Pronunciation versus Writing : Betrayal !

Nadia BENRABAH-DJENNANE
Université Stendhal-Grenoble 3
Nadia.Benrabah@u-grenoble3.fr

The current paper aims to show how closely connected pronunciation and writing are. More particularly, it will try and illustrate the significant impact cases of mispronunciation can have on learners' writing. Only one pronunciation variable will be considered here, namely, the voiceless glottal fricative /h/. (Henceforth, /h/ will be used to refer to the phoneme, [h] to the sound and *"h"* to the letter). The informants involved in the current study are all French learners of English studying in Grenoble.

The idea of the present paper arose from a number of observations we were regularly making while reading and marking various pieces of written work produced by our French learners of English. One of those observations involved "strange" mistakes in their writing. However, such mistakes were not only found in the papers of average or weaker students. They were also quite common in the writing of good undergraduate students or even more advanced postgraduates. We therefore decided to investigate the matter further. So after having recorded, within a highly controlled framework, a speech sample of French English involving the glottal sound, we decided to devote the second part of the study to the link between pronunciation and writing. The paper will report on that part of the investigation. The data considered here, consists mainly of a collection of all cases of students' written mistakes we came across over a period of one semester and which illustrated quite nicely the impact pronunciation has on writing and vice versa.

Any teacher involved with French learners of English will immediately notice that [h] is quite problematic indeed. Besides, since the voiceless glottal fricative is absent from the French phonemic inventory, one could, understandably, be seduced by the following reasoning : There are indeed some similarities between French and English which could more or less facilitate learning. However, one cannot deny the presence of a large number of differences which will inevitably affect learning. And as to the absence of /h/ from the French inventory, then one could logically expect a similar absence in the speech of French learners of English. Yet a closer look at the learners' speech clearly shows that the sound [h] is far from being absent. However, when it is expected to be pronounced, it is not, and when nothing justifies its use, there it appears again ! So the problem is not so much a matter of inability to produce the English sound however "unnatural" that sound might seem to a French vocal tract. The problem has more to do with the odd but recurrent "absent-present-absent" pattern of [h].

Probably due to the distinction that is usually made between the four skills (reading and writing on the one hand, listening and speaking on the other), similarly, a clear difference is often made between written and spoken skills, hence between speaking and writing in general. It is as if there was some kind of resistant barrier between the two which prevented any in-and-out exchange or influence, which is clearly untrue. A number of scholars have actually shown the link between spelling and pronunciation (Guierre, 1987; Ginésy, 2000; Deschamps, 1994 ; Deschamps, et al., 2000, Duchet, 1991 among others). Likewise, we will try and show not only that there is a clear link between writing and pronunciation, but also that the importance of that link is such that it can have a considerable impact on French learners' acquisition process.

1 Transcriptions
The first mistakes we would like to report here appeared in the learners' transcriptions. The students' task was to transcribe phonetically a number of dictated words, phrases or sentences. What could have been regarded as mere errors of transcription or of identification soon appeared to reveal a deeper difficulty at the level of the learners' own pronunciation as the following examples illustrate:

(1) Words dictated with [h] : " *husband, ham, harm, perhaps, alcohol* "
(2) Words transcribed : [ˈʌzbənd], [æm], [pəˈæps], [ˈælkɒl]-[ˈælkɒəl]

(3) Words dictated without [h] : " *art, odd, earth* "
(4) Words transcribed : [hɑːt], [hɒd], [hɜːθ]

The above transcriptions could be interpreted differently. Either the informants are not at all aware of the problem and do as if the sound [h] did not exist. Or they associate it, as in French, to a silent letter (which would, for them, mean absence of sound), and hence equate absence of sound to an absence of symbol. That could perhaps explain the first series of transcriptions in (2) above where [h] is totally absent. Or, the learners are somehow conscious of their problem, and/or, to a certain extent, are subjected to some doubts which they will try to resolve with hypercorrection. That could explain the odd appearance of [h] in (4) above. However, none of the two interpretations really satisfied us as none could really explain, on its own, both the absence of [h] in (2) and its presence in (4). These examples of odd behaviour of the sound [h] in the learners' transcriptions are far from being the only ones noticed and collected. Besides, as mentioned above, the data considered here gathered similar "interesting" mistakes made by a wide range of students including some who were not studying English as a major subject. The following sections illustrate other areas where the problem of pronunciation affected the learners' writing.

2 Articles
The handling of articles is already quite problematic to French learners of English in general. The problem of pronunciation of [h] makes it worse. The absence of [h] in the learners' pronunciation of certain words where it should be present will lead them to make a large number of writing mistakes. The problem is revealed by the choice or writing of adjacent words as illustrated in the following examples shown as they appeared :

a) because it is **an hindrance**
b) change into **an horrible** tragedy
c) After years of being **an hero**
d) They had **an hard** fight
e) It causes **an harmful** …
f) created to give **an history** of drugs thoughout the 20th century
g) **an historic** reconstruction
h) which may represent **an human** being
i) **an human**
j) **An half** of the world / **an half** an hour
k) I have **an headache**
l) **an humble** black glove
m) are invited on **an heavenly** island
n) **an hidden** son
o) He notices that the world is **an horrible** place
p) I don't think Bridget is **an heroine**
q) was a miracle **for headhachs**

g) has to be regarded with caution though, as even in the speech of some native speakers, [h] sometimes disappears from this word (*"historic"*) when preceded by an indefinite article (Wells, 1990: 339). Nevertheless, the other examples nicely illustrate the confusion in the learners' mind as far as the pronunciation of [h] is concerned. The confusion is clearly visible in the choice of article. The inadequate choice of "an", usually preceding a word starting with a vowel sound, reveals the fact that the learner not only does not pronounce [h] in that particular position/word, but that he

also considers the word as one starting with a vowel and not a [h] sound. The reverse also seems to be true. An unjustified pronunciation of [h] at the beginning of a word normally starting with a vowel sound may also trigger the use of the incorrect article as is illustrated in the case of *" a **evil** "* in the sentence *" (...) was presented as **a evil** we could avoid (...)"* found in a learner's piece of writing. The last example of *"**headhachs**"* in q) above also seems to suggest the presence of the sound [h] in the learners' pronunciation of the second syllable.

3 Pronouns or auxiliaries?

Also noticeable in the students' writing were mistakes showing how the inappropriate presence or absence of [h] in the learners' pronunciation clearly led to a real confusion between different grammatical categories. That confusion was reflected in their writing. Thus, pronouns and auxiliaries were sometimes used confusingly as illustrated in the following examples reproduced without any correction : *"But **is** author doesn't seem to like it"*, or the case of a singular subject being followed by : *"... and **as** been banned at work"*. In both examples, the absence of the letter *"h"* sheds some doubt as to the meaning and grammatical function of the highlighted words. Similarly, the "unjustified" insertion and/or disappearance of the letter *"h"* result in pronouns taking the form of auxiliaries and vice versa. This, in turn, quickly generates confusion in the respective functions of the transformed words as the following examples also show :

i) *Why did Charles Dickens introduce this woman in **is** story?*
ii) *In **is** opinion ...*
iii) *The character stands on **is** balcony*
iv) *In **is** first works ...*

v) *The ambassador promised to do all **is** possible to release Michael.*

vi) *They think **his** right because ...*
vii) *Liddell **his** wondering if ...*

The first five examples are suggesting an absence of the sound [h] in the learners' pronunciation. Yet, this absence is also accompanied by a similar and noticeable absence of the letter *"h"* in their writing. Despite the absence of the letter *"h"*, the absence of the sound [h] in those words, however, is clearly to be encouraged as this is the normal weak form/pronunciation of such words. Nevertheless, there is absolutely no evidence here that the absent sound was really the result of a deliberate and conscious choice made by the learners, or ... a mere coincidence. The last two examples (in vi) and vii) above), highlight the phenomenon of turning a personal pronoun (*"he"*) followed by an auxiliary (*"is"*) into a possessive pronoun (*"his"*), and likewise, that of an auxiliary (*"is"*) turning into a possessive pronoun (*"his"*).

4 The case of *"all"* and *"whole"*

Another instance of written confusion resulting from pronunciation problems involved the words *"all"* and *"whole"*. Traces of such confusions were quite common in the learners' writing. But they, in turn, led learners to make other mistakes such as incorrect word ordering as illustrated in the following examples : *"**Whole the** children"* written instead of *"**All the** children"*, or *"**the all** coalfields"* instead of *"**the whole** coalfields"*. Other examples (where *"**the all**"* is used instead of *"**the whole**"*) illustrate the same phenomenon: *"It wasn't the destiny of a man which was concerned but **the all** social system"*, *"a problem touching **whole** Germany"* or even *"**an all** part of his works"*. This confusion is reinforced by the absence of vowel contrast between the two words in the French learners' speech. As most of them use the same monophthongal type of vowel in both *"all"* and *"whole"* instead of the English long vowel /ɔː/ and diphthong /əʊ/ respectively.

5 Lexical vs grammatical ambiguity

Mispronunciation or inappropriate use of the sound [h] generated another type of mistake in the students' writing. One of the consequences was to provoke lexical and/or grammatical ambiguity. In fact, the words the learners wrote were not exactly those they originally aimed at. Incorrect pronunciation again affected writing which in turn affected meaning and sometimes led to communication breakdown :

  (a) *Didn't you* **ear** *now ?*
  (b) *"Why are you eating now?" "Because I'm* **angry.***"*
  (c) *Her hand suddenly got stiff on the* **hedge** *of the table.*
  (d) *And* **heaven** *sending employees home.*

The above examples show that the learners pronounced the words *"hear"* and *"hungry"* without the sound [h], and the words *"edge, even"* or *"island"* and *"illness"* (below) with it. In a piece of writing, one student, talking about an island, wrote : *"He's been living on this* **highland** *for 20 years."* On Alzeihmer disease, another one wrote: *We can note that this* **hillness** *appears when …".* While writing about the main character of a novel, yet another student substituted *"is" for " he is" : "She thinks* **is** *a manipulator who will use everything and everyone to his own ends."* Last but not least, here is how a French learner quoted Oscar Wilde : *"I am sick of women who love me. Women who* **ate** *me are more interesting."*

So we have tried to show that what could, at first glance, be regarded as mere spelling mistakes or banal identification problems (in the case of phonetic transcriptions) reflected, in fact, far more serious and sometimes even deeply rooted problems affecting the entire learning process. If it is true to say that English spelling can, sometimes, predict pronunciation, it is all the more so to claim that incorrect pronunciation can lead to incorrect writing. The two domains (pronunciation and writing) are far from being independent from each other. Instead, there is a continuous forward and backward exchange between the two. And that is also true of all the other domains of competence. Pronunciation should no longer be regarded as an independent skill affecting only the learners' oral performance. The various examples used in the current paper clearly showed that, on the contrary, unresolved pronunciation problems could have dramatic consequences on other domains, writing in particular. But we have also shown that sometimes, not only is writing affected, but meaning is, too. Moreover, one of the other consequences inadequate handling of pronunciation problems can even lead to is communication breakdown.

REFERENCES :
Guierre, Lionnel (1987) *Règles et exercices de prononciation anglaise.* Paris, Longman, France
Ginésy, Michel (2000) *Phonétique et phonologie de l'anglais.* Paris, Ophrys
Deschamps, Alain (1994) *De l'écrit à l'oral et de l'oral à l'écrit: Phonétique et orthographe de l'anglais.* Paris, Ophrys
Deschamps, Alain, Duchet Jean-Louis, Fournier, Jean Michel, O'Neil, Michael (2000), *Manuel de phonologie de l'anglais : Capes/Agrégation d'Anglais.* Paris, Didier Erudition – CNED.
Duchet, Jean-Louis (1991) *Code de l'anglais oral.* Paris, Ophrys
Fournier, Jean-Michel (2002) Why ca'ress ? Talk given at ALOES Conference on *L'anglais oral : la prosodie* held at Paris XIII University, 22-23 March 2002.
Kellerman, Eric & Sharwood Smith, Michael (1986) *Crosslinguistic Influence in Second Language Acquisition.* Oxford : Pergamon P.
Kenworthy, Joanne (1987) *Teaching English Pronunciation.* London : Longman
Van Els, Théo, Bongaerts, T., Extra, G, Van Os, C. & Jansen-Van Dieten, A.M. (1984) *Applied Linguistics and the Learning and Teaching of Foreign Languages.* London : Edward Arnold.
Trocmé, Hélène (1974) Les difficultés phonétiques des français qui apprennent l'anglais. *Bulletin Pédagogique IUT,* 30 : 28-34.
Wells, John C. (1990) *Pronunciation Dictionary,* London : Longman