

The Prominence of Phonetics in English Language

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Abstract: English Language is said to be the primary source of communication across the globe. English is learnt as a second language in many countries. But there are different varieties of English used in different countries. In some countries like India where English is learnt as a second language, grammar and written skills are given more importance rather than pronunciation which may result in ineffective communication. So, everyone who learns English as their second language has to be very attentive regarding the variety of English they use, for their communication to be effective and clear. To standardize the pronunciation of English, linguists introduced a unique code which is known as IPA i.e., the International Phonetic Alphabet. It provides a unique symbol for each sound of English to vary one word from another. This paper mainly focuses on the importance of Phonetics, especially for ESL (English as a Second Language) learners.

Keywords - English, Phonetics, Prominence, Pronunciation.

I. INTRODUCTION

English is the most commonly used language across the world. It is used for various purposes such as official, educational, social, interpersonal etc. English is also used as the main language for browsing on the internet. Unlike its standard form of written communication, there are many variations in the spoken communication. The cause for these variations might be social, historical, spatial etc. These variations or varieties of a language are often referred to as the 'Dialects'. In the united Kingdom (U.K) where English is spoken as a native language, one such dialect is most widely accepted, has gained social prestige & became the standard variety of English. It is referred to as the Received Pronunciation (R.P) of England. One of the most famous phoneticians was 'Honey Sweet' who is known as the father of Received Pronunciation. This Received Pronunciation is today helping millions of ESL learners to learn English easily and quickly. Sweet says, "Without Phonetics we can neither observe nor record the simplest phenomena of a language." Phonologists denoted RP with a unique code known as the International Phonetic Alphabet(IPA). The use of these unique symbols or sounds is referred to as the phonetic notation. Every human being possesses the ability to produce these phonetic sounds by using certain body mechanisms such as the respiratory system, the phonatory system and the articulatory system. All these three systems work together to produce sounds. Air flow is the basis for the production of any human sound. Based on the manner in which the air flow comes out, sounds are classified into Vowel sounds and Consonant sounds. Based on the state of glottis, sounds are distinguished as 'voiced' sounds and 'voiceless' sounds. The lips can also assume different shapes in the production of vowel and consonant sounds. Depending upon the lips positions, they can be distinguished as 'rounded' and 'unrounded' sounds. There are many other such classifications depending on the manner of articulation and place of articulation. So, awareness of the basic phonetic concepts can help the learner to have a quick understanding of the phonemics of a language.

II. PROMINENCE OF PHONETICS:

Phonetics is said to be the branch of linguistics that studies the sounds of human speech. The sounds of English are basically classified into vowels and consonants. The sounds are generally produced, based on the manner of the air flow in our body. The sounds produced when the air comes out freely without any obstructions in its flow are called as vowel sounds. The consonants are the sounds in which the air flow is obstructed at one point or the other and is released suddenly (plosives) or slowly (fricatives).

In today's world, there is a great need for an ESL learner to learn phonetics for the following reasons :

- 1) Lack of correspondence between spelling and pronunciation
- 2) Tool for an ESL learner as well as a teacher
- 3) Pronunciation carries Prestige
- 4) To improve communication
- 5) For lexicography

1) Lack of correspondence between spelling and pronunciation:

Many changes took place in the pronunciation of English after the 17th century, but the orthographic representation (spelling) remained the same. So, there is no one to one correspondence between the spelling and pronunciation for the words in modern English. For example, in the words 'chain', 'chef', 'character'; 'ch' is common in spelling. But, the sounds are /tʃ/ (cha), /ʃ/ (sh), /k/ (ka) respectively. Therefore, there is a great need for an ESL learner to learn phonetics. If one is aware of the phonetic notation, he or she can directly refer to the dictionary and can know how to pronounce the word accurately.

2) Tool for an ESL learner as well as a teacher:

Phonetics can be used as a tool for both learning and teaching English. It is specifically helpful to those learners whose mother tongue (M.T) phonemics are completely different from that of English. It helps learners to understand the nuances in the pronunciation of phonetic sounds by explaining the place of articulation and the manner of articulation. For example, [v/, /w/] & [z/, /ʒ/] are similar sounds which can be distinguished mostly using these place and manner of articulations. It helps teachers to observe the differences between the sounds of first language and the target language, so that they can in turn explain it to the students easily. This enables students to comprehend easily and speak the language in a better way. Therefore we can say that, a language can be easily learnt by acquisition of phonemic sounds rather than by letters of an alphabet. The changing scenario in many established schools is to teach phonemics of the language first and then proceed to the letters. Learning phonetics is more effective and is also an easy way to improve one's language speaking skills.

3) Pronunciation carries prestige:

Good Pronunciation always gives the first impression to the listeners on the speakers. Proper pronunciation increases the effectiveness of speech. We may also know the social status of a person from the accent or slang he uses, even if he tries to conceal it. The use of Received Pronunciation (R.P) such as the BBC English is said to have more prestige than any other English dialect.

4) To improve Communication:

Communication is generally a two-way process. Especially, for any oral communication to be successful, the receiver or the listener must be able to comprehend the message or the information sent by the sender or the speaker. Oral communication becomes ineffective, if there is a lapse in understanding the message sent by the speaker, particularly when both the sender and the receiver are using different accents. The manner or the tone in which we communicate a message is said to be more important than the matter in the message. Sometimes, same words or same sentences that we use, may convey different meanings with a change in stress or tone. Therefore, there is a need for an ESL learner to learn phonetics which helps to standardize the pronunciation, improves the ability to comprehend and to communicate effectively.

5) Lexicography:

Lexicography is said to be the art of compiling or making dictionaries. It is mostly concerned with issues such as the choice of accent, phonetic transcription of words and their weak forms, representation of stress etc. Some phoneticians have said that it is not necessary to include pronunciation in dictionaries but others have strongly recommended to subsume it into dictionaries. The entry of pronunciation into dictionaries should be accorded a greater importance, as we no longer regard speech as a degraded form of writing. This pronunciation indication in the dictionary serves the purpose of advising an ESL learner who is unsure of the spoken form of a word, by giving him/her an accurate pronunciation.

III. CONCLUSION

It is mainly using pronunciation that we communicate our ideas to the world. The omnipresence and pervasive nature of English made the knowledge of English as a basic necessity. Looking and understanding the language through the lens of phonetics and phonemics will definitely help the learner to understand or to learn a language easily. So, one should have an adequate knowledge of phonetics to communicate more effectively. It is not only useful for the English language teachers and ESL learners, but also for linguists, lexicographers, speech therapists etc. A good theoretical knowledge of phonetics can be gained by reading and even more can be acquired by working in a phonetics lab. Thus, we can achieve perfect pronunciation by practising and use it effectively in our day to day communication.

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