

Ukrainian English Accent: Roots, Reasons and Basic Features

The paper explores the origin of a foreign accent in non-native speech. Deviations from the pronunciation norm in the articulation of English vowels and consonants by Ukrainian learners of English form a dynamic system of specific features correlating with the degree of foreign language competence. Phonetic interference of native language production and perception habits into the foreign language performance has its psychological and linguistic reasons. Divergence of phonological and phonetic features of native and foreign languages, automated articulations transferred into the foreign speech shape the specific character of the foreign accent. The contrastive analysis of the articulatory bases of English and Ukrainian as well as the analysis of actual phonetic deviations enabled to single out salient features of Ukrainian English accent.

Keywords: non-native accent, phonetic interference, deviations from standard pronunciation, articulatory basis, foreign language acquisition

Ukrainischer Englischakzent: Wurzeln, Gründe und Grundfunktionen

Im Beitrag wird die Herkunft eines fremden nicht-muttersprachlichen Akzents untersucht. Abweichungen von der Aussprachenorm bei der Artikulation von englischen Vokalen und Konsonanten durch ukrainische Englischler bilden ein dynamisches System von spezifischen Merkmalen, die mit dem Grad der Fremdsprachenkompetenz zusammenhängen. Die phonetische Interferenz der muttersprachlichen Produktions- und Wahrnehmungsgewohnheiten auf die fremdsprachlichen Leistungen hat psychologische und sprachliche Gründe. Die Divergenz der phonetischen und phonologischen Merkmale der Muttersprache und der Fremdsprache sowie die automatisierten Artikulationen, die in die Fremdsprache übertragen werden, prägen den spezifischen Charakter des fremden Akzents. Die kontrastive Analyse der Artikulationsgrundlagen des Englischen und Ukrainischen sowie die Analyse der tatsächlichen phonetischen Abweichungen ermöglichten es, herausragende Merkmale des ukrainischen Englischakzents herauszustellen.

Schlüsselwörter: nicht-muttersprachlicher Akzent, phonetische Interferenz, Abweichungen von der Standardaussprache, Artikulationsbasis, Fremdspracherwerb

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Introduction

The presence of a foreign accent in speech meets various kinds of reaction on the part of interlocutors. It might vary from a sharply negative reaction, when a foreign accent impedes communication, to rather a permissive attitude of the members of the same speech community.

Some scholars view it as a hindrance to speech intelligibility while others believe that accent alone cannot be a communication barrier. Most foreign language (FL) learners attach more importance to mastering language structure and learning words rather than acquiring accurate pronunciation. They consider accent-free speech to be an unattainable goal and give up the attempts to improve their pronunciation skills. The proponents of the critical period theory claim that accent-free speech cannot be acquired if the learner has reached the puberty period when the brain loses its plasticity. With all the variety of viewpoints on the non-native accent and its communicative relevance we cannot deny the fact that a foreign accent is a phenomenon that practically all second language (L2) learners experience, thus its reasons and peculiarities require thorough investigation with the aim of its potential reduction.

Theoretical Background

Non-native accent has been in the focus of research since the middle of the previous century. The role of prosodic deviations in the realization of foreign accent was widely researched by Valihura (2008), Zaharova (2005), Devitska (2018). Many researchers pay attention to sociocultural and communicative aspects of foreign accent (Munro/Derwing 1999, Schmid/Yeni-Komshian 1999). The non-native accent is treated as a sign of interlanguage, that is a kind of language code that FL learners have. The interlanguage (the term introduced by Selinker 1972) can be viewed as a dynamic phenomenon characterized by the transitional language competence. Being a manifestation of interlanguage the non-native accent reflects systemic variations from the target language pronunciation norm. Such systems of variations have their own peculiarities depending on the first language of FL learners. This paper is aimed at determining the factors causing a non-native accent and describing the basic features of Ukrainian English accent.

An accent is interpreted as a unified entity of pronunciation patterns used for communicative interaction by the members of the same speech community who share a relevant social or geographical attribute and maintain a uniform set of phonological characteristics, despite a certain amount of limited phonetic and lexical-incident variation between them (Parashchuk 2000). The accent of an individual speaker serves a marker of personal identity, personal and demographic characteristics, social and cultural background. Traditionally accents are subdivided into two major groups: regional accents and social accents (Kalyta/Taranenko 2010: 6). The regional ones relate to local communities within a country while social accents are distinguished on the basis of the speaker's cultural and educational background. A foreign accent characterizes non-native speech. While national and regional accents are described in terms of constant and variable features within the pronunciation norm, a non-native accent comprises violations of the standard pronunciation. A foreign accent is opposed to the pronunciation norm and is the result of its violation. Deviations from the standard pronunciation that form a non-native accent

include a system of violations which are organized according to some rules and shared by all the speakers of the same native language. Moreover, foreign accent includes separate sporadic violations peculiar to idiolect.

Roots of Foreign Accent

The roots of the non-native accent lie within a bilingual situation when the learner's native language exerts a constant influence on the foreign language performance. Linguistic interference is an objective process which occurs during language contact irrespective of the learners' wishes. It works in one direction – from the mother tongue to the foreign language. Linguistic interference is a dynamic phenomenon which tends to get reduced in the process of foreign language acquisition.

The term “interference” has a number of interpretations in science. In the realm of linguistics a wide range of definitions of interference can be grouped into four types. Interference can be considered as 1) the undesirable penetration of the mother tongue into the foreign language performance (Kuleshov/Mishin 1987: 4, Kharchenko 2004: 5), 2) the interaction of structures and elements of the structures of two language systems as a result of language contacts (Haugen 1972: 70, Zhluktenko 1974: 58, Kharchenko 2004: 5–6), 3) a phenomenon that occurs in the system and structure of two languages and has a systemic character (Weinreich 1979: 22), 4) cases of deviations of bilingual speakers' performance from the monolingual speech (Haugen 1972: 62, Weinreich 1979: 22).

Pronunciation interference as a specific type of interference has a number of significant differences from other types of interference, namely grammar and lexical interference. Pronunciation interference can be regarded as a violation of a second language system and its norm as a result of the interaction of phonetic systems and pronunciation norms of two or more languages in the speaker's mind which is manifested as the interference of listening and pronunciation skills (Liubimova 1985: 18). The influence of the first language sound system on the perceptive level causes violations in the perception of non-native speech (Liubimova 1985: 43), which entail differences in foreign pronunciation. Consequently non-native accent is manifested in two language skills – speaking (production) and listening (perception). Such a strong connection between perception and production can be explained by the fact that in the process of perceiving information special hearing and moving impulses are formed in the brain. Consequently, lack or insufficient degree of hearing differentiation leads to a receptive accent that consequently transforms into a productive accent. The two manifestations of a non-native accent are the result of double interference.

Interference can encompass all aspects of language structure but the degree of its manifestation may be different. The studies reveal that intensity of transition directly depends on the similarity of new and familiar objects, which is also observed in pronunciation (Major 1987: 197). It turns out that FL learners are better at acquiring the pronuncia-

tion of a FL sound that is absent in their L1 than the articulation of a sound that is an allophone in L1 (Lenhardtova 1993: 300). However, the more similar the phonological systems of L1 and L2 are, the less difficult it is to master L2 (Isaev 1992: 27). In this respect the potential volume of interference is directly proportional to the number of differences between the two languages. Thus we can see that the similarity of language structures is a positive and facilitating factor while acquiring a FL as a system though it is a negative factor when a learner tries to achieve a certain level of FL proficiency. Pronunciation interference can be caused by the fact that certain L2 sounds or phonetic categories are absent in the learner's mother tongue (Cheremska 2006: 25).

Linguistic interference is primarily caused by the absence of a second language or foreign language competence. Furthermore, the learner's inability to reproduce the SL utterance correctly can be explained by both perceptive and production interference especially at early stages of SL or FL acquisition (Haugen 1972: 73). The speakers of the same language community have their own perceptive basis, which is a system of phonetic templates and rules of comparison, a language system of phonetic unit perception, which is closely connected with the sound structure of the language and is determined by it. The long-lasting habit of singling out and perceiving L1 sounds as linguistically significant becomes so automated that a FL learner subconsciously transfers it onto the foreign speech.

So we see that interference has its roots in the specific psychological mechanisms of FL learners. The difference in the duration of using the two languages determines the transference of L1 perception and production habits onto L2 language system.

Reasons for Foreign Accent

The volume and type of interference depends on the peculiarities of L1 and L2. Thus interference is determined by the rules of language use and by the rules of realization of oppositions peculiar to the language system. So pronunciation interference is pre-determined by peculiarities of L1 and L2 functioning.

So we can claim that the reasons for pronunciation interference embrace: 1) lack of language competence or its insufficient level, 2) articulation automatics that can be explained by a certain phonological screen or matrix through which L2 speech is perceived. L1 perception habits are automatically employed, and L1 articulations which have been previously trained by the years of the mother tongue language experience are subconsciously transferred onto foreign realizations.

Traditionally deviations from the target language pronunciation norm comprise phonological and phonetic ones. The phonological deviations concern the differences in the pronunciation of phonemes while the phonetic deviations are the result of inadequate allophone articulation (Liubimova 1985: 45). Phonetic interference can be interpreted as a result of identification of units belonging to different language levels

(Zhuktenko 1974: 89–96): 1) distinctive features of phonemes, 2) phonemes of different languages, 3) phonemes with different distribution, 4) word level units that cause the phonetic leveling of words, 5) prosodic features.

Since pronunciation interference is a complex phenomenon we find it reasonable to single out its types that lead to a foreign accent. These types include: 1) interference caused by the violation of specific features of L2 articulatory basis, 2) interference as a result of paradigmatic factors, and 3) interference as a result of syntagmatic factors. Paradigmatic factors are based on the choice of a phoneme in the unity of its differentiation and integral features in the language phoneme inventory. Syntagmatic factors determine the usage of an allophone of a phoneme in a succession of phonemes (Weinreich 1953), so syntagmatics encompasses coarticulatory phenomena and distributional characteristics of speech sounds.

Basic Features of Ukrainian English Accent

The overall research of a foreign accent and Ukrainian English accent in particular must embrace the following aspects:

1. Separate phonemes and their sequences: phoneme inventory, their distinctive and integral features, main oppositions, strong and weak positions of phonemes, types of neutralization of phonological oppositions;
2. Separate sounds and their modifications in the flow of speech: typical articulatory settings in L1 and L2, principal and subsidiary allophones, articulatory similarities and differences of two phonologically similar units in both languages, peculiarities of vowels and consonants articulation in different phonetic environments;
3. Syllable structure in L1 and L2: correlation of the syllable and main language units, types of syllables according to the placement of vowels and consonants, the commonest type of syllable in each language, the degree of articulatory unity of sounds within a syllable, rules of syllable formation and syllable division;
4. Accentual and rhythmic organization of L1 and L2: nature, peculiarities, types and degrees of word stress, word accentual patterns, the degree of reduction of unstressed syllables;
5. Prosodic peculiarities of utterances in L1 and L2: the structure of intonation groups, rules of dividing utterances into chunks, specific intonational and rhythmic patterns in both languages.

Articulatory basis encompasses the most general articulatory tendencies and reflects the specific character of the phonetic system of a language.

Whereas two languages differ in their articulatory settings, it is not possible completely to master the pronunciation of one while maintaining the articulatory setting of the other. The articulatory setting of a language is determined by the most frequently oc-

curing sounds and sound combinations of that language as well as by the specifics of the syllable structure, word accentual patterns and prosodic features. When Ukrainian learner imposes the new phonemes of English on the articulatory (voice quality) setting of Ukrainian, foreign accent appears.

Even kindred languages differ in a range of specific peculiarities of their articulatory bases formed during hundreds of years. Though the articulatory basis is not genetically (anatomically and physiologically) determined (Zinder 1979: 79), specific L1 articulations become so deeply ingrained in the minds of the speakers through years of constant usage that they exert a powerful influence on L2 acquisition. We believe that articulatory basis of a FL should be acquired as a system of features whereas training of certain features only is bound to give rise to a foreign accent. Articulatory basis with its static and dynamic features should be treated as a model of phonetic phenomena in a given language. It governs all speech articulations. The specific character of the articulatory basis is determined by the following factors:

- a) the inventory of sounds making the phonological system of a language, the frequency of occurrence of sounds in speech (Kuleshov/Mishin 1987: 2);
- b) the concentration of sounds in certain places of articulation;
- c) the possibility of the speech organs to switch from one type of articulation to another (Kuleshov/Mishin 1987: 21);
- d) the phonological system of a language, in particular its differentiation features which in their turn define the usage of definite articulatory organs for producing utterances (Zinder 1979: 81).

The contrastive analysis of the articulatory bases of English and Ukrainian enabled to build a model of the predicted features of Ukrainian English accent that make it different from the pronunciation norm. The comparison of English and Ukrainian vocalic systems reveals the difference in the articulatory bases when the English articulatory setting focusing on the schwa sound is not adequately reproduced by Ukrainian speakers of English resulting in the deviations in the pronunciation of English vowels.

One of the elements of phonetic basis of the language is made up by speech mechanisms which are responsible for the syllable stereotype of the language. In the English language the syllable is mostly closed with a short checked vowel and a consonant at the end of the syllable. Acoustically the checked character of vowels is revealed through a certain interval between a vowel and a final consonant. Thus glottalisation is an integral element of the English articulatory basis which regulates the pronunciation of occlusive consonants as well as the checked character of vowels. However, in the Ukrainian language the syllables are mostly open with vowels occurring at the end of the syllable. These differences in the syllable stereotype of English and Ukrainian predetermine such manifestations of a foreign accent as failure to reproduce glottalized character of consonants and the prolonged articulation of English checked vowels.

The model of predicted foreign accent on the segmental level is constructed on the basis of the contrastive analysis of phonological systems of English and Ukrainian placing special emphasis on distinctive (differential) and non-distinctive features of phonemes (Kochubei 2006: 82–114).

Error analysis is based on the detection of actual phonetic deviations in the English speech of Ukrainians which can be done with the help of auditory method of research. It enables to determine the peculiarities of phonetic realizations of the English speech of Ukrainians compared with the speech of native speakers. Let us disclose the main features of the Ukrainian accent of English on the segmental level revealed in the study (Kochubei 2006) which involved the analysis of deviations from the standard English pronunciation of EFL teachers whose native language is Ukrainian. The analysis of deviations in the pronunciation of vowels revealed the following tendencies:

1. More front articulation of English front vowels /ɪ/, /i:/, /e/ due to the interference of Ukrainian pronunciation habits.
2. Insufficient opening of English low vowels due to lesser articulatory activities of the bottom jaw in Ukrainian.
3. Insufficient differentiation of broad and narrow variants of vowel phonemes.
4. Incorrect articulation of English diphthongs since the stability of articulation is not observed as a distinctive feature in Ukrainian.
5. Excessive lip rounding and protrusion in the articulation of English rounded vowels caused by the greater prominence of lip participation in Ukrainian.
6. Deviations in the realization of phonological and positional length of English vowels due to the differences in the syllable stereotypes of English and Ukrainian.
7. Full value of vowel phonemes in unstressed position which is explained by lesser frequency of reduction of vowels in the Ukrainian language.

Ukrainian accent of English encompasses the following features in the pronunciation of consonants:

1. Inappropriate articulation of the consonants which are absent in Ukrainian. Bilabial /w/ is often confused with the labio-dental sound /v/. Interdental phonemes /θ/, /ð/ are pronounced like dental sounds. Post-alveolar sonorant /r/ and back-lingual nasal sonorant /ŋ/ are replaced by their Ukrainian counterparts that differ in the place of obstruction. The glottal sound /h/ receives excessive fortis articulation in the English speech of Ukrainians which is explained by overgeneralization while transferring the Ukrainian sound in English speech.
2. Dental-dorsal articulation of English apical-alveolar consonants /t/, /d/, /s/, /z/, /n/, /l/ due to the different tongue setting in Ukrainian.
3. Palatalization of English consonants and consonant clusters. Palatalization is a distinctive feature of Ukrainian consonants whereas in English this feature is irrelevant and concerns the pronunciation of consonants /ʃ/ and /ʒ/. Pronounced by Ukrainian speakers these sounds get excessive degree of palatalization spotted by native speakers.

4. Devoicing of voiced consonants /d/ and /z/ in a word-final position.
5. Absence of aspiration of fortis plosive phonemes /p/, /t/, /k/ and absence of neutralization of aspiration in definite positions.

Being one of the salient features of Ukrainian English accent, devoicing of voiced consonants is caused by secondary interference, when the Russian language, which is spoken by Ukrainians as the second language, exerts the influence on the articulatory habits of Ukrainians who speak English. Devoicing at the end of a word is typical of Russian, while in English voiced consonants are partially devoiced, and in Ukrainian such consonants undergo no devoicing at all.

In the process of language acquisition EFL learners often make such mistakes that cannot be exclusively explained by interlanguage interference. These deviations may be explained by the complexity of L2 structure which supports the fact that EFL learners with different L1 backgrounds tend to make similar mistakes in English speech. In addition, at advanced stages of language acquisition Ukrainian learners of English develop the habit of hypercorrect pronunciation of certain clusters of sounds, which is not typical of native speakers. To exemplify, Ukrainian English speakers at times pronounce the word-final consonant /z/ as the fully voiced one whereas native speakers tend to partially devoice this sound.

Conclusions

To conclude, the established core of Ukrainian English accent features is of great value to EFL teachers in Ukraine as this linguistic description will serve as a reliable reference-point indicating the most complicated issues of English pronunciation which require additional training with Ukrainian learners of English. Since English has ultimately asserted its global status, the description of phonetic features of regional and territorial accents as well as New Englishes is a significant stage in providing mutual intelligibility and successful communication.

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