

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

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I.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

There is a great difference in teaching Russian language to foreigners and that to Russians (i.e. whose MT is Russian) which may be viewed in terms of a whole set of linguistic, psychological, and methodological factors.

While learning a second language the negative role or the interference of the MT (here accepted also as the L1) of the learners becomes a major factor. As a result it produces a mixed language and it becomes a habit of the learners to deviate slowly from the authentic and correct utterances accepted for the target language, thereby distorting the language so much that at times in the process of communication the whole essence of the language is lost. This, as it should be considered, is one of the most important negative factors, especially at the initial stages i.e. when the learner has just taken to pronouncing the sounds and segments of the given foreign language. From here an important methodological conclusion can be drawn: while introducing the sounds and the segmental features of a foreign language enough care should be taken to minimise the interfering effects of the MT.

There are two ways of achieving such a goal:

- a) by studying the phonetic errors made by the learners, and
- b) by a comparative study of the phonetic systems of the mother tongue (MT) and the target language (TL).

Of course each of the above has both advantages and disadvantages of its own.

Fixation and a study of the phonetic errors allow to detect some difficulties spontaneously in introducing a second language in definite and defined conditions. However, phonetic errors can occur as a result of the interrelation between quite a few varied factors, viz., linguistic, physiological, and psychological, including individual mistakes and coincidental ones. Errors pointed out by the teacher to the students are the results of not only objective but also of subjective factors of students, as well as the instructors or evaluators. As a result of this, the study of the phonetic errors alone cannot serve adequately to check the interfering effects of the phonetic system of the MT of the learners.

Comparative phonetics as a linguistic method of studying accentual patterns assigns the objective data about the phonetico-phonological differences in two interrelated languages (Salistr.a, I.D., ocier.ki mjetodov obucenija inostr.annyh jazykam, Moskva, str. 26-32), allows to foresee the area and type of the phonetic errors of the learners and to scientifically formulate the base of a system of exercises in view of a given MT. However, this method does not deal in the study of the dynamics of phonetic skills in a foreign language, psychological reasons, and individual aptitude in learning a second language. So a combination of the above two methods may prove to be quite handy in defining the interfering factors. However, in recent times quite a few courses in practical phonetics of foreign languages have been designed on the basis of a comparative study of sound systems of MT (L1) and the TL. The effectiveness of such a method of study has been evaluated by some famous linguists: "...the only way which to some extent may guarantee the learners...from a dangerous mixed bilingualism — is the way of

consciously avoiding the mother tongue." (Serba, L.V., pr. i podavanie jazykov v sr. i jedn. Škol. e, Moskva, 1947, str. 56 - 67); "...we must operate on a comparative method of two languages: mother and target, and by alienating from the habits/skills of the MT, get used to the norms of the target language." (R. Jefor. matsl. j, A.A., foneticesk. j, minimum pr. i ovl. ad. ien. j r. usskim pr. oiznoŠ. ien. iem n. ier. usskim, — r. ussk. j jazyk v natsional. 'no. j Škol. e —, 1961, No. 4., str. 10)

1.2 THE PRESENT STUDY: A STUDY OF ERRORS / ACCENTS

The present task follows from the study of communication-speech approach of training in a second language with a view to improving the speech standards of the target language. The levels of correct reproduction of a foreign tongue depend greatly on following correct phonetic preconditions of speech. Otherwise they not only distort the spoken language but also affect the very concept of communication and disturb the realisation of the main goal of language — COMMUNICATION. Good and correct pronunciation, on the other hand, formulates the necessary preconditions for the development of all aspects of speech activities in a foreign tongue.

As we know that in getting acquainted with the pronunciation of a language the most important stage is the initial one, when all the norms of speech-reproduction are formulated by an individual. The success in this process determines the level of correcting accentual errors at later stages. It is quite clear that if errors get automatized, they demand much greater efforts to overcome them. Along with the interference, the reason for foreign accent is the low level of recognition of the productive operation and the phonetic material

in learning a foreign language. Such a position can be viewed along with the study of the psychological concept of the formulation of the intellectual capabilities in learning a second language.

The optimal path of acquiring a foreign language must begin with a conscious act of its acquisition; and first of all in averting the inertia of the MT. The factor involved here is conditioned first of all in the matter of recognising the nature of phonetic model and the complexities of its material presentation for the purpose of studies. It is very important to mention here that the question of interference of L1 should be viewed not in isolation from the other tongues (OTs) that the learner is exposed to. A set of errors (or accents) may well be caused because of the OTs, at the same time another set may be averted with their (OTs) help.

One of the most important and central aspects in dealing with the problem of accent is defining the reason of its occurrence and a study of its psychological nature. At the same time we may deal in brief with the very term "accent" viewing it from the following aspects:

- (a). While looking at accent from the point of view of the reaction of the native user of the language, one may ascertain that the user of the language does not accept just any deviation in the speech of the speaker as accent for example such deviations as idiolects, abnorms etc. but only those which are preconditioned by national or dialectical influence.
- (b). While analysing the accent in the background of a comparison of the system of MT and TL we find that it has a multiaspectual category, which defines not only all the levels of

phonetic sectors but also all the other levels of the language viz. phonetic, grammatical, and lexical.

(c). Lastly, looking at accent as a product of speech movements in the formation of the speech habits in "external" and "internal" indicators, we may define accent as:

(i) a conditioned habit of incorrect (from the point of view of the system of the language) norms and usages of the language and;

(ii) a system of such habits which are realised in the speech in a complete switching over of attention from the plan of expression to the plan of content.

The psychological interpretation of accent with a study of the level of formation of the habit allows us to differentiate the audio differences in two categories : "errors" and "accents", which in practice often interfere in acquiring the second language. The differences in the concepts of "accent" and "error" have the following methodological implication:—

'Error' is the deviation in the actual process of conceptualisation. In such cases its correction is accepted by the learner as a totally motivated intermediary step on the path of achieving the end-goal of speech activity. This defines the positive attitude of the learner towards the act of rectifying the error, which helps in the process of learning and using the language at an early stage. At the stage of the use of the speech in accentuated form the pronunciation habits are automatized and the object of actual recognition becomes the predominant side of speech.

1.3 THE PROBLEM OF INTERFERENCE AND ITS CLASSIFICATION

In the theory of bilingualism and speech activity the most important object for study is the problem of interference. This has lately been accepted to be of extreme importance in the theory of second language acquisition, not only in the linguistic but also in the psychological realm.

The problem of language contact was viewed before L.V.Šerba as the main factor in the levels of language acquisition phenomena: convergence, divergence etc. Here bilingualism as a living process exists not in language but in speech. Šerba gave a new orientation to bilingualism as a process of contacts taking shape in the speech activities of bilinguals. He was one of the first to introduce the term 'SPEECH ACTIVITY' in his work "About the three aspects of language phenomena and about experiment in linguistics" (L.V.Šerba, Language system and speech activity, Leningrad, 1974, p-24). Yet in 1958 he noted: "Interference of languages We must search in the very individual placement of one or the other social conditions." (Šerba, L.V., o ponjatij smještenija jazyl'ov, izobrannyye r.aboty po jazykoznaniju i fonetike, tom I, LGU, 1958, str - 47).

The problem of getting acquainted with foreign articulations happens to be quite important, because articulation plays the greatest role in the process of speech activity, and the presence or absence of the so called phonetic errors or those of articulatory types depend on the fact as to how successfully the student acquires the correct articulation from the very beginning. Without averting these errors in good time it is rather impossible to achieve total correctness of articulation of

foreign speech as they constitute one of the most important and standard characteristics of foreign accents.

The task of mastering the sounds involves a stupendous process, in which, from the methodological point of view, the stage of the placement of a sound in the whole system is clearly distinguished. The correct acoustic effect and correct articulation are demanded from the learner from the very beginning. This can be called the main task at this stage. A successful settlement of this task would determine the prerequisites for advancement to the next stage: training in the sound with a view to automatizing it correctly. Each stage of working upon a sound is characterised by a set of their own peculiarities, demanding a specialised methodological interpretation and its system of functioning.

The problem of attaining accurate skills of pronunciation becomes more acute while preparing students — 'Russists' or future teachers of the Russian language. They must have a very authentic pronunciation, i.e. achieving the levels of pronunciation skills as native users. Such a necessity is explained not only by the qualifying demands of a teacher, but also by the fact that foreign teachers most often work in total absence of language community and at times they are the only 'echelons' of Russian speech for their students, which often makes the very teachers feel that they need better command over the pronunciation.

At times it becomes very difficult to make out the nature of interference, especially when they become automatic even for the teachers either by the influence of their own L1, or more so, when the L1 of the teachers and the students is the same. Hence

interference can be classified on the basis of either its origin or the results. While classifying the errors on the basis of the results one must also remember whether the same is affecting the perception or the production of the sound, which may either add an accent to the segment or even change its meaning.

Interference according to its origin may be of the following types:

(a) Interference due to the fact that there is a large difference in the system of phonological distinctions, when there is no equivalent correlation in the TL, as compared to the native language, which may result into a failure in distinguishing between the two phonemes of the TL.

(b) Interference due to dissimilarities in the combinational patterns of corresponding phonemes in the native and target languages.

(c) Interference due to differences in the neutralisation rules of the two languages.

(d) Interference due to misconceptions of the phonetic realisations of the allophones of the counter-phonemes, and differences in the positional variants.

(e) Interference due to differences in the representations of the phonemes in the written language.

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The question of introducing sounds of the Russian language to foreign students should be seen in the wider linguistic context of the problems of training in pronunciation. From a

methodological point of view the linguistic bases of dealing in the pronunciation have often and widely been discussed and worked out. This includes the necessity of having some knowledge of the MT of the students; and a detailed knowledge of the articulatory and acoustic bases of the Russian sound system. In the same way the questions of selection and grading the material, system of phonetic exercises, drills, and the other methods to work upon the language, have been worked out.

At the same time, practice shows that the introduction of the Russian segmentals to the foreign students becomes quite complicated at the initial stages and often desired results are not achieved. As a result, this long but low effective phonetic work is often capable of reducing the learners' interest in studies, which from the pedagogical point of view is most uncalled for and unwanted.

Hence there has always been an objective necessity to continue the search for the ways of introducing the Russian segmentals more effectively and fruitfully in such a way that at the end :

- a. each learner could adequately master each segment and;
- b. the time factor could be effectively reduced with a view to withholding the learners' interest in the subject.

While analysing the study of pronunciation as a process of the formation of the maiden activities in the production of sounds, we notice the possibility of the application of the theory of getting accustomed to foreign articulations, and can come to the conclusion that this activity has a two fold effect: first at the beginning of the work over the activity when the

learner is informed about the articulation, and later after the utterance of the sound. Control and correction of the errors are carried out as the end results. The very way of the formative movement remains far from the reach of objective control and consequently the whole process of getting acquainted with the articulation remains very weak. The learners resort to imitation, having found an easier way in the "trial and error" method. The results of such actions depend greatly on the skills of phonetic imitation of the learner. Hence it is clear that the effectiveness of acquainting oneself in the foreign pronunciation can be enhanced by consciously pointing out the prevailing conditions which define and control the process of the production or, for that matter, reproduction of the foreign sounds.

The linguistic bases of the methodology of teaching/learning (henceforth training) the Russian language by the foreigners are constituted not only on the basis of the characteristic features of the Russian sound system, but also depending on the peculiarities of the mother tongue (in this case "Bengali"). It is needless to mention that presence or absence of certain sounds and sound covers not only interfere in learning a second language (in this case "Russian"), but also hamper at times, resulting in a total loss of perception of the sound while learning it. For example though consonants of the Bengali language contrast each other in voicing \pm : /b/-/p/; /d/-/t/; /g/-/k/; but pairs like /v/-/f/; /z/-/s/; /Z/-/S/ are absent in the Bengali language, whereas there are /b/-/bh/; /p/-/ph/; /g/-/gh/; /k/-/kh/ etc. In Bengali sounds like /s/; /ʃ/; /z/; /f/; /ts/; /v/ and /x/ are absent, however, [s]; [S] are present in Bengali in allophonic levels. Training in the Russian language by foreigners demands a special 'vision' of linguistic features from the point of view of

perception of the user of the other languages.

For different Indian users, in the Russian Language there could be difficulties in learning different sounds or sometimes even the same sound in different positions or combinations. It is worth noticing the fact that for the users of Bengali, difficulties in training oneself in the Russian language will greatly depend on the differences in the articulatory systems. If we advance our studies with this hypothesis, we may safely state here that a sound knowledge of the articulatory and acoustic systems will certainly ease the process of training oneself.

Here at this stage it is very important to distinguish the linear or the 'segmental' units and the non-linear or the 'suprasegmental' units of the language to be trained in. By 'linear' units of a language its sounds and their combinations are understood. This sequence is displayed in speech and its recordings and also in writing, which depicts the spoken part in visual forms in the shape of different letters, studied one after the other in a linear space. Each isolated sound (a portion or a segment) in the speech also happens to be a part of the whole system in speech process.

In contrast to this the 'Suprasegmental' units include stress in all its form, intonation, melody, and metre. They differ from the linear units by the fact that they cannot exist on their own when separated from segments, and only along with them do the suprasegmentals exist and function, i.e. they, as if, base themselves on the segments.

The Bengali language is used (as L1) by the peoples of Bangladesh, West Bengal, the adjoining areas of Orissa, Bihar and

Assam. Being one of the Indo-European Languages, Bengali belongs to the eastern group of the Indo-Aryan Languages of the Indo-Iranian branch.

It is important to note that the Bengali Language differs in style: being two — the HIGH CODE — "Sādhu bhāṣā" (SB) which stems at the Navadwip dialect; and the modern spoken and literary language — "calit bhāṣā" (CB) founded on the Calcutta dialect.

The main difference between these two systems' styles stems in the difference between the phonological and morphological structures of the word. Though they are different variants of a single language system, their differences also lie in their function.

This study bases mainly on CB, which in our times is also used in the written counterpart. It is important to mention that CB and SB are both equally dominant styles in Calcutta and Dacca respectively and their respective states. The reason for basing this work on CB is mainly that of availability of data. It is worth mentioning that Arabic and Persian elements are reviving in the eastern SB of Bangladesh. Hence possibility of difference being routed through the interference of L1 is not to be rejected if the question is that of CB or SB.

The task here is to find out problems of introducing the Russian segmental features to Bengali speaking students. The study has been carried out on the basis of a study of the Russian segments, and the choice of data has been determined by their so called "DIFFICULT NATURE" and the difficulties, especially faced by the Bengali speaking learners.

The selection of Bengali students as the subject of this study is purely governed by the consideration that the researcher's MT is Bengali and he already had some experience of working in this area.

The present study is a modest attempt in this direction.

In the following chapter the two systems of sound segments under study have separately been examined in detail with a view to establishing the major areas of difference in the systems of articulation of various sound segments, their combinations and other important features.