

Interference of Croatian in the Pronunciation of the Twelve Most Frequent RP Consonants

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This paper presents the results of an experiment carried out to point to some hitherto unexplored aspects of interference between Croatian or Serbian and English. In particular, the research was concerned with the pronunciation of the twelve most frequent RP consonants on the part of speakers of the observed variety of Croatian or Serbian. Three groups of errors have been noticed. The first group includes errors which logically result from the basic differences between the two phonological and phonetic inventories concerned. The second, a particularly interesting group, comprises some unexpected pronunciation errors, neglected in existing contrastive phonological and phonetic literature. The most notable among them is an excessive final devoicing of English obstruents. Finally, an important role in the creation of the overall impression of foreign accent is played by errors consisting of hypercorrect pronunciation of the target-language consonants.

1. The aims and main assumptions of the research

The present paper presents the results of an experiment carried out in order to point to some as yet unexplored aspects of Croatian accent in the pronunciation of English.¹ The research under consideration was conducted to show the relative difficulty in the identification and realization of particular English consonants for speakers of the Croatian variety of the Serbo-Croatian language. The population observed consists of subjects whose pronunciation of the mother tongue

1. The experiment was conducted as the basis for the author's M.A. thesis, entitled *Fonološke i fonetske osnove hrvatskoga književnog jezika u engleskom izgovoru* (The phonological and phonetic bases of interference between Standard Croatian and English).

maximally approaches what is often referred to as “standard”, i.e. the most general type of unlocalizable accent (cf. Wells 1982: 118). The experiment concerns primarily the **paradigmatic aspect** of interference between **two particular accents** (Standard Croatian and RP) of the languages under consideration, a **particular stage in the acquisition of the target language** (a relatively advanced one), and a **single phonostylistic level** (the most formal one). Therefore, it is important to note that the results obtained cannot serve as a universal illustration, let alone account for the wide range of issues subsumed under the topic of Serbo-Croatian interference in the pronunciation of English consonants.² Instead, they are meant to point to some directions which further exploration of interference between the two languages can and should take.

The issues dealt with can be simply formulated in terms of a common question that arises in the course of the acquisition or linguistic study of foreign languages: which particular phonemes (in our case consonants) of the target language present difficulties in identification or realization to the category of speakers concerned and to what extent. Putting it in more concrete terms, the question posed here is whether in our use of the English language we are more often and more reliably revealed as non-native speakers of English by, let us say, the wrong realization of the phoneme /r/ or, say, by the non-English pronunciation of the phoneme /v/, and how can this difference in indicativeness between particular wrongly pronounced target-language sounds be measured and numerically expressed.

The research was based on the following assumption: the contribution of a non-English sound in the foreigner's speech to the overall impression of foreign accent is directly related to:

- (a) the frequency of occurrence of the sound in question
- (b) the extent to which the concerned sound deviates articulatorily and acoustically from the expected (i.e., unmarked) target-language sound.

Thus, in order to establish how indicative of our Croatian accent is our pronunciation of a particular English consonant, we need two kinds of information: first, the frequency of that consonant in the target language and second, some kind of numerical data indicating its distance in our pronunciation of English from the ideal, expected RP consonant.

As regards the frequency of occurrence of particular consonants in RP, the necessary statistical data are provided by Gimson (1976). Data on the articulatory and acoustic distance from the expected standard of English consonants pronounced on the part of Croatian-speaking informants had to be obtained by establishing a suitable methodology of measuring and quantifying the Croatian accent.

2. The term “consonant” is used here in a rather wide sense. It refers to the sound types for which Gimson (1976: 28) employs the term “consonantal type”, and which he defines as “the type of sound which is most easily described in terms of articulation, since we can generally feel the contacts and movements involved.”

As the native speakers' judgement represents the most reliable and appropriate criterion for deciding about the existence, non-existence, or strength of a foreign accent, the experiment under consideration involved evaluation of the English pronunciation of the representative non-English informants on the part of English assessors.

Since we are examining the realization of discrete linguistic units, it does not appear reasonable to expect the assessors to distinguish more than five degrees of deviation from what they feel to be native-like pronunciation. In addition, a five-degree scale of evaluation turned out to be particularly suitable in view of the fact that all the chosen assessors, who work as English teachers, were used to the five-degree system of evaluation in their everyday work. They were asked to give the highest mark (1) for what they felt to be perfect, native-like pronunciation of the observed consonant, the lowest mark (5) for the highest degree of foreign accent, and the intermediate marks (from 2 to 4) for the various successive degrees of foreign accent between these two extremes on the scale. In other words, the stronger the native speaker's impression of a foreign accent, the higher the mark.

The variable aimed at for each consonant was thus obtained by multiplying the average mark given for its pronunciation by its frequency of occurrence in the target language. It should be noted that the consonants with a frequency below 2% were not taken into consideration, which means that the research was limited to the twelve most frequent RP consonants.

2. The choice of the informants, pronunciation models and assessors

The subjects consisted of ten psychology students, aged 19—20. Before their University course of English, all the chosen subjects had learned the British variety of English at school for eight years. These ten informants were chosen from among a larger group, consisting of about forty students, according to the following criteria:

(a) By virtue of their provenance, social and educational background, as well as on the basis of their own estimation, the chosen students cannot be considered as speakers of any recognizable local accent. In other words, in their pronunciation of their mother tongue, these informants maximally approach the idealized, standard accent, in Yugoslav literature normally called "Croatian literary language", which is in the present paper referred to as Standard Croatian.

(b) Because of the possible physiologically based and hitherto insufficiently explored differences in the pronunciation of consonants by men and women, the two sexes were equally represented in the experiment, seeing that in normal, everyday situations, as a rule, we are about equally exposed to male and female pronunciation.

The pronunciation models after whom the informants repeated the prepared text met the same criteria as the informants, of course, applied to their mother-tongue, English. These models were an English man and an English woman, whose pronunciation of English, according to the definition provided by Wells (1982: 117) is identifiable as RP.

The same goes for the four assessors, the only difference being that in choosing them it was not necessary to ensure an equal representation of the sexes, since no physiological bases are known for a difference between the sexes as regards the perception of pronunciation. Let it be mentioned in passing that all these assessors teach English to adult native speakers of Serbo-Croatian at a relatively advanced level.

3. The choice of the text and the phonostylistic register

The experiment under consideration was limited to a single phonostylistic register, in particular, the most formal one: the pronunciation of a specially prepared list of words in a sound-proof studio. This choice was made on the basis of the following considerations:

(a) The research is concerned with the registering and evaluation of phenomena which can be characterized as pronunciation nuances. This presupposes perfect studio conditions of recording, which excludes the possibility of any kind of "natural", spontaneous speech.

(b) As the quality of the discrete units concerned depends considerably on their position within the word, the text which we want to use for the examining of the consonants in question, must contain these consonants in different phonetically relevant positions and surroundings. Since no "natural" text can be regarded as representative in this respect, the research requires lists of words prepared in advance.

(c) Seeing that the quality of consonants, in contrast to that of vowels, does not substantially depend on prosodic elements, a carefully made list of words can be considered as a representative text for the study of mother-tongue interference in the pronunciation of target-language consonants.

It is logical to presume that in this phonostylistic register, foreign accent is less striking than in other, less formal styles, as informants tend to concentrate hard and take maximum caution when speaking into a microphone. Therefore, we can expect the errors established by this experiment to be even more striking in natural speech. In addition, these errors will then be only one, probably not the most important aspect of the complex phenomenon of Serbo-Croatian accent in the pronunciation of English.

4. The composition of the word-lists

Taking into consideration that lists containing more than sixty words are avoided in this kind of investigation because concentration would become difficult for both informants and assessors, and seeing that the informants had to repeat each word from the list twice (once after the male model and once after the female model), the experiment had to be carried out in two parts. It goes without saying that the recording and evaluating circumstances, and, of course, the participants in the experiment were the same on both occasions. This means that two lists of words were drawn up, each of them consisting of 30 words pronounced in turn, in random order by the male and the female model. In other words, each of the twelve observed consonants was represented in five words

pronounced twice, in various word positions and in varying phonetic surroundings.

When choosing the words, care was taken to ensure that the consonants under consideration were in approximately equally long and equally difficult words.³

5. The conditions and procedure of the experiment

The models recorded their lists in a sound-proof studio, using a condense microphone 20Hz—20kHz / 125 dB SPL, attached to a Revox A 77 recorder.

The same studio was utilized to mix the recordings of the male and female models so as to obtain a random order.

The next step was the recording of the informants' responses to the words pronounced by the models. This was carried out in the same circumstances as the recording of the models. Apart from two tape recorders of the above mentioned type, use was made of a pair of earphones TECH/2 15—22kHz, which later served for the listening and evaluation of the results.

Some particularly revealing results, as well as the corresponding pronunciation models were later subjected to narrow-band spectrographic analysis, which was done in the same studio, using the SONAGRAPH 6061—B, with a frequency range 80—8000 and a 45 Hz filter. The time scale comprised 2,4 sec. for the entire length of the spectrogram.

6. The evaluation and analysis of the results

For the reasons specified earlier, the evaluation, as well as the recording of the results was carried out in two parts, i.e. on two successive days. For each informant the assessors were given a table with a scale from 1 to 5 beside each word that contained one of the consonants under consideration. In each word, the consonant concerned was indicated. The assessors had to attribute one of the five points on the scale to each word. After they had received all the necessary instructions as regards the meaning of each of the five possible marks, relying on their native-speaker intuition, the English people evaluated the strength of the foreign accent in the pronunciation of the consonant in question, the best mark being 1, and the worst one 5.

When evaluating the responses, each of the assessors was alone and did not know the results of the others' evaluation. Thus they could not influence each other's marks. In addition, it should be noted that the assessors had separate forms for each subject, so that when marking the pronunciation of a particular informant, they could not be influenced by the results of the other subjects.

3. The lists of words, a full description of the course of the experiment, as well as a detailed presentation of the results of the research can be found in the M.A. thesis referred to in note 1.

The assessors were asked not to linger on particular words and to give marks which reflect their first impression of the foreign accent, if any, in the pronunciation of the consonant concerned.

As considerations of space do not allow for a detailed presentation of the results of the experiment, for the present purpose I shall only make a survey of the main conclusions that have been reached on the basis of this research.⁴

On the basis of the overall average marks for each consonant on the one hand and the statistics of their frequency on the other, the following values (symbolized by the letter *x*) were obtained for particular consonants, showing their indicativeness of foreign accent in the English pronunciation of the observed category of speakers:

Phoneme	/t/	/dʒ/	/d/	/n/	/s/	/r/	/l/	/k/	/z/	/v/	/w/	/m/
<i>x</i>	11.04	10.36	9.46	7.73	5.15	5.05	4.72	4.42	4.38	3.74	3.57	3.51

(1)

It should be noted that *x* gradually decreases from left to right.

However, we must not forget that the difficulty of particular English phonemes for the speakers of Croatian or Serbian, and accordingly, the strength of the observed Croatian accent in their pronunciation depends considerably on the position within the word and the phonetic surroundings. Thus, for example, the realization of the phoneme /d/ in the intervocalic position, in the word “adore” received an average mark of 1.375, which is much better than the average mark for the final [d] in the word “wind”, 2.675. The example of the phoneme /z/ is even more revealing: in the word-initial position, before a tense vowel, in the word “zeal”, it received an average mark of 1.00. This means, in this position none of the assessors noticed any foreign accent in the pronunciation of this consonant by any informant. In the word-final position, however, in the word “exams”, the same consonant received an average mark of 3.175.

In view of such an obvious correlation between the difficulty of particular phonemes of the target language and their position within the word, as well as their phonetic surroundings, it should be emphasized that the values *x* presented above have an exclusively theoretical significance. By establishing these parameters for the Croatian pronunciation of the twelve most frequent RP consonants, we have provided an answer, at least partially, to the previously posed question: which segments on the phonological and phonetic level betray us as non-native speakers of English and to what extent. Nevertheless, I wish to stress that it would be unjustified, moreover dangerous, to apply the data from table 1 directly in English teaching and learning, and to start from the simplified and

4. See the preceding note.

wrong premise that in order to pronounce English without a Croatian accent, we should simply pronounce certain phonemes, say /d/, otherwise than our mother-tongue would suggest. This would logically encourage hypercorrection, which is again only one aspect of interference.

If we want to use the experiment presented above in practice, in the sense of pointing to certain pronunciation errors which are to be prevented and corrected, and prescribe the corresponding "therapy" for this purpose, we must have as a starting point particular, in this respect indicative, errors.

Let us therefore comment upon the most striking errors of this kind. The pronunciation errors established by this experiment can be divided into three groups.

The first group comprises all those errors which logically result from the differences between the two phonemic and phonetic inventories. Seeing that in linguistic theory and practice these errors are more or less known and expected⁵, here they will be dealt with only in terms of numerical data pointing to their relative significance in losing, or rather diminishing the Croatian accent in the English pronunciation of the observed category of speakers.

The second group consists of some unexpected errors, as yet overlooked in the contrastive literature, which in the experiment turned out to be so frequent and striking that they cannot remain unnoticed.

There is yet a *third group*, including the errors of hypercorrection. Although hypercorrection, as a type of error in the pronunciation of foreign languages is well known in linguistic theory and practice, the actual circumstances and ways it is manifested in the observed informants deserve to be discussed.

1. Let us first consider *the first group of errors*. The most stringing and frequent ones among them are **phonemic errors** in the pronunciation of the RP phoneme /ð/.⁶ In view of the banality and predictability of such errors, as concerns this aspect of the manifestation of Croatian accent, we shall content ourselves with the observation that among the RP consonants under consideration, /ð/ is confused with the widest range of phonemes. This can be illustrated by considering the following errors:

"they" [dei], [gei], [zei]

"other" [ʌ də], [ævə]

"wither" [widə]

"smooth" [smut], [smuz], [smuf], [smuv], [smuθ]

5. Such errors are normally referred to in the contrastive Croatian or Serbian — English works, notably those by Filipović (1961) and Vidović (1985).

6. According to the status of the wrongly pronounced sound in the target language, three types of errors are distinguished: **phonemic**, **phonetic** and **allophonic**. A *phonemic error* is committed when a target-language phoneme is realized by a sound which falls within the range of performance of another, wrong target-language phoneme. By analogy, when the wrongly pronounced sound represents a wrong allophone of the intended target-language phoneme, we are dealing with an *allophonic error*. *Phonetic errors* consist of realizing a phoneme of the target language by a sound which is **c o m p l e t e l y** foreign to it.

. As an example of a typical allophonic error, from this group. I wish to single out the dental realization of the English phoneme /d/, as in the word "doctor": [dɒktə], which, as shown by the results of the evaluation, has made an appreciable contribution to the native speaker's impression of foreign accent.

Among the expected phonetic errors, as regards how frequent and striking they are, one error deserves special attention. It is the pronunciation of the English phoneme /v/. Although in the contrastive phonological and phonetic literature that we have at our disposal potential errors of this kind are regularly taken into consideration⁷, it is rather surprising that all the assessors have proved much more sensitive to the wrong realization of this phoneme than, for example, to the typical Croatian trilled pronunciation of the RP phoneme /r/!

The question that arises here is whether these native speakers of English, whose pronunciation has been defined as standard, react to considerable phonetic deviations from this standard to a lesser extent than we would have supposed on the basis of comparison of the two concerned phonetic inventories, because in some dialects of their language such a pronunciation does not represent a mistake? Unfortunately, for the moment, no definite answer can be provided to this question. The answer depends on whether we subscribe to the panlectal or polylectal view of language⁸, and considerations of space preclude us from making a case for or against either of these two views. Irrespective of the possible explanations why the non-English pronunciation of the RP consonant [v] turns out to be so indicative of Croatian accent, let us briefly comment upon the spectrograms which point to this problem.

The comparison of the spectrograms showing the native speakers' pronunciation of the words containing the phoneme /v/ with the corresponding spectrograms of the typical informants' pronunciation reveals the common tendency among the subjects to pronounce this English consonant too loosely.⁹

The spectra of the English [v] sound always have a discernable *fill*, characteristic of fricative consonants, which at the end of the articulation of the sound in most cases is intensified to the point of resembling the *spike* found in the spectra of plosives. In the spectra showing typical informants' responses (i.e. the ones that were given the average mark 3.75 for this consonant) the looseness of the [v] sounds is basically reflected in the following way: the fill characteristic of the English [v] consonant is as a rule very discreet, and there is no trace of the line resembling the occlusive spike, referred to above. Moreover, the spectra of the sounds under consideration merge with the spectrum of the neighbouring vowel, which points to a somewhat vowel-like quality of the English [v] sound as pronounced by speakers of Croatian.

7. See note 5.

8. The panlectal — polylectal controversy is dealt with in detail by Bolinger and Sears (1981).

9. Cf. Filipović (1961).

2. Within the *second group* we can distinguish three kinds of error. The first one consists of an unexpectedly big difference in aspiration between the models' pronunciation of the final [t] and that of the informants.

The RP word-final [t] is considered as an unaspirated sound, particularly after [s] (cf. Gimson 1976: 161), and in the contrastive literature in this position aspiration is nowhere mentioned as a potential pronunciation problem for speakers of Serbo-Croatian. However, the spectrographic analysis of the relevant responses clearly indicates that the English models realize the phoneme /t/ in this position with a considerably greater degree of aspiration, i.e. with more noise and a shorter occlusion than the observed subjects. This difference in aspiration might be related to the difference in the place of articulation: in English this consonant is alveolar, while in Serbo-Croatian it is dental. Nevertheless, since spectrographic analysis as such does not show such differences in the place of articulation, a possible correlation between the difference in the place of articulation and the difference in aspiration between the two languages in question can only be a matter of guesswork.

The second error from this group consists of an excessive devoicing of English obstruents in the word-final position.

The devoicing of final plosives and fricatives is a widely known process, which has been described in the phonological and phonetic literature of both languages under consideration. Thus Wells observes: "In most kinds of English, lenis ('voiced') obstruents are fully voiced only between voiced segments... Adjacent to a fortis ('voiceless') segment, or to silence surrounding an utterance, they are partly or entirely devoiced." (Wells, 1982:42)

Thus, in devoicing final English obstruents, the informants applied a process which in the observed standard accent is absolutely normal. However, the surprisingly bad marks that the native speakers gave for the pronunciation of such consonants, as well as their explanations in this respect, show that in the pronunciation of the informants, the process under consideration is much more marked than with the pronunciation models.

It should be noted that this devoicing can be observed in the pronunciation of all the voiced obstruents under consideration. In the realization of the phoneme /ð/, admittedly, it does not particularly surprise, as in the pronunciation of sounds which are foreign to our mother tongue, phonemic errors are common, even if they consist in replacing the concerned foreign sound by another foreign sound. As regards the devoicing of the final /z/ as in the word "exams", it can be attributed to the influence of orthography, i.e. of what is commonly referred to as the "apparent system of errors" (cf. Škarić 1967). Likewise, it may be argued that the pronunciation of the word "buzz" as [bas] is attributable to a greater familiarity of the informants with the word "bus" than with its minimal pair "buzz". However, as regards the realization of the words "red", "wind" and "arrive" as [reʔ], [wɪnʔ] and [ə'raɪʔ], no other explanation can be provided for such a drastic final devoicing apart from a **tendency of the observed speakers of Croatian or Serbian to devoice excessively final English obstruents!**

As the informants come from different regions of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and seeing that they were chosen by criteria which ensure a maximal unlocalizability of their pronunciation, it would not be justified to account for this error simply in terms of the influence of a particular Croatian dialect. This would seem the more unjustified in view of the geographical provenance of the informants who exhibited the most striking final devoicing: paradoxically, they come from Dalmatia, where no local dialect is characterized by such a feature.

In connection with this problem, once again it must be observed that a case can be made for a panlectal explanation of the problem, which, however, represents too complex a topic to be dealt with here.

In any case, the excessive final devoicing of English obstruents on the part of the observed informants is borne out by the corresponding spectrograms.

Once again, the responses chosen for spectrographic analysis were the average ones. The difference in voicing between the models' and the informants' pronunciation is reflected in the following ways:

- a) in the difference in the intensity and clarity of the *voicing bar* of the concerned consonant, which is quite clear in the models' spectrograms and obscured in the spectrograms showing the informants' pronunciation.
- b) in the difference of the length of the preceding vowel or sonorant, which is, of course, noticeably shorter before the devoiced informants' consonant, even though no difference can be observed in the overall length of the entire word.
- c) in the cases where the consonant in question is preceded by a sonorant, in the spectrograms of the models' pronunciation, the sonorant's *harmonic* is steadily prolonged into the spectrum of the consonant, while in the spectrograms showing the informants' pronunciation, this harmonic is interrupted.
- d) on average, the spectra of the models' final voiced obstruents exhibit an increased intensity at a higher frequency (about 4500 Hz) than the spectra of these consonants as pronounced by the informants (at cca 3500 Hz).

From this group of unexpected errors there is yet another one, for which it is difficult to find an appropriate name. The error in question is the tendency of the observed informants to confuse an allophone of some phoneme of the target language with what can be called a zero allophone i. e. not pronounce it at all.

A case in point is the pronunciation of the word "hostile" as [hostaɪ], which must be related to the unfamiliarity of the informants with the final "dark l" [ɫ], which is in this word-position in RP a normal allophone of the phoneme /l/.

Even if we wish to argue that the silence at the end of a word pronounced in this way should be treated as the realization of a zero phoneme, it is not quite justified to refer to this kind of error in terms of a "phonemic error", because unlike phonemic errors proper, it occurs only in the realization of one allophone of the concerned phoneme. On the other hand, if by allophonic errors we understand errors involving the pronunciation of a wrong allophone of a particular target-language phoneme, this cannot be classified as an allophonic error either, since in RP, the phoneme /l/ does not have a zero allophone.

Anyway, whatever we decide to call it, even in this necessarily undetailed research, this kind of error has been noticed with several informants, when the word "hostile" was repeated after either of the two models, and therefore deserves attention as a potential manifestation of Croatian accent in the pronunciation of English.

3. Let us finally consider the errors from the **third group**, viz. those of hypercorrection. Above all, this type of mistake is common in the realization of the English phonemes /t/, /d/ and /s/. Of course, it was established with speakers without any speech defects. What they do is pronounce such words as "daughter", "mat", "adore" and "reverse" as [do:θə], [mæθə], [ə'ðo:] and [ri'vq:θ]. These subjects are obviously aware of the potential danger of mistaking the English phonemes /θ/ and /ð/ for the phonemes /t/, /d/ and /s/, and as a result, pronounce [θ] and [ð] even in the cases where they are not supposed to. An observation of their own, made after the experiment, testifies to the existence of such an awareness: in their opinion, it is precisely the pronunciation of the sounds [θ] and [ð] that creates most difficulties in the pronunciation of English and which they tend to replace by the Croatian sounds [t] and [d].

Hypercorrection consisting of the realization of the phoneme /v/ as [w] is illustrated by all those responses which were given the mark 5 for the pronunciation of this consonant. The cases in point are: vast [wa:st], ever [ewə], vault [wolt].

In the end, mention should be made of yet another case of hypercorrection, observed in the pronunciation of the initial /l/ in the word "let". This error consists of using the otherwise troublesome allophone of the phoneme /l/, "dark l" also in places where it does not belong. As hypercorrection here occurs only in the realization of one particular allophone of the phoneme in question, it may be called "allophonic hypercorrection".

The final point to be made is that the results of the experiment presented above have served purely diagnostic purposes. Suggestions as to the corresponding "therapy" cannot be made in the space available here and therefore have to be left for another, more extensive paper.

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INTERFERENCIJA HRVATSKOGA KNJIŽEVNOG JEZIKA U IZGOVORU DVANAEST NAJFREKVENTNIJIH RP KONSONANATA

Na osnovu eksperimenta provedenog s ciljem da se ukaže na neke nedovoljno istražene aspekte interferencije hrvatskog ili srpskog i engleskog jezika, u izgovoru dvanaest najfrekventnijih RP konsonanata kod govornika promatrane varijante hrvatskog ili srpskog uočene su tri grupe pogrešaka. Prvu grupu sačinjavaju greške koje logično proizlaze iz osnovnih razlika dvaju promatranih fonološko-fonetskih inventara. Druga, posebno interesantna grupa obuhvaća neke neočekivane, u postojećoj kontrastivnoj literaturi neobrađene izgovorne pogreške. Naročitu pažnju među njima pobuđuje prekomjerno obezvučenje engleskih finalnih opstruenata. Na kraju, ukupnom utisku stranog akcenta znatno pridonose i greške iz treće grupe, koje se sastoje u hiperkorektnom izgovoru konsonanata jezika cilja.