adults are much more prominent than on the young children. Students should learn English phonetics systematically and correct their pronunciation consciously. Of course, imitation is also very helpful for them to improve their pronunciation, since only practice can make perfect.

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