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Russian coronal obstruents: Pronunciations typical of speakers of other Slavic languages (Linguodidactic aspect)

This article considers some distinctive features of accents peculiar for native speakers of Slavic languages in the domain of coronal obstruent pronunciation. This study is based on recordings of several informants whose native languages are from the Slavic group which were subsequently analysed. The analysis made it possible to report on the main common errors as well as some particularities in typical mispronouncing of Russian coronal obstruents by native speakers of several Slavic languages.

Key words: typology of accent, Russian consonants, Slavic languages, phonetic accent, phonetic interference

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Акцент носителей славянских языков в области произношения русских переднеязычных шумных согласных (лингводидактический аспект)

В статье рассматриваются особенности акцента носителей ряда славянских языков в области произношения русских переднеязычных шумных согласных. Основой настоящего исследования послужили аудиозаписи интерферирующей русской речи носителей славянских языков, их последующая расшифровка и анализ. В результате анализа были зафиксированы общие и типологические ошибки в произношении русских переднеязычных шумных согласных в речи носителей славянских языков.

Ключевые слова: типология, согласные звуки, славянские языки, фонетическая интерференция, акцент

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The Russian language is among the top ten of the most used languages in the world; people seek to master the language to live, study or work in Russia, to come closer to understanding Russian culture and art, to enjoy Russian literature in the original, to watch Russian films or just to communicate in Russian. The Slavs are one of the major ethno-linguistic community in Europe. It is no accident that Slavic people are often referred to as Brother Peoples; historically they are united with common cultures, geographical locations, sometimes religion, and kindred languages. Native speakers

of Slavic languages often come to study in Russian higher school institutions, work for international companies or visit Russia as tourists.

The work reported here is aimed at analysing basic challenges that Slavic students face in the course of studying Russian pronunciation of coronal obstruents. The significance of the issue is determined by the fact that Russian is a language dominated by consonant contrasts. The domain of coronal obstruents is one of the most important in Russian phonetics: over one third of Russian consonants are within this domain. It is likely that foreign accents are most frequently heard in this segment of the Russian phonetic system.

It is known that ‘the functions of the phonetic component of the language consist in the acoustic coding of the text in the process of its synthesis (speaking) and its decoding in the process of analysis (perception)’¹ [Knyazev, Pozharitskaya, 2011, p. 14–15]. If “coding” (i.e. phonetic implementation of a speaker’s intention) differs from implementation habitual to a particular native language speaker then at the level of “decoding”, certain difficulties may occur when interpreting information. In other words, if a word habitual to a native speaker is uttered in some unusual way it can result in misinterpretation that may distort or disrupt communication [Azimov, Shchukin, 2009, p. 101]. In our case, such unusual coding is a phonetic accent.

Reformatsky defined phonetic accent as a consequence of ‘introducing the skills in one’s own phonological system to a foreign phonological system’ [Reformatsky, 1959, p. 155]. Usually, there are two common perspectives on a foreign accent: “external” and “internal” ones (see, e.g. [Programma, 2007]). The “external” perspective is that of listeners when they detect specific features of a foreign language speaker’s accent regardless of his or her native tongue. The “internal” attitude is the perspective of a speaker: the sum total of interconnected deviations from the system of a language being studied that result from interaction between one’s native tongue and a language being studied, i.e. phonetic interference.

The two perspectives on an accent supplement each other, which makes it possible to detect and identify phonological and non-phonological errors in the students’ speech and correct these. By phonological errors we mean mispronunciation that can cause distortion or destruction of the sense; while non-phonological errors are those which affect only the norm of pronunciation [Bryzgunova, 1963, p. 12–13; Barkhudarova, 2012, p. 58].

V.A. Vinogradov wrote that interference is localised in a speaker, when an accent exists only for a listener [Vinogradov, 1976, p. 42].

A.A. Reformatsky noted that depending on the correlation of the phonological systems of the native tongue and a foreign language, two tendencies

¹ The English translation of citations is made by the author of this paper.

might be seen when a learner is mastering the system of phonetic categories of the language being studied. ‘The first trend is to fit foreign properties that differ from one’s native pattern: for instance, when a smaller phonemic inventory of the native tongue is superimposed on the more extensive phonemic inventory of a foreign language’ [Reformatsky, 1959, p. 148]. E.g. native speakers of many languages including Slavic ones typically pronounce non-palatalised consonants in the position of palatalised ones; for example, *[s]eichas ‘сейчас’, *ve[s] ‘весь’. This happens because most languages lack a phonological opposition between palatalised / non-palatalised consonants.

The second trend becomes evident when ‘the phonemic repertoire of one’s native tongue is larger than the phonemic repertoire of a foreign language within a similar segment of the phonetic system’ [Reformatsky, 1959, p. 148]. In this case, the native speakers of the language that is rich phonemically start to single out insignificant non-phonological features within a meagre repertoire. So, native speakers of many languages including the Slavic ones may exaggerate diphthongal feature of the Russian vowel [o] in some positions: *v^[u]o]t ‘вот’.

N.S. Trubetsky wrote that ‘listening to speech in a foreign language we analyse what we hear and automatically apply the familiar “phonological sieve” of our native tongue. Then since our “sieve” turns out to be inappropriate for the foreign language, multiple errors and misunderstandings occur. We misinterpret the sounds of the foreign language phonologically for they are griddled out through our native tongue’s “phonological sieve”’ [Trubetsky, 1960, p. 59]. Hence, as A.A. Reformatsky indicated: our main task is not to master foreign pronunciation but to “fight” our own [Reformatsky, 1970, p. 506].

Researchers have repeatedly pointed out that the most dangerous thing is to be carried away by seeming “similarities”: these are often seductive, and they should be really avoided. ‘Just catch a likeness, – A.A. Reformatsky put it – and you would be immediately tempted to bring different things to some common basis both systematically and physically on the grounds of “the type of the sound”’ [Reformatsky, 1959, p. 145]. L.V. Shcherba noted that ‘difficulties hide not so much in the sounds for which there are no counterparts in a student’s native tongue, but rather in those for which similar sounds exist in it’ [Shcherba, 1974, p. 128].

All the above can be easily illustrated when focusing on accents peculiar to the native speakers of the Slavic languages. One might be tempted to identify ‘something similar and to accept it for the same phenomenon’ [Reformatsky, 1959, p. 145]. This results in making errors that keep recurring even in the speech of people who speak Russian at a high level.

Sometimes errors are caused by divergence in position-related patterns in the native and studied languages. Position-related patterns can imply both the existence of phonological alternations conditioned by the sound position, and limitations that particular positions impose on use of the sound [Barkhudarova, 2011, p. 40]. E.g. although in the Bulgarian language there is an opposition of consonants by palatalisation / non-palatalisation, in the Bulgarian accent quite often one detects mispronunciation of Russian palatalised consonants. This results from position-related patterns for the use of these consonants inherent of the Russian language, which differ from the patterns of use of the respective Bulgarian consonants: in Bulgarian, palatalised consonants are impossible at the absolute end of the spoken word and before other consonants [Lebedeva, 1970, p. 83], while in Russian palatalised consonants can be located in most positions in the spoken word. For instance, in the experiments to be reported, the following errors in the speech of Bulgarian native speakers were detected which resulted from this divergence in position-related patterns in the Russian and Bulgarian languages: *ry[s] ‘рысь’, *skvo[z]niak ‘сквозняк’, *rado[st] ‘радость’.

To study the accents of native speakers of the Slavic languages in the domain of Russian coronal obstruent pronunciation, a linguistic experiment has been carried out; the experiment included several stages: first, the specifics of the Russian phonetic system have been analysed against the background of phonetic systems of other Slavic languages. This analysis made it possible to predict the basic challenges in mastering Russian coronal obstruents pronunciation by native speakers of the other Slavic languages. The predictions guided the design of targeted materials that consist of the words, word combinations, and sentences, which include phonetic phenomena that can be difficult for Slavic students. Then the materials were suggested to the participants whose native tongues were six Slavic languages: Bulgarian, Croatian, Polish, Czech, Ukrainian and Serbian. Altogether 17 informants took part in the experiment: 6 Bulgarian speakers, 3 Czech speakers, and two for each of the other Slavic languages listed above. The informants' reading of the materials was recorded and analysed.

The results of the analysis are shown in Table 1. The data reflect typical pronunciation errors detected in the speech of the native speakers of Slavic languages when producing Russian coronal obstruents.

The Table demonstrates that a number of difficulties which result from pronouncing Russian coronal obstruents are common for all these Slavic language native speakers. These common mispronunciations are:

- a) distinguishing between palatalised and non-palatalised consonants;
- b) pronunciation of various multicomponent and two-component consonant clusters: in particular, -сч-, -зч-, -тч-, -дч-, -чш-, -сш-, -зш-, -тч-, -дз-.

Table 1

Typical mispronunciations of Russian coronal obstruents by Slavic language speakers

Bulgarian accent	Croatian accent	Polish accent	Czech accent	Ukrainian accent	Serbian accent
<i>Opposition of consonants by palatalisation / non-palatalisation</i>					
*r[ʏ]s] 'рысь', *skvo[z]niak 'сквозняк', *rado[st] 'радость'	*[s]eichas 'сейчас', *rado[st] 'радость', *[t]ʏ, 'ты'	*ho[t] 'хоть', *chi[t] 'чуть'	*ve[s] 'весь', *[s]ʏn 'синь'	*r[ʏ]s] 'рысь'	*[s]eichas 'сейчас', *chi[t] 'чуть', *[t]ʏt 'идут'
<i>Opposition of voiced / voiceless consonants</i>					
–	*no[z] 'нож', *obe[s]:ana 'обезьяна'	*no[z] 'нож', *prole[z] 'пролез'	–	–	*no[z] 'нож'
<i>Sibilants</i>					
*[z]ʏviot 'живёт', *bol[ɛ]oi 'большой', *[t]e[ɛ]esh 'ищешь'	*[t]e[ɛ] 'ищешь', *radaj[ɪ]aia 'падающая', *sme[ɛ]no 'смешно'	–	*monta[z]or 'монтажёр', *ri[ɛ]ʏstʏ 'пушистый', *kuki[ɛ] 'кукиш'	*[t]e[ɛ]ʏl' 'щель'	*re[z]et 'режет', *solny[ɛ]ko 'солнышко', *proprust[ɪ]e[ɪ]ʏ 'пропустивший'
<i>Affricates</i>					
*ro-neme[ts]ki 'по-немецки'	*stan[ts]ʏa 'станция', *to[ʏ]no 'точно', *[sts]ena 'цена'	*tsy[ɛ] 'пыц'	*prin[ts]ʏp 'принцип'	–	*[t]ʏ 'чья'
<i>Consonant Clusters</i>					
*uchi[ts]ʏa 'учитесь', *ite[ɪ]aiu 'читаю', *ol[ts]ʏesno 'отчество'	*zago[dd]o 'за год до', *be[s]ʏarki 'без шапки', *lu[te]ʏi 'лучший'	*zago[dd]o 'за год до', *be[s]ʏarki 'без шапки', *lu[te]ʏi 'лучший'	*[ste]ʏaiu 'читаю'	*be[s]ʏarki 'без шапки'	*[te]ʏaiu 'читаю', *[ste]ʏiaesh 'считаешь', *lu[te]ʏi 'лучший', *lu[te]ʏi 'лучший'

It should be mentioned that common difficulties are both related to similar and different errors in various accents. For example, the opposition of consonants by palatalisation / non-palatalisation was a challenge for all informants; they demonstrated both similar and different mispronunciations in this domain.

For instance, speakers of all languages tended to pronounce non-palatalised consonants instead of palatalised ones at the end of the spoken word: **ry*[s] ‘рысь’, **chu*[t] ‘чуть’. Similar mispronunciations have been identified before front vowels in the speech of Bulgarian, Croatian and Serbian students: **[s]eichas* ‘сейчас’, **o*[t]ets ‘отец’. The reverse phenomenon of inappropriate consonant palatalisation before vowels has been detected only with speakers of the Serbian, Czech and Croatian languages: **[sʲ]in* ‘синь’, **pushis*[tʲi] ‘пушистый’.

Some types of mispronunciation were found to be relevant to the speakers of not all but several languages. For instance, many foreign language speakers faced difficulties when pronouncing affricates. Thus, pronunciation of the affricate [ts] seemed difficult to the native speakers whose language was Bulgarian, Croatian and Czech; pronunciation of the palatalised affricate [tɕ] seemed difficult to native speakers of Croatian and Serbian. The first group tended to palatalise the non-palatalised affricate [ts] in front of vowels and palatalised consonants as in the words *по-немецки, станция, принцип*. The latter group of speakers pronounced the palatalised affricate [tɕ] as a non-palatalised consonant: **to*[tʃ]no ‘точно’, **[tʃ]i* ‘чьи’.

Native speakers of Croatian, Polish and Serbian faced difficulties with the positional change of voiced consonants to their voiceless counterparts in absolute final position in the spoken word, substituting voiceless consonants for voiced ones: **no*[z] ‘нож’, **prole*[z] ‘пролез’.

Native speakers of all languages except for Polish demonstrated a large variety of errors in pronouncing sibilants. Below, we adduce some examples of specific errors in Slavic accents:

a) native speakers of Bulgarian, Croatian and Serbian demonstrated palatalisation of sibilants in front of velar consonants: **[ɕ]kolnica* ‘школьница’, **solny*[ɕ]ko ‘солнышко’;

b) native speakers of Bulgarian and Serbian demonstrated palatalisation of sibilants before front vowels: **ka*[ɕ]el ‘кашель’, **re*[z]et ‘режет’;

c) native speakers of all languages except for Polish and Ukrainian showed palatalisation of sibilants before non-front vowels: **bol*[ɕ]oi ‘большой’, **pi*[ɕ]u ‘пишу’;

d) native speakers of Bulgarian and Ukrainian pronounced sound combination [ɕtɕ] in place of [ɕ]: **i*[ɕtɕ]esh ‘ищёшь’, **[ɕtɕel]* ‘щель’.

The Russian phonetic system poses difficulties for students of Russian who natively speak other Slavic languages. We have considered the specific difficulties posed by coronal obstruents. Some types of mispronunciation were typical for the native speakers of all presented Slavic languages (e.g., the use of consonants opposed by palatalisation / non-palatalisation in different positions), whilst others were demonstrated by the speakers of some groups of languages only (e.g., the pronunciation of sibilants).

It should be mentioned that it is fairly rare for errors in Russian coronal obstruent pronunciation to be shared by speakers of all the languages investigated. Most of the specific foreign accent features identified are typical only for a group of accents, even in the case when these accents result from interference from closely related languages.

The Russian pronunciation errors produced by native speakers of other Slavic languages are caused by different factors. Based on the classification of errors according to their origin suggested by E.L. Barkhudarova [Barkhudarova, 2012], all errors identified in the course of this research can be divided into two basic categories:

1) errors caused by difference in the phonemic repertoire of the native tongue and the language being studied: the 'truly system-defined errors' [Barkhudarova, 2012, p. 61]. E.g., due to absence of palatalised consonants in their native tongue, many foreign students including Slavic students pronounce **ho*[t] for both positions: *хоть* and *хот* or *ход*;

2) errors of 'position-related' origin that result from either mis-acquisition of phonetic position-related patterns of the language being studied, or from transferring the phonetic position-related patterns of the native language to the language being studied [Barkhudarova, 2012, p. 61]. Pronouncing voiced consonants instead of voiceless ones at the end of a spoken word can be considered among errors of this type, and these have been identified in this study in the speech of the native speakers of the Croatian, Polish and Serbian languages.

Working with errors of position-related origin with foreign students in Russian phonetic classes could be of special importance and challenge since 'position-related patterns are easy to acquire while mastering a native tongue, but they are extremely difficult while studying a foreign language owing to the instinctive nature of perception and acquisition of these' [Barkhudarova, 2012, p. 67]. Moreover, position-related accent is usually the most stable and can be detected even in the speech of people whose command of a foreign language is at a very high level; after all 'native speakers of any tongue ... transfer their phonetic patterns to the language being studied and do not perceive phonetic patterns of the studied language' [Barkhudarova, 2012, p. 68]. Hence the tasks of the analysis and elimination of 'position-related' errors

in the speech of Russian-speaking foreigners of all levels are relevant and important. This particularly applies to the elimination of phonetic accents in the speech of the students whose native tongues are Slavic, e.g. errors related to substituting voiceless consonants for voiced ones at the end of the spoken word, the palatalisation of consonants in particular positions, and others.

So, the analysis carried out here demonstrates that the speech of Slavic students of Russian exhibits interference resulting both from common difficulties typical for all students whose native tongues are Slavic, and from challenges specific to the native speakers of particular Slavic languages. These shared and specific difficulties cause errors in the Russian speech of Slavs; these errors may be either similar or different for various accents.

The theoretical value of the research carried out here has practical implications for developing a typology of foreign accents in Russian speech. In addition, the findings may be specifically useful in the creation of courses in Russian phonetics for the native speakers of Slavic languages.

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