Basics of Language for Language Learners

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In the previous chapters we have seen a number of ways in which English differs from other languages in terms of how words and sentences are pronounced. Because of these differences, an English speaker is bound to make mistakes when learning to speak another language, and that, of course, is what makes the speaker’s accent sound foreign. The discussion in the preceding chapters should make it easier for you to pinpoint the areas where you are most likely to have trouble and give you some tools to help deal with them.

In this chapter we bring together some of the typical pronunciation errors made by English speakers when learning another language. Perhaps these are some of the same errors that you make. If so, the following discussion will remind you of the differences between English and other languages and will also offer some guidance about how to avoid common errors.

Interpreting Unfamiliar Symbols

As we saw in earlier chapters, each language has its own conventions for representing in writing how a sound is pronounced. These conventions are arbitrary rules decided upon at some stage in the language’s development. Because they are arbitrary, the same sound could potentially be represented by as many different letters combinations as there are languages! It is not quite as bad as that, but conventions do differ, as we have seen.

Nasalized vowels are a good example of a type of sound that is represented in different ways. Recall from Chapter 4 that in Polish, the two nasal vowels are represented with a cedilla under the vowel: ‘ę’ and ‘ą.’ In French and Portuguese, on the other hand,
nasalized vowels are written with the letter for the vowel followed by the letter for a nasal consonant, as shown in (1) for French.

(1) **French nasal vowels**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronunciation</th>
<th>Spelling</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[ɔ̃]</td>
<td>on</td>
<td>bon 'good'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ɑ̃]</td>
<td>an</td>
<td>bane 'bench'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[œ̃]</td>
<td>ain, aim, in</td>
<td>bain 'bath, fam 'hungry, fin 'end'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you know, when 'n' or 'm' follows a vowel in English, we typically pronounce the consonant, as in the words 'sun' and 'some.' Because of this, a native English speaker may be inclined to pronounce French and Portuguese words that have similar letter sequences the same way as in English, and thus incorrectly. That is, the speaker will tend to pronounce the vowel followed by a nasal consonant rather than just a nasalized vowel. Native speakers of French and Portuguese will be quick to identify this speech as foreign. You can avoid this pitfall. If you, the learner, are familiar with the spelling conventions for nasal vowels in these languages, you will know that the same sequence of letters in English and in French or Portuguese are pronounced differently.

Where can you find this kind of information? The front matter of a bilingual dictionary is a very good place to start. A good dictionary, whether it be in electronic or hard copy format, will contain a key to how the spelling symbols of the language are pronounced. Alternatively, you could check with your language instructor or consult an introductory language textbook, which should also contain important information about pronunciation.

### Aspiration

Another common error made by native speakers of English involves the property of aspiration. You will recall from Chapter 3 that an aspirated consonant is made with a small puff of air expelled (typically) after the consonant. We find this with the English stops [p, t, k] when they occur before a stressed vowel and are not preceded by [s]. If you place your hand a couple of inches in front of your mouth when you say the pairs of words listed in (2), you should feel a puff of air after the consonants at the beginning of the words on the left, but not after the corresponding unaspirated consonants in the words on the right. As a native speaker of English, you learned at a very early age that in some contexts stop consonants are pronounced with aspiration and in other contexts they are not.

(2) **English aspirated and unaspirated stops**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspirated Stops</th>
<th>Unaspirated Stops</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pot [pʰat]</td>
<td>spot [spat]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to [tʰu]</td>
<td>stew [stu]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The unaspirated stops that occur after [s] actually sound very much like [b, d, g]. To discover this for yourself, try saying *spot, stew,* and *ski* first as you would normally and then as follows: replace the [p] in *spot* with [b], the [t] in *stew* with [d], and the [k] in *ski* with [g]. Can you tell the difference between *spot* and *sbot?* If not, you are like most English speakers in not being able to distinguish a voiceless stop from a voiced stop when it comes after [s]. This is because voicing differences between stop consonants in this position are not used to distinguish the meaning of words in English. That is, there are no words in English like *ski* and *sgi* which differ only in whether or not the stop after [s] is produced with vocal cord vibration. If, on the other hand, there were pairs of words such as this in the language you learned as a child, part of your language acquisition would have involved learning to listen for the subtle acoustic details when these or comparable words were spoken that would have then enabled you to tell them apart.

Turning to errors that English speakers make, two of the most common mistakes involve aspiration. In the first case, English speakers produce aspirated stops where they do not occur in the language being learned, and in the second, English speakers fail to produce aspiration where it does occur in the new language. In the first case, English

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**Exercise 1: Aspirated and Unaspirated Consonants**

Try this simple exercise to get practice pronouncing unaspirated stops in unfamiliar contexts (that is, contexts that you are not used to when you speak English).

- Begin by pronouncing a word with an unaspirated stop, such as *Stan,* from column A. Notice that there is no puff of air after the ‘t’ as there is in the word *tan,* for example.
- Now try pronouncing the same word from column A again, but this time, suppress the ‘s’ at the beginning (for example, by saying the ‘s’ silently before saying the rest of the word out loud). If you are doing it correctly, you will be pronouncing the stop consonant as unaspirated. In fact, pronouncing the word *tan* with an unaspirated stop will, to an English speaker’s ears, make the word sound very much like ‘dan,’ which begins with an unaspirated (voiced) stop.
- Try this a few times for each of the words in column A or at least until you can comfortably produce an unaspirated voiceless stop at the beginning of an “English” word.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Column A</th>
<th>Column B</th>
<th>Column C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stan</td>
<td>Stan</td>
<td>dan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>span</td>
<td>span</td>
<td>ban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>scan</td>
<td>scan</td>
<td>gan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
speakers transfer the aspiration rules of English to the pronunciation of words in languages that do not have aspirated stops, such as French, Italian, Spanish, and Greek. As a result, English speakers pronounce voiceless stops before a stressed syllable with aspiration. The problem is that aspiration is simply not a feature of these languages. In Italian, as with the other languages mentioned, voiceless stops like [p, t, k] are unaspirated regardless of where they occur.

Pronouncing stops with aspiration is a common characteristic of English-accented speech and one that can be avoided with practice. But first it is important to be able to hear and feel the difference between an aspirated and an unaspirated stop. Recall that you should feel a small puff of air come out of your mouth when pronouncing an aspirated consonant, as in ‘to,’ but not with an unaspirated consonant, as in ‘stew.’ The unaspirated ‘t’ in this latter context is similar to how ‘t’ is pronounced in Spanish, French, and Italian (and many other languages with unaspirated stops). The tricky part for an English speaker is to be able to produce the unaspirated stop in contexts where, in English, one would normally find an aspirated stop, for example, at the beginning of a word such as ‘to.’ In other words, you will need to learn to undo the rule of aspiration that you acquired as a child. (See boxed Exercise 1 on page 75.)

In English, there is no difference in spelling between the aspirated and unaspirated consonants, probably because they are not distinctive and so do not serve to distinguish the meaning of words as place of articulation does, e.g. [t] ‘tea’ vs. [k] ‘key.’

As we saw in Chapter 3, aspiration can be distinctive in languages. In Hindi, for example, pronouncing an aspirated consonant without aspiration, or an unaspirated consonant with aspiration, can change the meaning of a word. Because aspiration is not distinctive in English, it is easy for an English speaker to mispronounce Hindi words. The speaker may incorrectly pronounce a voiceless unaspirated stop at the beginning of a word with aspiration or pronounce a voiced aspirated stop without aspiration. Each pronunciation will give the speaker English-accented Hindi and perhaps even change the meaning of the Hindi word.

Before leaving Hindi, it is interesting to note that aspiration does not appear only on voiceless consonants, as it does in English. As the examples in (3) show, voiced consonants also contrast for aspiration.

(3) Hindi aspirated and unaspirated voiced stops

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hindi</th>
<th>Pronunciation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[bʰal]</td>
<td>ˈforehead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[qʰan]</td>
<td>ˈpaddy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[qʰal]</td>
<td>ˈshield</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ɡʰal]</td>
<td>ˈconfusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[b al]</td>
<td>ˈhair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[q an]</td>
<td>ˈcharity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[q al]</td>
<td>ˈbranch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ɡ al]</td>
<td>ˈcheek</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This fact makes Hindi particularly fascinating since it results in a four-way distinction for consonants in terms of voicing and aspiration:

(4) Hindi voiced aspirated unaspirated voiced

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hindi</th>
<th>Pronunciation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[kʰal]</td>
<td>ˈskin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ɡʰal]</td>
<td>ˈconfusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[k al]</td>
<td>ˈera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ɡ al]</td>
<td>ˈcheek</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Being aware of the differences between English and languages with distinctive aspiration like Hindi is a good start in learning how to pronounce the words correctly. With this knowledge you can focus on hearing and producing aspirated and unaspirated consonants in unfamiliar contexts.

**Alveolar vs. Dental Consonants**

Not only are sounds similar to English ‘t’ and ‘d’ common in the world’s languages, but they are also the most frequent consonants in English. This means that we have had lots and lots of practice pronouncing and listening to them.

The challenge for learners of other languages is that these sounds are not always pronounced exactly like the sounds of English, even though they may be spelled with the same letters *t* and *d*. We have already seen that they can be aspirated, unaspirated, or both in a given language. They can also be made at a different place of articulation than the sounds of English.

Recall from Chapter 3 that the consonants [t] and [d] in English are alveolar stops:

![Figure 6.1 Alveolar place of articulation of English [t, d].](image1)

![Figure 6.2 Dental place of articulation of [t, d].](image2)
they are made by raising the front part of the tongue against the alveolar ridge as approximated in Figure 6.1.

In some languages, such as Italian, Spanish, and French, the sounds spelled by the letters ‘t’ and ‘d’ are classified as dental, as opposed to alveolar. This means that the front of the tongue (including the tip) is positioned behind the upper teeth, as illustrated in Figure 6.2.

While positioning the tongue against the teeth as opposed to the alveolar ridge may seem like a small difference, it is enough to alter the acoustics of the sound. This means that if an English speaker pronounced the first sound in the Italian word *tavola* ‘table’

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**Exercise 2: Dentals and Alveolars**

This exercise is most effective if you do it in front of a mirror.

*Practicing an alveolar:*

- Begin by slowly repeating the English syllables [da, da, da]. While you are saying these sequences, look at your mouth closely in the mirror, and focus on the position of your tongue while making the alveolar consonant.
- Continue to repeat the syllables [da, da, da, . . .], slowly focusing now on feeling where your tongue is touching the top of your mouth. The front part of your tongue behind the tip will be positioned slightly behind your teeth, touching the alveolar ridge.

*Practicing a dental:*

- Now move the front and tip of your tongue forward so that it rests behind your top teeth. When you look in the mirror, you will likely be able to see your tongue protruding slightly below your top teeth. It shouldn’t protrude as much as when you make a ‘th’ sound, as in *the*.
- With your tongue in the dental position, slowly repeat the sequences [dɑ, dɑ, dɑ] (to make the IPA symbol for a dental sound, add [ ] below the symbol used for the alveolar). Feel and see the position of your tongue when you make the dental consonant. When you feel confident that you can make a dental sound, try the following exercise.

*Practicing both together:*

- Compare the pronunciation of the two types of sounds by slowly repeating the following sequences:

  [da, dɑ, da, dɑ, da, dɑ, . . .]

  Feel the difference between the pairs of sounds. Look in the mirror and pay attention to where your tongue is. Listen closely and see if you can hear the difference between the alveolar and dental consonants.
with an alveolar stop instead of a dental stop, an Italian speaker would be able to identify the accent as foreign. Similarly, if an Italian speaker said the English word *table* with an initial dental stop, we would likely consider the pronunciation non-native.

Making a dental sound is not difficult; it just takes practice in remembering to shift the position of your tongue slightly forward when you are speaking a language that has them. Try Exercise 2 in the box on page 78 to familiarize yourself with the difference between dental and alveolar consonants.

Exercise 2 focuses on dental and alveolar voiced stops ([d, d]), though it is important to note that the distinction between dentals and alveolars is not limited to voiced stops. The voiceless counterpart of ‘d’ can also be dental ([t]) or alveolar ([t]), as can nasal consonants ([ŋ], [n]). Similarly, there are both dental ([s], [z]) and alveolar ([s], [z]) fricatives.

As a rule of thumb, in a given language, all sounds in these categories will typically be either dental or alveolar. In English, for example, the voiced and voiceless stops [t, d], the fricatives [s, z], and the nasal stop [n] are all alveolar. In French, on the other hand, the stops ([t, d]), the fricatives ([s], [z]), and the nasal ([ŋ]) are all dental. This does not apply to nasal consonants, which are typically alveolar in English but dental in French and Italian.

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**Exercise 3: Voiceless Alveolar and Dental Stops [t, t]**

Repeat Exercise 2, but replace the voiced stop with the voiceless alveolar stop [t] and the voiceless dental stop [t].

*Note:* It is typical for dental stops to be **unaspirated**, as is the case in French, Italian, and Spanish.

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**Exercise 4: Dental and Alveolar Nasals and Fricatives**

*Nasals:*

Repeat Exercise 2, but replace the voiced stop with the alveolar nasal [n] and the dental nasal [ŋ].

*Fricatives:*

Similarly, repeat Exercise 2, but replace the voiced stop first with the voiced alveolar fricative [z] and the dental fricative [z], and second with the voiceless alveolar fricative [s] and the voiceless dental fricative [s]. When you make the fricatives, your tongue will be close to but not touching the alveolar ridge and top teeth.
mean that a language cannot have both dental and alveolar consonants, though it is uncommon. Malayalam, seen in Chapter 3, is a language with both: [paŋŋi] 'pig' and [kənni] 'virgin.'

To further hone your skills at producing alveolar and dental consonants, do boxed Exercises 3 and 4 (on page 79) involving voiceless stops, nasals, and fricatives.

### Flapping

Say the English words *atomic* and *atom*, paying attention to how you pronounce the *t* in each word. If you are a native speaker of North American English, you probably pronounce the *t* in *atomic* as a voiceless aspirated alveolar stop. In *atom*, on the other hand, the letter *t* is most likely voiced and unaspirated, sounding similar to a quick *d* sound. This latter sound is called a **flap**, characterized by the phonetic symbol [ɾ], and is the typical pronunciation of English *t* and *d* when, simplifying somewhat, they occur between vowel sounds, if the first vowel is stressed. Compare *atomic* and *atom* once again, paying attention this time not only to how the *t* is pronounced but also to which syllable is stressed in each word. In aTomic, the second syllable is prominent, while in Atom, the first syllable has the most stress. The *t* in *atom* therefore occurs between vowels the first of which is stressed, the context where flapping occurs. Other examples of words with a *t* or *d* pronounced as a flap include *writing*, *rudder*, *fatter*, and *out of here*.

Here are some facts about the flap in North American English. First, it is an alternate pronunciation of *t* and *d*. This means that pronouncing the *t* in the word *writer* as the flap [ɾ] as opposed to [t] does not change the meaning of the word; that is, [t] and flap are not distinctive in English; nor are [d] and flap. Second, the flap occurs in only one context in English: between vowel sounds if the first is stressed. Thus, **where** the flap is pronounced is completely predictable. The predictable, non-distinctive nature of English flap tends to make speakers less conscious of its presence; in fact, if we had not specifically drawn your attention to the fact that the *t* in *writer* is pronounced differently than, say, the *t* in *top*, *stop*, or *pot*, you may not have been aware of any differences. But now that you are aware, you are in a better position to correct any mispronunciations you may have involving this sound when speaking another language!

In other languages, the flap may not be a predictable pronunciation of another sound. Rather, it may be a distinctive sound in and of itself. This is the case with the flap in Spanish, written as a single letter *r*, e.g. *pero* 'but,' *para* 'for,' *tocar* 'to play.' We know that the flap is distinctive in Spanish because replacing it with a similar sound can affect word meaning. Compare the two words *pero* [pero] 'but' and *perro* [pero] 'dog' (rr is pronounced as a trill). The fact that the flap in Spanish is written with *r* instead of *t* or *d* as in English may lead a learner of Spanish to conclude that the letters represent different sounds. This is incorrect. Regardless of spelling, American English speakers already know how to produce the flap sound. This should then make it relatively easy to pronounce words such as Spanish *pero* where the flap occurs in the same context as in English.
Pronouncing a flap at the end of a word as in tocar \([\text{tokar}]\) ‘to play’ may be more challenging since it is not a context where flaps are produced in English. A simple exercise to practice doing this is given in (5), using the Spanish words cara ‘face’ and tocar ‘to play’:

(5) a. cara, cara, cara
   b. cara cara\(\), cara cara\(\), cara cara\(\)
   c. cara cara tocar, cara cara tocar, cara cara tocar
   d. tocar, tocar, tocar

Begin by repeating the word cara several times (5a), taking notice of how you are making the flap; cara \([\text{kara}]\) will sound similar to English gotta \([\text{gara}]\), though beginning with an unaspirated \([k]\) instead of a \([g]\). Now try the sequences in (5b). In this case, the final vowel in the second word of each pair is suppressed. While you should not hear a full vowel after the flap in cara\(\), releasing the front of your tongue from the roof of your mouth when making the flap may create a very small vowel sound. Now try row (5c) in which tocar, with a word-final flap, has been added. Notice that the final syllable in tocar will essentially be pronounced the same way as cara. Finally, repeat tocar several times alone, paying attention to your pronunciation of the flap at the end of the word.

Spanish provides a good example of a language that has a flap like English, though it uses the flap distinctively and in different contexts. Not surprisingly, many other languages do not use the flap sound at all. In these languages, native speakers of American English commonly mispronounce \(t\) and \(d\) as a flap if it occurs in the English flapping context. As subtle as it may seem to American English ears, pronouncing a word like data as \([\text{dara}]\) instead of \([\text{data}]\) will sound very foreign to a native speaker of a flapless language. Obviously, the way to avoid this type of error is to suppress the flap pronunciation. This is much more challenging than it sounds because pronouncing a flap for a \(t\) or \(d\) is automatic for an American English speaker. However, awareness of the English flapping rule and the tendency to pronounce \(t\) and \(d\) as \([r]\) is half the battle. Practicing how to say \([t]\) between vowels in words like \([\text{d}\text{t}\text{a}]\) is the other half!

**Released and Unreleased Stop Consonants**

Another characteristic of English pronunciation involves the pronunciation of the stops \(p, b, t, d, k, g\), particularly at the end of a word. To illustrate, say each of the sentences in (6) out loud several times at a normal speaking rate. Listen to how you say the consonant at the end of each of the underlined words.

(6) The cat stood on the \(\text{sack}\).
    I called a \(\text{cab}\).
    The rug she bought was \(\text{neat}\).
Was there a small burst of aspiration at the end of any of the final consonants (called a consonant *release*)? Or did you hold the closed part of the consonant a bit longer so that the air was not released after the consonant? Experiment a bit, pronouncing each of the consonants at the end of the underlined words. Practice producing the consonants with a release and then without a release.

This short exercise is intended to illustrate that whether or not a stop consonant is released at the end of a word in English is optional. Both are acceptable pronunciations of the same word.

This is not the case in all languages. As potentially subtle as this property may seem, the presence or absence of a consonantal release can contribute to creating a foreign accent.

In some languages, such as Korean, stop consonants are never released at the end of a word. In other languages, stops are always released in this position. German is an example of this latter type. Note that adding a release to a Korean consonant or pronouncing a stop in German without a release will not change the meaning of the word. It will, however, characterize the pronunciation as non-native.

Avoiding a foreign accent in this case does not require learning how to make a new sound or gesture since English speakers already know how to pronounce a consonant with a release as well as without. Rather, it begins by being aware that whether or not a consonant is released in English is optional, and that there may be differences between English and the language being learned.

**Full and Reduced Vowels**

Let’s look at another property of the English language that can give away your identity as a non-native speaker in no time at all! This involves pronouncing full vowels as reduced vowels. It is probably easiest to explain the difference between full and reduced vowels with an illustration.

In the section on flapping above, it was pointed out that the words *atom* and *atomic* differ in terms of which syllable is stressed, that is, which syllable is the most prominent. In *atom*, the first syllable is stressed, while in *atomic* it is the second. Recall that the pronunciation of ‘t’ as a flap [ɹ] or an aspirated stop [tʰ] depends in part on the stress of adjacent syllables, as indicated in the phonetic transcriptions of the two words: [ætɹɔm], [ɑtʰʌmɪk]. Notice that there is also a change in the quality of the vowels across the two words. Compare, as shown in the diagram below, the first vowel of each word. In *atom*, the ‘a’ is pronounced as [æ], while in *atomic* it is a schwa, [ə]. Schwa also occurs as the second vowel of *atom*, even though the second vowel in *atomic* is [ɑ]. Can you predict when schwa occurs?

```
[ætɹɔm]       [ɑtʰʌmɪk]
```

If you said that schwa occurs when the syllable is not stressed, you are absolutely right. As a native speaker of English, you will typically pronounce any vowel in a non-prominent syllable as [ə] or [ɪ], sometimes called reduced vowels. This means that all the vowels in the following words that do not have an accent mark indicating stress are pronounced as a reduced vowel: message [mɛsɪdʒ], campus [kæmpəs] (or [kæmpɪs]), computer [kəmpjʊtər], porcupine [pɔrˈkjuːpɪn]. Vowels that occur in a stressed syllable in English are referred to as full vowels. This observation about English may seem confusing since the spelling of a word does not generally distinguish between full and reduced vowels. However, by paying careful attention to how a word is pronounced, you should be able to identify the syllable(s) in a word with the most prominence, those with the least prominence, and hence those with full and reduced vowels.

The challenge for speakers of English is that not all languages distinguish between full and reduced vowels. In Czech, Greek, Spanish, and many other languages, vowels are always pronounced in their full form regardless of whether the syllable they appear in is stressed or unstressed. So the Greek word for ‘bicycle’ is [poθɪlατο] with no reduced vowels at all. An English speaker not aware of the fact that he learned to pronounce vowels differently in stressed and unstressed positions (regardless of the spelling) will then probably turn the vowels in Greek [poθɪlατο] into the incorrect form *[pɔθɪlατo], and be immediately recognized as a non-native speaker!

To avoid this, determine whether unstressed vowels are reduced in the language you are learning. Listen to and ask your instructor; listen to and ask native speakers. Are some syllables more prominent than others? Is an ‘o’ in the spelling pronounced the same in all positions in a word and in all types of syllables, stressed or unstressed? What about ‘u’ or ‘a’ or ‘i,’ or whatever the vowels in the language are? If so, you will need to pay special attention to how you pronounce vowels, especially in syllables without stress. In short, you will need to unlearn the pattern that you so successfully learned and have practiced for so many years.

**Monophthongs vs. Diphthongs**

As we saw in Chapter 4, the English vowel system is quite complex because it contains monophthongs like [i] beat, [ɪ] bit, [ɛ] bet, [æ] bat, and [ʌ] but, as well the diphthongs in (7).

(7) **English diphthongs**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[au]</td>
<td>cow, trounce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ou]</td>
<td>go, sew, toad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ai]</td>
<td>buy, bide</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1. The two different accents (‘acute,’ grave) on the word *porcupine* represent the two types of stressed syllables in English: primary stress and secondary stress. As the terms suggest, primary stress is stronger. Secondary stress is not as prominent as primary stress, but it is more prominent than a syllable with no stress at all.
Exercise 5: Diphthongs to Monophthongs

• Say the vowel in *say* slowly. Concentrate on not moving your tongue or jaw upwards toward the end. This will have the effect of making the vowel seem much shorter and end more abruptly. Note that the tongue and jaw movement may be very subtle.

• Repeat with the vowel in *so*.

• Once you feel that you are able to pronounce the vowels as monophthongs, try saying a short word in the language that you are learning that contains these vowels. If you are learning French, for example, you might choose the words *fée* ['fe] ‘fairy’ and *faux* ['fo] ‘false.’ You could compare your pronunciation of the French words with the monophthongs to the English words *Faye* and *foe*; the English words end in a diphthong while the French ones do not.

• Repeat with other monophthongal vowels from your new language.

Unrounded Back Vowels

The final common pronunciation error discussed in this chapter involves back unrounded vowels, particularly the high vowel [i], in languages such as Japanese, Korean, and Turkish. Remember from Chapter 4 that this vowel is made a bit like the [u] in *suit* but without rounded lips. Try saying *suit* as you would normally. Now, say it with your lips somewhat spread as if you were smiling. Your pronunciation should be similar to [sit].

[oi] soy, boy
[ei] ray, say

A great many languages have only monophthongs and no diphthongs. In Chapter 4, we identified the following list of languages, though many more could be added: Arabic, Bulgarian, Ewe, French, German, Greek, Hawaiian, Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Navaho, Spanish, Swahili, and Zulu. It should be clear what the challenge is for a speaker of English when pronouncing vowels in these languages: to try to avoid saying a monophthong as a diphthong.

Substituting a diphthong for a monophthong is a common mistake made by English speakers when learning a language without diphthongs. This is especially easy when the monophthong of the foreign language is similar to a diphthong of English. The English diphthongs [ei] and [ou], for example, are very similar to the vowels [e] and [o] which occur in most of the languages noted just above. If you are a native speaker of English and you want to sound more like a native speaker of a foreign language that has [e] and [o], you will need to practice saying the vowels [e] and [o] without adding an [i] or [u] pronunciation to the end. Boxed Exercise 5 is designed to help you accomplish this.
It is really not that hard for a native English speaker to make this sound. In fact, some people already use the vowel in English words such as *roses* [roziz] (others may say [roziz] or [rozəz]).

Yet, it is not uncommon for English speakers to pronounce a back unrounded vowel as rounded, that is, to pronounce [i] as [u]. One of the reasons for this is that in some languages, the vowel [i] is spelled or transcribed with the letter ‘u’. This can be confusing unless you are aware that the spelling does not match up with how you would pronounce ‘u’ in English.

Another reason for the mispronunciation can be that an English speaker may actually perceive the foreign vowel [i] as [u] since both sounds share some similar acoustic properties. From this perspective, when a person says the misperceived [i] as [u], she is simply repeating what she heard.

While there are certainly other reasons why an English speaker may mispronounce a back unrounded vowel, we note one more to conclude this chapter: the person has simply not had sufficient practice making a back vowel without rounding the lips since all non-low back vowels in English are rounded.

Knowing that vowels and indeed all sounds are composed of independent gestures that can be combined in different ways, you should be in a better position to understand how to control your lips independently of where the back of your tongue is positioned. In short, in order to sound more like a native speaker of the language that you are studying, you can learn to undo some of what you have spent so many years practicing.

### Summary

In this chapter we have focused on a few of the more common errors of pronunciation that North American English speakers make when learning a new language. Naturally, the types of errors you might make will depend on how the languages that you speak well and the language that you are learning differ. We believe that the information covered in this chapter and the preceding chapters will provide you with tools to analyze these differences and be more aware of how you pronounce the sounds and words of the language you are learning.