

Spelling-to-Sound or Sound-to-Spelling? Errors found among Japanese Learners of English

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1 Introduction

On 19th February, 2009, John Wells's Phonetic Blog¹ carried an entry titled 'Sounds and letters' with a photo² of bottles of *Sparkring Soda* [sic] as an example of Japanese learners' confusion of L and R. While Wells is well aware of the fact that the Japanese learners of English are not able to distinguish between /l/ and /r/ orally and aurally, he finds it difficult to understand why they should visually confuse the letters L and R, because 'without exception the spellings l, r ... relate consistently to the corresponding sounds'.

Wells's last remark is, of course, quite true, and EFL teachers in Japan would use this point as one of the (many) reasons why learners should strive to be able to at least pronounce the two sounds accurately: not only would they then be able to make the necessary distinction of minimal pairs, but it would also save them from making embarrassing spelling mistakes. The same could be said of other pairs of phonemes that are known to be difficult for the Japanese, like /b/ and /v/, or /æ/ and /ʌ/, the latter pair of which Wells makes a mention in the same blog entry.

The present paper claims that the kind of spelling mistakes mentioned above does in fact reflect the pronunciation of the English of a certain category of Japanese learners and the learners are writing what they are pronouncing. It further claims that it is a kind of hypercorrection, and tries to search for the cause behind such overcompensation and what it implies.

2 Errors to be expected

A contrastive analysis of Japanese and English tells us that the phonemes which Japanese EFL learners might find difficult to distinguish would involve the following pairs or triplets: /b/ and /v/, /s/ and /θ/, /z/ and /ð/, /s/ and /ʃ/ before high front vowels, /z/ and /ʒ/ before high front vowels, /r/ and /l/, /j/ and no /j/ before high front vowels, /w/ and no /w/ before high back vowels, /i:/ and /ɪ/, /u:/ and /ʊ/, /æ/ and /ʌ/ (as well as /ɑ/ for American English), /ɑ:/ (or American English /ɑɜ:/) and /ɜ:/ (or American English /ɜ:/), /ou/ and /ɔ:/ (as well as for American English, /ɔɜ:/).

Indeed, these are the phonemes whose pronunciation and/or perception that learners actually confuse frequently.

3 Possible causes of mispronunciation

3.1 Spelling

Japanese students of English are prone to read English spelling according to Latinate rules because of *romaji*, a method of writing Japanese using Roman letters. This is because *romaji* is taught in primary school, before pupils start learning English in its written form. This is the cause behind the wrong pronunciation heard widely among the Japanese of /ɔ:/ words containing the letter U, as /ou/ (e.g. *cause*, *bought*, *thought*, etc.). Likewise, the fact that the set of *romaji* does not include the letter V (because Japanese lacks the sound represented by it) nor the letter L (the Japanese tap consonant is written with the Roman letter R) must have a certain amount of influence on how students read and write English later on when they start learning the

¹ <http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/wells/blog0902b.htm>

² From the engrishfunny.com site.

language. The abundance of examples of words spelt incorrectly with R where L should be used could be attributed to the influence of the *romaji* spelling.

3.2 Ongoing changes in pronunciation of Japanese

In Japanese, /s/ and /ʃ/ are neutralized in front of the high front vowel /i/. It used to be that the English /si:/ and /sɪ-/ would be pronounced with /ʃi:/ and /ʃɪ-/ by Japanese speakers of English, because the pronunciation of the Japanese alveolo-palatal fricative [ç] is closer to English /ʃ/ than to /s/. However, due to an ongoing change of this sound in Japanese towards a more [s]-like sound, the transfer of L1 to L2 that teachers come across in classrooms nowadays is increasingly of the type where students pronounce English *she* as *see*. The parallel situation is witnessed with words that contain /zi:/, /zɪ-/ and /dʒi:/, /ɟɪ-/ as in phonology.

3.3 Hypercorrection

There is yet another type of mispronunciation heard among Japanese learners of EFL where American English /ɑɹ/ is pronounced as /ɜ:/ (*car* becomes *cur*)³, and /ʌ/ as /æ/ (*cut* becomes *cat*).

Spelling, English or Latinate, plays no interfering role here: rather, the speaker is going against, or ignoring completely, the spelling-to-sound rules. Moreover, a very similar sound to the English vowel phonemes in question actually exists in Japanese, so there should not be any hardship involved in pronouncing the first part of the diphthong in /ɑɹ/ or the short vowel /ʌ/. And yet, certain types of Japanese EFL learners tend to pronounce these phonemes with a sound resembling [ɜ:] and [æ] respectively, vowels that are not found in Japanese and therefore considered difficult by learners of English.

So difficult, that much time is spent practising these vowel sounds, and consequently, when a learner finally succeeds in acquiring the pronunciation, the vowels seem to leave a strong impression on the minds of the learners as very typical English sounds. The sounds are associated with the English language itself.

This is why this kind of mistake is often observed among the more advanced students rather than among beginners⁴—remember that a beginner would not be able to pronounce the foreign sounds. It is found in students who are more ‘conscious’ of their pronunciation: phonetics students, for example. In that sense, the mispronunciations can be considered a type of hypercorrection. However, hypercorrection in L1 or L2 usually occurs when the user of the language in question extends a certain existing rule of that language and applies it wrongly by analogy. So when a Cockney English speaker adds an /h/ at the beginning of *out* to produce a hypercorrect form */haʊt/, he is doing it from the knowledge that the standard form of English for words like *how*, *high*, *hat*, etc., are pronounced with word-initial /h/ which he himself usually omits, and under pressure to ‘sound proper’, makes an overgeneralization. The same goes for speakers of northern accents in the UK and their misuse of the /ʌ/ phoneme. Compared to these instances of hypercorrection, the kind we are looking at now differ in that applying the [ɜ:] sound to an AR spelling or [æ] to U is not an overgeneralization of any spelling rule. There is no such rule in the first place.

4 Discussion

A graduate student studying phonetics recently caught my attention mispronouncing

³ Taro Aso, the Japanese Prime Minister, pronounced the first syllable of the word *partnership* as /pɜ:t-/ when he made a formal speech in English in Germany on 5th May, 2009. This word, as well as *partner*, is a common loanword, and the Japanese pronunciation begins with /pa:-/ without a hint of rhoticity.

⁴ The afore-mentioned Japanese Prime Minister has spent some time in America and the UK as a student.

the word *heart* as *hurt*. She otherwise displayed a satisfactory pronunciation of English. I asked her why she had pronounced the word the way she did. The student was not aware of her mistake at the time of the reading of a passage that contained the word, and she was certain that she had not mistaken the word for a similar word containing the spelling EAR or the vowel /ɜ:/ (like *earth* or *hurt*). She recalled that she was more than aware of the word that appeared before her, and at the same time, she was 'keyed up' for the occasion to pronounce a phoneme she knew she had to take care to pronounce, and as a consequence, she must have overdone it, she explained.

A similar inner conflict must be experienced when a linguistically-conscious student pronounces /æ/ instead of /ʌ/, /v/ instead of /b/, or /r/ in place of /l/, all cases where an easier and closer-to-Japanese sound is replaced by a more difficult, troublesome sound.

Then, the same type of students often make spelling mistakes writing *recentry* [sic] and *hericopter* [sic], analogous to the example cited by Wells. Of course, cases resulting from circumstances mentioned in 3.1 could be at work here, especially for beginner-level students, but Japanese EFL learners whose English ability is otherwise higher than average have been caught writing and pronouncing these words with /r/ and not /l/. In such cases, hypercorrection may be the reason for both the written and pronunciation errors.

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