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Rebuilding a Professional Space for Pronunciation

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The Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching (PSLLT) conference is the only conference of its kind in North America. This conference came from an idea that germinated during John's sabbatical in Vancouver, British Columbia during the first half of 2008. He took part in one day of presentations and discussions whose goal was to map out research goals and directions, with the end goal of helping to influence the long-term research agenda for pronunciation research and teaching. This led to the idea of a conference devoted to pronunciation teaching and research, and resulted in the planning of this first conference.

A further framing of the reason for the conference came when John was invited to take part in a colloquium at the Canadian Association of Applied Linguistics conference in Ottawa during 2009. The colloquium, *Accentuating the positive: Directions in pronunciation research*, examined many of the same issues as the Vancouver discussion, albeit in greater depth. His part of the colloquium defined the future of pronunciation teaching and research as a marketing issue, an issue of rebranding pronunciation for today's "market". In business, rebranding is a way of reviving demand for an established product that has lost much of its sales appeal in a changing market. Rebranding can occur by developing new uses for a product, showing how it remains relevant to a market that has overlooked its virtues, and building a new brand identity. There are features in language teaching today that suggest that such rebranding could be successful for pronunciation, but there are other elements that indicate that rebranding will not be enough without rebuilding the infrastructure needed to support pronunciation's role in the curriculum.

A positive sign for pronunciation's future is that teachers have not lost interest in teaching pronunciation, nor have students lost interest in learning it. Sessions about teaching pronunciation at professional conferences are routinely jammed. Professional workshops at TESOL, the annual international Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages convention, are consistently among the most attended professional development workshops, despite the significant extra cost to participants. Students also recognize pronunciation's value. When we offer pronunciation tutoring opportunities as part of a graduate-level class on the teaching of pronunciation, we can usually accommodate 15 or so students. It is not unusual to have between 100 and 200 students ask to take part. Clearly, learners of English have not heard that pronunciation is unimportant.

Pronunciation, as all language teachers with more than a passing knowledge of methodology know, was once central to language teaching. Practical phonetics and phonology were important enough to be part of any well-considered training course. Loss of value to the brand of pronunciation began most obviously with Critical Period research in the 1960s (see a review in Scovel, 2000). This research suggested that native accents were not only unrealistic, but perhaps unachievable for adult learners of a foreign language. Following this, the advent of the Communicative approach to language teaching in the 1970s began to institutionalize the loss of market share for pronunciation because CLT's emphasis on spoken language and communicative effectiveness did not include work on the details of pronunciation accuracy. As a result, in many places the baby (the need for spoken intelligibility) was thrown out with the bathwater (the goal of native accuracy).

By the time research began to recognize that pronunciation was not an issue of native-like vs. unnecessary (Hinofotis & Bailey, 1981), but rather that pronunciation training was essential to a multitude of intermediate steps that influenced spoken intelligibility, the language teaching world had moved on. The infrastructure for the teaching of pronunciation was in serious disrepair with little interest from many in restoring it. Courses for teachers existed in a minority of TESL training programs (Murphy, 1997) in North America; the same situation was true across the English-speaking world (Gilbert, 2010).

Another part of the professional infrastructure, pronunciation research reported in top refereed research journals, was also suffering from neglect. Even today, this is true. A recent survey of research in 14 top professional journals showed that over a 10-year period, from 1999-2008, pronunciation-oriented articles ranged from a low of less than 1 percent to a high of around seven percent of all articles published in these journals (Deng et al., 2009). The highest percentages (none very high) occurred in journals that had published dedicated special topics issues on pronunciation. Several journals went for five years at a time without a single article relevant to pronunciation, indicating that even those teachers looking for research help in making pedagogical decisions were left with few places to turn.

Another part of the professional infrastructure included sanctioned settings for professional to meet. In the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL), a special Interest Groups (SIG) has existed for pronunciation since the mid 1980s, but getting an equivalent group started in TESOL was met with roadblocks of all sorts. Pronunciation was not considered an important professional undertaking, and Interest Sections focusing on particular language skills were not considered appropriate to an organization that preferred to think of itself in terms of the context, not the content, of teaching (Gilbert, 2010).

An interesting analogy to pronunciation is the teaching of grammar. Also as a result of the communicative revolution in language teaching, grammar was threatened with marginalization. Krashen (e.g., 1985) argued that grammar would naturally develop with the right approach to language teaching. Fortunately for students and for teachers, the mistake of

removing grammar from teacher training programs did not progress as far as it did with pronunciation, and it became quickly evident that language learning was unlikely to lead to the attainment that, without explicit grammar teaching, students needed to achieve. In addition, grammar teaching was rebranded with the help of SLA theories of input processing (Vanpatten, 2004) and noticing (Long, 1990) and the development of new approaches to teaching such as Larsen-Freeman's *Form-Meaning-Use* paradigm (2001) and cognitive approaches to teaching grammar (Fotos, 2001).

Pronunciation's place in research and teaching, meanwhile, has had similar theoretical advances and teaching paradigm shifts. Research into pronunciation has been strongly influenced by extensive research by Murray Munro and Tracey Derwing (e.g., 1995) examining the concepts of intelligibility, accentedness and comprehensibility. Other research examining the constraints of the critical period and ultimate attainment in pronunciation conducted by James Flege and colleagues, as well as a number of other researchers (e.g., Moyer 2004) have rewritten the book on ultimate attainment in pronunciation acquisition, casting more attention on the importance of individual and social factors and less on biological ones.

The paradigm on teaching pronunciation, meanwhile, has also shifted away from the traditional emphasis on vowels and consonants to a prominent focus on prosody, the suprasegmentals of language. What this means is that the pronunciation research and teaching of today is very different than it was 40 years ago. Unfortunately, the stereotype that pronunciation means little more than endless drilling remains strong in many people's minds.

One of the consequences of the uneven professional infrastructure for training teachers (Murphy, 1997) is that teachers today feel more unprepared to teach pronunciation than in previous generations. Research across the English speaking world has been very consistent about this. Teachers are underprepared or uneasy about teaching pronunciation in the US (Morley,1994), in Canada (Breitkreutz, Derwing & Rossiter, 2002), in the United Kingdom (Burgess & Spencer, 2000) and in Australia (MacDonald, 2002). The same lack of preparation has also been reported among teachers of Japanese (Kawai & Hirose, 2000), so it appears that the marginalization of pronunciation in the language curriculum is very much a worldwide phenomenon.

The infrastructure for professional preparation for pronunciation teaching is in disrepair, but it is not completely gone. Many influential teachers and researchers have been working diligently to carry out research, run training workshops and write books for teachers, provide materials for students in the classroom, migrate and create new materials for computer interfaces, and develop high quality, theoretically defensible courses in pronunciation as part of teacher training programs. Nonetheless, the infrastructure is not sufficiently available to allow pronunciation to take its deserved and equal role at the language teaching table.

Charles Swindoll, an American preacher, once gave a series of sermons about the biblical account of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem around 500 BCE. The city had been destroyed, other

people had moved into the area, and the newcomers who returned from exile to rebuild the city faced obstacles on every side. Swindoll entitled the series, "Hand me another brick!" In much the same way, the first Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching conference is a modest attempt to place another brick or two on the infrastructure of a rebuilt approach to pronunciation by providing a professional space for teachers and researchers to meet together and discuss theory, trends and practice in pronunciation. The electronic proceedings of the conference are another brick, a place in which the wide variety of studies and approaches can be shared with a wider audience who may not easily have access to the wide variety of professional journals in which pronunciation-oriented research may be found. For readers of the proceedings, we hope that you will find much here that encourages you to join in the rebuilding, such that, in years to come, you can join in adding another brick or two to the rebuilding.

PRESENTATIONS AND PROCEEDINGS

The first pronunciation conference was held jointly with the Technology in Second Language Learning Conference at Iowa State University and included approximately 90 participants from 10 US states and 5 foreign countries. The portion of the conference schedule devoted to pronunciation included two plenary addresses (from Wayne Dickerson and Tracey Derwing, both included in this volume). In addition, there were more than 20 other paper and poster presentations, 7 of which are in this volume. One presentation, entitled "Language awareness and second language pronunciation: a classroom study," by Sara Kennedy and Pavel Trofimovich, is published in *Language Awareness* (2010, vol. 3).

PLENARY ADDRESSES

Wayne Dickerson, from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, has over 35 years of experience in teaching pronunciation and training teachers during their MA in TESL studies. During his time at Illinois, he has influenced hundreds and hundreds of teachers. I took his Applied Morphology and Phonology class during my first semester in the ESL Master's program, and I was hooked from the first day. The class was challenging, exciting and eye-opening, and the framework that he taught for teaching pronunciation and understanding the sound system of English continues to influence my thinking 25 years later. Wayne is a teacher's researcher, always trying to see what learners need to become their own teachers, developing techniques to help make connections between the written word and how it is pronounced, and giving us the tools both to evaluate published materials and write our own.

His plenary address, *Walking the walk: Integrating the story of English phonology***,** is a discussion of why and how he has changed the way he teaches teachers. In the plenary, he describes how our stated beliefs that phonology is an integrated system of creating meaning is at

odds with how we actually present the fundamental facts about the English sound system. Typically, we still teach the segments of language first, and then move on to suprasegmental features of stress, rhythm and intonation, teaching each as a separate subsystem that can be adequately addressed without reference to the other subsystems. In his paper, he discusses how this ordering actually gets us into trouble, and that we end up trying to hide the jams our teaching gets us into. (For example, we teach vowels and have to address [ə], the most numerous vowel in English. It is also a vowel sound that makes no sense unless we understand the rhythmic system that gives rise to it, creating a jam in which we can only explain the sound by making reference to a portion of the sound system that we have not yet addressed.) Then he goes on to discuss how a change he has made in his own course, addressing the sound system first from the rhythmic system helps avoid the difficulties that are inherent in the traditional way of presenting the sound system. The solution that he has integrated into his own teaching should be a challenge to others who teach teachers about the sound system of English and who wish to have their courses reflect the priorities we say we have about helping our students learn to pronounce English more effectively.

Tracey Derwing is Professor of TESL and the co-director of the Prairie Metropolis Centre for Research on Immigration, Integration and Diversity at the University of Alberta. Her name is familiar to everyone who has looked for research on the intelligibility of English and the effect of pronunciation on spoken intelligibility. With Murray Munro at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, she has framed the research agenda for pronunciation since the early 1990s. Tracey started her career as an ESL teacher teaching pronunciation to immigrant students in Edmonton, Alberta, and her experiences as a teacher who had little to turn to except minimal pairs exercises have continued to inform her research agenda so that both researchers and teachers will find much that is useful in her many articles.

Her plenary, *Utopian Goals for Pronunciation Teaching*, starts from the recognition that pronunciation, despite the importance it plays in judgments of spoken intelligibility, continues to be a much neglected part of language teaching, much to the disservice both of teachers and of learners. She discusses nine action points for addressing this neglect: Changes to the way we educate ESL/EFL teachers, attention to integrating pronunciation into the language teaching curriculum, a greater focus on intelligibility rather than accent, increased pronunciation research, more appropriate uses of technology, enhancement of native speakers' listening skills, new attention to pronunciation in assessment, and strategies for increasing newcomer's opportunities to interact with native speakers. Far from being Utopian goals, she asserts that they should be seen more as a "to do list" and that each of the ideas are being, and can be, implemented now rather than waiting for some far-off future.

INTELLIGIBILITY, COMPREHENSIBILITY, AND ACCENTEDNESS

Two papers in this collection directly address issues related to intelligibility, comprehensibility and accentedness (Munro & Derwing, 1995). Jennifer Rasmussen and Mary Zampini (Le Moyne

College) report on a study that addresses the improvement of listening skills for learners of Spanish. Most intelligibility research focus on how intelligible learners' speech is to native speakers of the target language, but an equally critical aspect of intelligibility is the learner's ability to understand native speech. Rasmussen and Zampini examine the development of listening ability for three features of Andalusian Spanish: Aspiration or deletion of syllable final /s/, synalepha, or linking/elision across word boundaries, and the pronunciation of the interdental fricative, /θ/. An experimental group of 2nd and 3rd year Spanish learners was trained to listen for these phonetic features in Andalusian Spanish, and their performance was compared with that of a control group. Results were mixed, with the experimental group showing significantly better improvement for one feature while the others showed no difference between the control and experimental groups.

The second paper, *Factors in Raters' Perceptions of Comprehensibility and Accentedness*, by Heesung Grace Jun and Jinrong Li (Iowa State University), employs verbal protocols (think alouds) to examine why three NS and three NNS raters judged NNS spoken performance as comprehensible. The researchers asked raters to first listen to the utterances and rate each for comprehensibility, followed by a think aloud session in which they discussed why they rated each sample as they did and what features they noticed that impacted their ratings. Following, this, the raters listened again and rated each sample for accentedness. Results showed that NS and NNS raters cited different features for their ratings, with NS raters focusing more heavily on global impressions and NNS raters citing specific pronunciation errors.

ACQUISITION AND ATTITUDES

The three papers in the second section address the acquisition of pronunciation and learners' attitudes toward pronunciation. In the first paper, *The Effects of Self-Monitoring Strategy Use on the Pronunciation of Learners of English*, Sue Ingels (University of Illinois) examines a topic that is beginning to get an increasing amount of attention, the teaching of learning strategies for better learning of pronunciation. In the study, she looks at the effectiveness of training learners to monitor and correct their non-target use of English suprasegmentals using three different strategies or strategy combinations: Listening (L), Listening+Transcription (LT), and Listening+Transcription+Annotation (LTA). Using Listening alone appeared to help learners to monitor and improve, although the LT and LTA strategy combinations may have led to greater improvement for certain suprasegmental targets.

In the next paper, Fran Gulinello (Nasau Community College) reports on a longitudinal study of changes to the vowel systems of adult native Spanish speakers learning English. The study is a carefully constructed laboratory study examining 11 stressed, non-diphthong vowels spoken in comparable contexts. The findings show that speaker production of the vowels changed over time, including seeing two vowels merge into one category, one vowel splitting into two categories, and vowels shifting from one category to another. The paper argues that the interlanguage phonology of learners should be seen not only in light of its approximation to the

target language but also as a unique system in its own right. The change of the pronunciation of one vowel in a system cannot be seen as isolated from changes in other vowels, and the changes in one vowel should affect how we understand and teach the pronunciation of the new L2 vowel system.

The last paper in this section, *ESL Learners' Attitudes toward Pronunciation Instruction and Varieties of English*, comes from Okim Kang (Northern Arizona University). In it, she examines learners' expectations toward learning pronunciation and their attitudes toward the accents of different inner circle varieties of English, specifically in New Zealand and the United States. Her findings showed that students studying in New Zealand far more likely to be dissatisfied with the pronunciation instruction they received than were students studying in the United States. She also found that those in New Zealand were could be more ambivalent or even quite negative toward the variety of English they heard in comparison with the learners who studied in the United States. She suggests that learner attitudes be taken into account to provide better pronunciation, and suggests that the differences shown in response to these two varieties have implication far beyond these two settings to the teaching of pronunciation in outer and expanding circle contexts.

DESCRIPTIVE RESEARCH

The last section of the proceedings includes two papers that are descriptive in nature: one focusing on the pronunciation of the past tense (-ed) morpheme by Somali learners of English, and the other examining the use of sentence focus in authentic materials. In the first paper, Ettien Koffi (St. Cloud State University), examines why Somali learners of English (a significant immigrant population in Minnesota) consistently have trouble pronouncing past tense verbs correctly in certain contexts even when they pronounce it perfectly in others. He analyzes the syllable structure of Somali and compares it to English, showing how both the insertion of epenthtic schwa in verbs like *kissed/jumped/kicked* and the deletion of the suffix in verbs like *begged* can be understood by understanding both the syllable structures of English and Somali. Koffi's paper is an excellent example of how the use of linguistic knowledge and reasoning is so critical to helping teachers better address their learner's needs.

In the next paper, *Authentic speech and teaching sentence focus*, Greta Muller Levis and John Levis (Iowa State University) examined how authentic speech can be used to create teaching materials for sentence focus (e.g., How ARE you? FINE. How are YOU?). Focus is an essential part of communicating pragmatic meaning in English, and it is a suprasegmental feature that is prominently displayed in most published teaching materials. Since focus is typically connected to the information structure of discourse, the teaching of focus is also is tied closely to highlighting new information new information. Most published materials, however, are constructed rather than authentic. The paper examines the issues involved in creating teaching materials for non-final new information from authentic academic and non-academic discourse. Results suggest that texts with multiple examples of non-final new information are

rare, calling for adaptation by teachers, and that most reasonably useful authentic texts also include uses of focus that are difficult to explain by using reference to new and given information alone. The paper ends with suggestions for using authentic and adapted materials to teach sentence focus.

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