

Re: Subtitutes for English /T/ and /D/

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- *From:* Dominic Bojarski <dominicbojarski@xxxxxxxxxx>
 - *Date:* Sun, 22 Jul 2007 10:48:51 -0700
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On Jul 22, 2:10 pm, "Peter T. Daniels" <gramma...@xxxxxxxxxxxxx> wrote:

On Jul 22, 4:54 am, Dominic Bojarski <dominicbojar...@xxxxxxxxxx> wrote:

On Jul 22, 6:44 am, "Peter T. Daniels" <gramma...@xxxxxxxxxxxxx> wrote:

On Jul 21, 9:29 pm, Dominic Bojarski
<dominicbojar...@xxxxxxxxxx>
wrote:

Five years
ago, I
moved to
Poland and
have since
been
teaching
English
to Poles. All
of them
start out
pronouncing
[T D] as [f
v]. Many

Do you not contradict
yourself? This shows how
similar they are!

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To Poles, yes. To native speakers, no. No contradiction.

Poles who teach English themselves also do so. This is an extremely irritating mistake and I correct it every time I hear it. As a matter of fact, I tell them that it is an "unforgivable mistake", and to use the Polish [t d] instead.

Why don't you teach them how to make [T] and [D]?? You're as bad as Mark misleading his Hungarians!!

Depends on the level and goals of the student. It takes a Pole a lot of practice to say [T D]. Not all of them are willing to spend that much time on one sound of many that they have problems with.

It's a matter of proximal and distal goals. The proximal goal is to stop the student from using [f v].

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Why? Why is it "unforgivable"?

See below.

This is relatively easy and can be accomplished quickly. The distal goal is to get the student to correctly pronounce [T D]. This demands a lot of time and effort. It is also a lot easier to do if the student is starting out from [t d] than from [f v].

I do not mislead them at all. I tell them quite clearly that using the POLISH [t d] is a compromise, but one that does not impair comprehension as does using [f v].

How does that "impair comprehension"?

Because:

A) it's phonemic: free/three, brief/breath, whiff/with, fin/thin, vat/that, fink/think, furrow/thorough, fought/thought.

In the few examples among those pairs that actually do differ only in /T/ vs. /f/, how would communication be impaired by the substitution?

Perhaps not very much if that were the only pronunciation problem the speaker had. However, language learners usually have a whole constellation of pronunciation problems, each of which contributes to the reduction in ease of communication.

As part of the constellation, the [f v] substitution does indeed impair communication.

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B) most native English speakers wouldn't even dream that the student is trying to say [T D], even those who are aware that the substitution occurs in AAVE, in which it does not occur at the beginning of a word.

Most native English speakers are not hearing isolated wordlists when they're interacting with other English-speakers, whether native or L2.

[f v] may be mapped close to [T D] on phonetic charts and in the brains of some non-native speakers, but not in the brains of native speakers. As I said, native speakers focus on the differences between these sounds (which are small, but essential), and ignore the similarities (which are large, but nonetheless not significant) to the point that many are completely unaware of any similarity.

And therefore they automatically substitute the correct phoneme for the phone that was actually uttered.

With a great deal of difficulty, if at all. It's not at all a natural substitution for most native English speakers. [f v] is not a very useful hint that the speaker meant to say [T D]. Most native speakers would leave the sound blank and try to fill it in based on the context rather than relying on [f v].

Let's say that [f v] and [T D] are 99% identical. Native speakers naturally ignore that 99% and focus exclusively on the 1% that distinguishes them.

Furthermore, learning to make the substitution takes far longer than the length of an average conversation. This isn't a pure substitution, either. First the listener has to decide whether the substitution should be made or not.

I doubt that many unexposed native speakers would readily interpret "vose" (those), "boaff" (both), and "maff" (math) without sufficient context. I also doubt that many of them would fail to notice it, as you seem to think.

Utterances do not occur "without sufficient context."

Lexical words occur more often without sufficient context than you would think, especially in brief conversations on non-mundane topics.

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Sean asked whether there were any American accents that use [f v] for [T D]. Uneducated African-Americans often do, and this is considered an extremely negative feature of their speech. Anyone who says 'wiff' for 'with', or 'ax' for ask', is going to be at a disadvantage on the labor market. It really raises hackles, including among better educated African-Americans.

As Nathan explained, it's a lot more complicated than that.

And many, many educated African Americans have phonetic traits that reveal their origins that they are simply unaware of —

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this one
happens to have reached
general consciousness.

To the point that it has become a shibboleth.
It's not a matter of a
voice being recognized as
African-American that is the issue, but of
the voice being recognized as uneducated. It
has reached general
consciousness because it clearly stands out
and sounds bizarre to non-
AAVE native speakers, few of whom are, as
you said, acoustic
phoneticians.

Why do you claim it "sounds bizarre"?

Because it does. Extremely. Haven't you ever heard anyone with this
problem before? It's downright irritating.

I'm afraid that's a problem with your attitude, not with the speakers
you're denigrating.

And what attitude do you suggest that I take? Live and let live, and
let the students retain their unpleasant accents? Get real, buddy.
That's exactly what they're paying me to do. It would also be
inconsiderate of me not to reduce my accent when speaking Polish.

ALL of my native speaking agree, whether they're from the States,
Canada, Ireland, Northern Ireland, England, South Africa or Australia.

"ALL of your native speaking"? Don't you realize that if you had said
that, no one would even have noticed the mistake? People hear what you
mean to say, not your slips of the tongue.

Typo. "ALL of my native speaking colleagues". Without exception, every
single one notices it clearly and considers it a serious mistake.

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They were all taken aback when they first heard Poles using this pronunciation. Even the one from London, who has probably heard it all his life (48 years). As a matter of fact, he's the one who had the biggest problem with it.

Duh. That's what I've been saying all along. ONLY the "one from London" (scil. only the Brit) is aware of and attuned to the particular negative sociolinguistic trait of [f] for /T/.

Duh, no. ALL of them, without exception, find it objectionable.

We spend a lot of time and effort trying to break this habit, as well as several other habits that Poles have, including:

A) using the Polish [o] sound in words like "cop", "not", "want" and "ball", which will be heard as "cope", "note", "won't" and "bowl". The Polish [o] sound does not exist in English, except maybe in some marginal dialects. Convincing Poles that it doesn't is difficult, because they "hear" it in the speech of non-American speakers. The sounds are radically different, though.

They also hear it in the speech of American speakers, because it's their phoneme represented by the American allophones.

No they don't. It's simply not there at all. Nor is there anything remotely like it. Period.

They should be hearing something that is practically identical to the Polish "a" sound (all of my American colleagues are cot-is-caught speakers, as am I). The reason they hear "o" is because they see "o". I grew up surrounded by Poles who learned English, but who remained illiterate in it. They did not have this problem. In fact, their accent, which was based almost entirely on listening, is fundamentally different from that of my students, which is more based on familiarity with how the word is spelled.

Try having someone read you something in which all of the "short o" sounds have been changed to "long o" sounds and see for yourself.

Again, how is communication impaired?

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B) using the Polish [a] sound in words like "cap" and "bag", which will be heard as "cop" and "bog". The Polish sound is the same as in the English word "father".

Again, how is communication impaired?

Because it phonemic and unnatural. Any time the listener has to fill in the blank for a word or sound that he can't guess, it impairs communication.

C) pronouncing "it" as "eat", and "live" as "leave". Polish has approximately the same sounds as English. The problem is orthographic in nature. The letter "i" is universally pronounced like "ee" in Polish. I had the same problem in reverse when learning Polish.

Again, how is communication impaired

Millions of Spanish-speakers in the US also don't distinguish /i/ from /iy/ (or, if you insist, /I/ from /i/), and communication is not impaired.

D) terminal devoicing, as in German. This gets tiring very fast, and severely impedes comprehension.

Whom does it "tire"?

The listener who has to spend time and energy trying to figure out what the speaker was trying to say. Again, it a case of first deciding whether a substitution has to be made, and then making it. This takes time, effort, attention and practice.

It's also typical of African American speech, and it's one of those (unconscious) "markers" I just referred to.

E) trying to pronounce the vowel in "bird", "herd", "heard", "curd" and "word" differently. They are convinced that they must be different, since we spell them differently. Polish has an almost complete one-to-one correspondence between spelling and pronunciation, and they assume that English must, too.

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That should be a simple matter for the teacher to explain. However, it has nothing to do with the topic.

F) failing to complete n, m, l, and w at the end of a word. Polish pronunciation stops far short of the portion of the sound that English speakers depend on for recognition. We just hear "something" that we cannot interpret.

I don't know what you mean by "complete" the sounds. American English is chock-full of "unreleased" final consonants.

Read it again. "Polish pronunciation stops far short of the portion of the sound that English speakers depend on for recognition. We just hear "something" that we cannot interpret." Another poster on this thread commented that for him, the English "n" seems to last FOUR TIMES as long as the "n" in his language, which I believe was Dutch. The same thing with Polish. Polish speakers break off the sound before they get to the part that we English speakers need in order to recognize it.

G) pronouncing silent letters as in "half", "island", "listen", "comb" and "bought". They can't believe that they are truly silent, and that it is not more "correct" to pronounce them.

Again, a problem with spelling. Nothing to do with the topic.

Our job is made harder by the fact that native speakers here mainly teach advanced students in whom these habits are deeply ingrained because they were not corrected by Polish teachers, many of whom have the same habits. The students can't believe that their former teachers were gravely wrong, or that the differences are huge and impair comprehension.

Right, blame the English language or the learner's phonemic system for the shortcomings of the educational system.

Non sequitur.

When the [f v] substitution is combined with these other problems, it is often impossible to figure out whether a Pole is trying to say

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"thirty", "thirteen", "forty" or "fourteen".

Isn't the notion of movable, i.e. phonemic, stress, among the very first things you should have taught in the Polish classroom? THAT all by itself could be the single most significant barrier to communication.

And it is one of the first things they learn. Without any difficulty, actually. Learning to pronounce differences in vowel duration is a different matter, though, and most Poles have a great deal of trouble learning that. My boyfriend has been living with me for three years and now speaks intimidatingly good English, except for the fact that he just can't pick up the rhythm of the language, in spite of all the time we have spent working on it.

Cockney is regarded as "British" and hence prestigious in the US.

As for Cockney, I doubt that many Americans are aware that the [f v] substitution is a feature of that dialect. The first time I heard it, I considered it to be a speech defect particular to that speaker.

The very fact that you noticed it marks you as unusual.

Not at all. It stands out like a sore thumb. I remember watching Ali G. with some friends in the States. One of them asked what a "bovva" was. We concluded that it was simply some slang word. None of us figured out that it meant "bother".

Aside from the [f v] substitution, there are no other similarities between the Polish accent and the Cockney accent, so there is no chance that an American would assume that a Polish speaker is speaking with a "prestigious" accent.

That wasn't the question, was it.

Well, then what was it?

An unexposed native speaking listener may be able to deal with the [f v] substitution if it is the only problem the speaker has, but would

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have to expend a great deal of effort trying to figure it out in combination with the other phonemically significant substitutions that Poles make.

Evidently you've never lived in a place with a great many Polish-L1-speakers in an English-speaking community. Try living in Chicago. Largest Polish-population city outside Warsaw, with still a very, very large number of monolinguals, and Polish accents are no harder to interpret than any other accents.

I'm not singling the Polish accent out at all. I lived in a Polish speaking community until I was 22, and later in Chicago for five years. Even though my ear is probably somewhat biased, I would still say that the Polish accent is far more comprehensible than some Asian accents.

From the point of view of an ESL/EFL teacher, the [f v] substitution

is a very bad habit that has to be quickly eradicated. The phonetic resemblance of [f v] to [T D] is simply immaterial, a linguistic curiosity of no particular teaching value. Close perhaps, but definitely no cigar.

The very fact that an ESL teacher conceptualizes his students' native-language traits as "very bad habits" bespeaks a very unfortunate attitude on his part.

No thing of the sort. I speak Polish myself, and would consider carrying over English sounds into Polish to be a very bad habit on my part as well.

And if he thinks that the _reason_ for the dispreference for [f v] is immaterial, then he is simply not qualified to be an ESL teacher.

Non sequitur again. I said that using the phonetic similarity as a justification for the substitution doesn't hold water. The reason for the dispreference is, as you say, a different matter altogether.

We

saw exactly the same problem with "cybercypher" Franke, who (unlike you) isn't even interested in why certain aspects of English are problematic for his Taiwanese students.

Unlike Franke, I wouldn't be able to live in a foreign country for a prolonged period without learning the language. I learned German before I went to Germany, and Danish before I went to Denmark. I came to Poland specifically to learn Polish, and got right down to work. Being aware of the differences between English and Polish has helped me learn Polish quicker and easier.

I'm not exactly sure what you are trying to get at. That accent reduction is a waste of time? I assure you it's not. Like it or not, people treat others, both fellow native speakers and foreigners, differently based on the quality of their accent. It's a natural human trait, and there's nothing you or I can do about it except help speakers with undesirable accents change theirs so that they are more acceptable.

Dominic Bojarski