Knowing How to Speak a Language

Being able to speak a language means that you know how to pronounce and understand the words and sentences of your language. If you are a native speaker of English, for example, you know that the letters ‘s’ and ‘sh’ both represent sounds of the English language since they occur in distinct words like sin and shin. As a native speaker you have learned how to pronounce these sounds as well as the many other sounds that are used in your language. You also know the way that sounds combine to make English words. For instance, you know that ‘s’ can be followed by ‘l’ because of words like slow. You are also aware, at a certain level of consciousness, that ‘l’ cannot be followed by ‘s’ at the beginning of a word—there are no words like lsow in English.

One of the things that makes languages so interesting for linguists who study them, but so difficult for those trying to learn a new language, is that languages can differ in terms of how sounds are put together to form words. Of course, the ways that sounds combine in two languages may be similar in some respects, but you can be almost certain that there will also be differences. A challenging aspect about learning another language, then, is that languages differ both in terms of the kinds of sounds that are used and in the ways that the sounds combine to form words. To learn another language therefore means that you will at least need to learn new ways of combining sounds to form words, and possibly new sounds as well.

In the next few chapters you will become familiar with some of the ways in which languages differ in terms of how speech sounds are made and used. You should also gain a clearer understanding of how your own language works. With this knowledge, we hope that you will come away with an appreciation for how your native language and
the language(s) that you are learning differ. Being aware of how the languages differ is a huge step toward understanding how you can sound like a native speaker, since it will allow you to identify areas to pay special attention to when trying to master your new languages(s).

We begin by considering foreign accents and what exactly makes an accent sound foreign. We have all heard someone speak English or some other language that we speak natively and have known right away that he is not a native speaker. What is it about the way the person speaks that makes him sound foreign? As you will see, how an individual produces the sounds, words, and sentences of a foreign language is directly influenced by the sounds, sound combinations, and other properties of his native language.

Dealing with Unfamiliar Sounds

One of the most basic reasons why an accent seems foreign relates to the sounds that make up the speaker's native language and those of the language she is speaking non-natively. We will refer to the collection of speech sounds that are used in a particular language to form words and sentences as a language's sound inventory.

When the sound inventory of your own language differs from that of a language that you are learning, you may be confronted with unfamiliar sounds. In this case, part of learning the new language obviously means learning how to produce and combine new sounds. In attempting to pronounce these new sounds, you may modify your speech in some way to make it more similar to the sound patterns that you are used to. In this chapter, we focus on the various strategies used by language learners to deal with unfamiliar sounds and sequences of sounds. If you use these strategies, your speech will sound different from that of a native speaker, thus giving you a foreign accent.

One common strategy is to replace an unfamiliar sound with one that is relatively similar to it from the learner's native sound inventory. This can result in an accent quite noticeable to the native speaker's ears.

We illustrate this strategy first by considering some examples of non-native English speakers speaking English, and then of English speakers speaking other languages. In each case, a sound that occurs in a word in one language is replaced with some other sound. The reason, of course, is that the particular sound does not occur in the speaker's native language. As a result, the person may not have had experience pronouncing or listening to the sound and therefore may substitute an unfamiliar sound with one that is similar sounding.

Let's begin by considering one aspect of Greek-accented English. The sound inventory of Greek, like that of many languages, including Spanish and Korean, differs from
English in that it does not include the vowel sound [i],¹ which occurs in English words such as sit, bit, kit, etc. That is, there are no words in Greek (or Spanish or Korean) that are formed with the sound [i]. On the other hand, the sound inventories of Greek and English are similar in that they both include the sound that we will symbolize as [i]. This stands for the vowel in English words like seat, beat, feet. If an English speaker uses the vowel [i] instead of [i] in a word, it can change the meaning of the word: compare sit ([i]) vs. seat ([i]); bit ([i]) vs. beat/beet ([i]). Notice that it is only the quality of the vowel that distinguishes the meaning of these pairs of words. We therefore say that the vowels [i] and [i] are distinctive in English.

Unlike English, the Greek language does not make use of the distinction between [i] and [i] to change the meaning of words since there are no Greek words with [i]; [i] and [i] are then not distinctive in Greek. This means that Greek speakers may not have had practice producing or listening to the sound [i] and may have difficulty hearing the difference between [i] and [i]. They may also replace the unfamiliar [i] sound in English words with the similar yet more familiar [i]. As a result, both the words sit and seat, spoken in Greek-accented English, may be pronounced similar to seat. Speakers of Greek-accented English have made use of the first strategy for dealing with an unfamiliar sound: replacing an unfamiliar sound with a similar, more familiar one.

Let’s look at some common replacements from other languages. Korean, unlike English, does not distinguish between the sounds [p] and [f]. These occur in English words such as the following: [p] pool, punch, paper, cup; [f] fool, photo, caffeine, enough. The reason for the lack of distinction between [p] and [f] in Korean is that only [p] is part of the language’s sound inventory. Therefore, one common trait of Korean-accented English is for the sound [f] to be replaced with a [p] sound in English words.

Why, you might ask, is the [f] sound replaced with [p] as opposed to some other consonant like [t] or [k]? The answer is that to Korean speakers, [p] and [f] sound fairly similar. One of the reasons for this is that they are both made with the lips. To make the sound [p], the lips close together tightly and then open, letting the air pass through the lips. The lips are also involved in making the sound [f]. In this case, the bottom lip rests gently against the top row of teeth as the air goes out of the mouth. (We will have more to say about making these kinds of sounds in the following chapter.) It is important to keep in mind that sounds like [p] and [f] may seem very different to a speaker of a language like English who uses them to differentiate words like pool and fool. But for speakers of languages where the sounds are not distinctive, the two sounds can be very difficult to tell apart, and the unfamiliar sound can be difficult to pronounce.

¹ The symbols used to represent vowel sounds are discussed in Chapter 4; see also the symbol reference chart at the back of the book. To differentiate the symbols used to characterize speech sounds from the letters used to spell words, sound symbols are enclosed in square brackets.
As a final example of foreign-accented English, consider one way in which German and English differ. German lacks a distinction between the sounds [w] and [v] as in *wine* and *vine*; there is no [w] in the German sound inventory. So, in German-accented English, in a phrase such as *Victoria’s wine shop*, the first sounds in *Victoria* and *wine* may both be pronounced as [v], a sound very similar to [w].

Now let’s reverse the process and consider some of the common pronunciations that make American English speakers sound foreign in other languages. Continuing with German and English, you may be familiar with how the final sound in the German composer’s name *Bach* is commonly pronounced in English—with a [k] sound and rhyming with *rock*. In German, however, the last sound in this word is actually pronounced with a sound that, though similar to [k], is nonetheless different. The symbol for the German sound is [x], and it is made, like [k], by raising the back of the tongue up to the back of the mouth. In making [k], the tongue briefly touches the roof of the mouth, and consequently the flow of air is temporarily interrupted as it goes out of the mouth. (At this point you should convince yourself that [k] is made in this way by slowly saying the word *rock* and paying attention to where your tongue touches the roof of your mouth when you make the sound [k].) For the sound [x], the tongue comes close to the roof of the mouth but does not touch it. In this way, the air passes through the narrow opening and creates turbulent noise. Technically speaking, [k] is called a **velar stop** and [x] is a **velar fricative** (see the next chapter for additional discussion). Since the English sound inventory does not include [x], English speakers commonly replace this unfamiliar sound with the more familiar [k], a common trait of English-accented German.

Another characteristic of English-accented German (or French, Swedish, Turkish, and so on) has to do with the way that certain vowels are pronounced. German, like many other languages, makes a distinction between the vowels [i], as in English *beat*, [u], as in English *boot*, and [y], as in the German word *Tuer* ‘door’. The last sound does not occur in English’s sound inventory. The sound [y] can be thought of as a combination of the sounds [u] (*boot*) and [i] (*beat*): the lips are protruded as in [u], but the position of the tongue is the same as in [i]. We will work on learning how to make sounds like this in later chapters. Since English lacks this sound, English speakers typically replace foreign words containing the sound [y] with [u]. The reason that [y] is replaced with [u] (and not [i]) may be due in part to the fact that, in German at least, the sound [y] is written in words as the letter ‘u’, as we saw with the word *Tuer* ‘door’, so English speakers unfamiliar with German will equate the letter ‘u’ with the English sound [u].

In each of these cases, the English speaker sounds noticeably foreign, and once again, the reason is that a sound belonging to some other language’s sound inventory does not occur in English. In order to pronounce words like a native speaker, you will obviously need to learn how to pronounce the unfamiliar sound.

A second strategy that non-native speakers use to deal with an unfamiliar sound is to simply **omit the foreign sound** entirely. The omission of a sound is a common trait of French-accented English when dealing with the unfamiliar sound [h], as in English *hello*, *hat*, *heavy*. There are at least two reasons why French speakers may omit the [h] from
their pronunciations of English words. First, there is no [h] in French, and there is also no sound that is particularly close to [h]. Second, given that the sound [h] is absent from the French sound inventory, French speakers may not be able to hear the sound and thus do not reproduce it. This is because as a child acquires a language, she learns to focus on the parts of the acoustic signal that carry meaning in her language, ignoring others. Thus her perceptual system becomes fine-tuned to the sounds of her own language which in turn influences what she does and does not hear. What characterizes “foreignness” in this case, then, is the absence of a sound.

The example from French allows us to emphasize once again the important distinction between sounds and the letters that we use to spell words. Note that while the letter ‘h’ is written in some words in French, such as haricot ‘bean’ and homme ‘man,’ it is never pronounced as [h]. This fact shows that the spelling used in a language does not always reflect what sounds occur in that language. French is not alone in this regard; it is also true of English and many other languages. Consider the letter ‘p’ at the beginning of some words in English, e.g. psychology: although the letter ‘p’ is present in written English, it is not pronounced in this word. Similarly, the ‘l’ in salmon is not pronounced, nor is the ‘k’ in knife, nor the second ‘b’ in bomb.

Another aspect of spelling that can be confusing when learning a new language has to do with the fact that languages can differ in the ways in which written words are pronounced. This is especially challenging when the same sequence of letters is pronounced differently. For example, the spelling ‘ch’ in English is pronounced like the initial or final sounds in church, while in Italian, the spelling ‘ch’ is pronounced with the sound [k]. As a result, the first sound in the Italian word che ‘what’ approximates the first consonant in the English word Kay.

All of the examples we have considered above underscore several important points when it comes to learning a new language: Do not assume that the language that you are learning is identical to your native language in terms of the sounds or the rules for spelling. Be aware of the differences with your native language, learn how to pronounce the new sounds, and, of course, practice!

**Dealing with Unfamiliar Sequences of Sounds**

As we all know, learning another language involves more than just learning new sounds. We also need to learn how to combine them to form new words. Because of this, it is sometimes the particular combination of sounds, not the sounds themselves, that is unfamiliar to a non-native speaker. Part of knowing how to speak a language involves knowing what sequences of sounds are possible, that is, a language’s phonotactics. An English speaker, for example, has learned that a word can begin with sequences like [bl], [pl], [pr], [sn], [tr], and [gl] because there are words in the language like blue, please, price, snow, truck, and glue. It is likely than an English speaker would say that plake is a possible word of English because it contains combinations of sounds found in English, even though, at the present time, it is not an actual word. On the other hand, there are no
English words that begin with the sequences [bn], [pb], [rt], or [gd], and knowing that these are not sequences of English is also part of a native speaker’s knowledge of English. As a result, a sequence like \textit{bnark} would sound very strange to an English speaker’s ears; in fact, he would probably say that it could not be an English word.

What happens when the language you are learning has unfamiliar combinations of sounds? One strategy often used by native speakers is to omit one of the sounds, as we saw above for French with [h]. A different strategy is to \textbf{insert a sound} in order to bring the sequence more in line with the phonotactics of the native language. In other words, inserting a sound gives the sequence a more familiar structure.

Consider the effects of this strategy for an English learner of Polish, a language where words can begin with many different kinds of consonant sequences. For example, in Polish the sound [g] (e.g., English \textit{go}, \textit{dog}) can be immediately followed by [d] (e.g., English \textit{do}, \textit{bud}) at the beginning of a word. In fact, the name of one of Poland’s major cities, \textit{Gdansk}, begins with just this sequence of sounds. Try saying this word. Most native speakers of English unfamiliar with the sequence [gd] will insert a short vowel between the two consonants so that the word is pronounced like \textit{G’dansk}. If you are a native speaker of another language that does not permit [gd] at the beginning of a word, determine whether you use this same strategy or a different one when pronouncing this word.

Inserting a vowel is also a trait of Spanish-accented English. One difference between English and Spanish is that words beginning with the sound [s] followed by another consonant are common in English, while they do not occur in Spanish. As a result,

\textbf{Exercise: Your Strategies}

If you are learning another language, it is almost certain that you will have a foreign accent when you speak. But what makes your own speech sound non-native? How do you deal with unfamiliar aspects of the language that you are learning? Which of the strategies above are you using?

Introspecting about your own accent can be hard, especially if you are trying to do it while speaking. A better approach would be to record yourself saying individual words or small phrases. If you have access to recordings of a native speaker, you could even record yourself repeating what the speaker said. Then listen carefully to each word several times, comparing it to the native speaker’s version, if possible. Try to pinpoint parts of the word that differ. What is it that makes them sound different? Are different sounds being used? Are you omitting or inserting sounds in places where the native speaker is not? Having a native speaker of the language help you identify the foreign-sounding aspects of the words will make the task easier.

This is a difficult exercise because how you hear sequences of speech has been strongly influenced by the languages that you learned as a child. Learning to hear in new ways is possible with practice, however, if you work hard at it.
the consonant sequences at the beginning of the following English words simply are not found in Spanish: *speed, stoop, strike, ski*. For Spanish speakers learning to speak English, a vowel is generally inserted at the beginning of the word. In this way, a word like *school* is pronounced something like *eschool* with a vowel pronounced before the [s] + consonant sequence.

A similar strategy is used in Korean-accented English. Although English does not have as wide a variety of consonant sequences as Polish, a fair number of different consonant sequences still occur in the language, such as *snow, fifth, strike, fast food*, and so on. These kinds of sequences do not occur in Korean. Consequently, Koreans often make use of the same strategy as English and Spanish speakers: they insert a short vowel to give the sequence a more familiar structure. In this way, the word *strike* may be pronounced like *strik* and *fast food* as *fasf* food.

### Dealing with Unfamiliar Syllable-, Word-, and Sentence-Level Properties

Thus far we have focused on strategies that language learners use when dealing with unfamiliar sound inventories and phonotactics. Yet, languages can also differ in terms of other properties relating to syllables, words, and sentences. In this section we will consider three types of properties relating to these elements: word stress, tone, and intonation. Understanding that your native language may differ from the one that you are learning in terms of any of these properties can help you become aware of how you need to modify your speech if you want to sound more like a native speaker of the language you are learning.

#### WORD STRESS

In most languages, one part of a word may have greater emphasis or prominence than another part. We use the term *stress* to refer to this property, and the term *syllable* to refer to the various parts of a word that can have stress. For example, speakers of English would probably agree that the word *baby* has two syllables: *ba-by*. On the other hand, *elephant* has three: *e-le-phant*. Which syllable of the word *baby* has stress? Do you say *BAby* or *baBY*? Clearly, there is greater prominence on the first syllable. The stress in *elephant* also falls on the first syllable. In the word *computer*, however, stress falls on the middle syllable: *comPUter*. If you are a native speaker of English, you have learned that certain syllables in English are pronounced with more emphasis than others and, as a result, are louder, are longer, and/or have higher pitch. This is part of your knowledge of English. Since languages differ in terms of where stress occurs in words, one common quality of speech that cues us to an accent as foreign involves the misplacement of stress.

In French, for example, stress typically falls on the last syllable of a word. Thus, one characteristic of French-accented English is the misplacement of stress on the final syllable of a word. A French-speaking politician was commonly heard pronouncing the English word *economic* as *econoMIC*, with stress on the last syllable, instead of on the third syllable: *ecoNOmic*. In Czech, by contrast, stress systematically occurs on the first syllable of a word. Being aware of differences in stress placement between your native language and your new language, then, is important to keep in mind.
TONE

Another property of syllables that can be challenging to the language learner is tone. In many languages, such as the Chinese language Mandarin, the only difference between two words may be the tone, or the pitch, of the syllable. As a result, tones can distinguish the meaning of otherwise identical words. Four different tones are used to do this in Mandarin. The first is called a level high tone and occurs in the word [mā] ‘mother,’ for example. The second is called a rising tone, where the pitch starts out low and ends up high, as in the word for ‘hemp,’ [má]. The third tone is called a falling-rising tone. It starts out high, dips lower, and then ends high. This is the tone that occurs on the word for ‘horse,’ [mà]. Finally, there is the falling tone which starts out high and ends up low, as in ‘to scold,’ [mà]. Note that all four words have exactly the same consonant and vowel. Only the tone lets you know which word is which. For speakers of languages that do not have tone, learning a language like Mandarin Chinese means that you also need to learn a new property of sounds that carries meaning in the language. Not pronouncing the tones correctly is a typical property of English-accented Mandarin Chinese.

INTONATION

A foreign accent can also involve differences relating to the melody, or intonation, of a phrase or an entire sentence. In standard American English, for example, intonation can distinguish a statement from a question. Say the following two sentences and pay close attention to how the pitch levels at the end of the sentences differ:

Statement: Zach eats pizza for breakfast.

Question: Zach eats pizza for breakfast?

When the pitch falls, as at the end of the first sentence, the utterance is interpreted as a simple statement. When the pitch rises, as in the second sentence, it is a question. Being able to assign the correct interpretation to a sentence according to these different intonation patterns is part of English speakers’ knowledge of their language.

But not all languages use different pitch contours to distinguish sentence function. Speakers of Chinese languages, for example, tend to keep the intonation pattern pretty much the same for questions and statements. Instead, they include the marker [ma] in the sentence to indicate that a question interpretation is intended. Finnish is similar in using a marker to indicate the difference between a statement and a question.

It is also interesting to note that even within a single language, intonation patterns can differ depending on dialect. In contrast to the pattern illustrated above for standard American English, African American Vernacular English indicates a yes-no question
Intonation patterns can appear to differ quite subtly, particularly in a language that you are learning. Yet, producing an intonation pattern incorrectly, just like mispronouncing a word, can convey a meaning other than what you might have intended. In a study by Hewings (1995), for example, it was observed that Indonesian learners of British English frequently used a falling pitch in inappropriate contexts, which in turn led to their being perceived as contentious.

As a native speaker of English, you are biased to perceive and pronounce utterances with the intonational patterns that you have learned for English. (In fact, you are biased toward all aspects of your language!) This is the case whether you are listening to English or to some other language. Learning to undo these patterns is challenging for an adult learner. You can start, however, by trying to pay attention to the melody that accompanies the words in an utterance when you are listening to a speaker of another language. Does the pitch go up at the end of a sentence? Does it go down? Is it a familiar melody, or is it quite different from what you have learned to expect? Some language learning materials focus on intonational patterns and can thus serve as a valuable resource for determining what part of the utterance to pay attention to when learning to produce the melody. If you are learning a language in a formal language setting, you can also turn to your instructor for information about the melodies used in various contexts.

Summary

We hope to have accomplished three goals in this chapter:

• The first was to help you understand some of the reasons why people speak with a foreign accent.
• The second was to outline what parts of a language's sound system can be affected when speech sounds foreign.
• The third was to identify some of the strategies that non-native speakers use to deal with unfamiliar elements.

As we saw, the reason why people speak with a foreign accent is that they are making an unfamiliar structure more familiar. It is important to stress that familiarity in this context is determined by one's native language. For this reason, the accent of an English speaker learning Russian will be different from that of a Swahili speaker or a Korean speaker learning Russian. Virtually any
aspect of a language can be modified to make speech sound foreign, including individual sounds, sequences of sounds, stress, tone, and intonation. In making a language structure more familiar, learners will generally do one of three things:

- replace the unfamiliar element with something familiar,
- omit the unfamiliar element, or
- insert another sound.

Analyzing the sound system of your language as well as the one that you are learning will help you understand the ways in which the two languages differ, and by being aware of these differences, you will have more control over how you speak.

Reference