IT'S NOT A PRONUNCIATION ERROR –
IT'S A NEW WORLD ENGLISH VARIETY BEING BORN!

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Some pronunciation features diverging from the established norm are not necessarily mistakes – they can be indicators of language change in progress, signs of a new variety. As language learners become more proficient, they become language users – users of a given variety. This study aimed to analyse the phonetic features of *Polish English* as understood to be a World English variety. First language (L1) Polish speakers who were proficient users of English were asked to read a text while being recorded. The text was designed to elicit pronunciation of specific words to determine whether participants exhibited the predicted pronunciation features. The exhibited features of *Polish English* such as the pronunciation of the voiced velar stop [g] in the final position of words normatively pronounced with a voiced velar nasal [ŋ], as in *doing* or the shift of the voiced dental fricative [ð] to a voiced alveolar stop [d] in words like *mother* seem to be not merely idiolectic pronunciation quirks, but regular patterns exhibited by the majority of *Polish English* speakers. The study begs the question: where is the line between an error in pronunciation and a feature of a new language variety? What should teachers correct and what should they accept?

INTRODUCTION

Errors in pronunciation are a natural part of the didactic process. As students learn, they attempt to pronounce new words and sometimes fail. They often fall victim to interference from their L1. Instructors often identify these errors and correct them. This inherently prescriptive scenario is perfectly suited for language learners, who need such guidance. However, as learners become more proficient, they become more and more independent and, in turn, become more than language learners – they become language *users*. People who achieve intermediate proficiency (often referred to as the B2 level on the CEFR scale) are language users – they communicate in that second language in various situations to achieve specific goals. Polish people using English are – in many aspects – no less English users than are native speakers. If these "new" users exhibit non-normative features, diverging form the native standard they were taught, one should not rush to a conclusion that all of them are just committing the same mistake. If a majority of users exhibits a given feature, it is a feature of this new variety, not a mistake in regard to the native norm. This study analyses the pronunciation features of *Polish English* as a new variety of English and aims to explain the reasons for their occurrence rather than stating that they are merely mistakes that should be eradicated.

Literature review

What serves as inspiration for the study is McWhorter's (2003) observation that "human language must and will change. […] Juxtaposed with other languages, human languages must and will mix" (p. 176). That is precisely the case of English as it has come to be used in Poland, by speakers whose L1 is Polish. The two languages became entangled in a close relationship of mutual influence and *Polish English* is the result – this "is a natural process of accommodation, which in due course could

lead to new […] forms" (Crystal, 200, p. 182). The premise that Poles have changed the English language they use, hence disobeying the normative rules, is connected to the key notion in language ecology that "it is those who speak a language on a regular basis – and in a manner they consider normal to themselves – who develop the norms for their communities" (Mufwene, 2001, p. 106).

A fundamental part of the discipline of World Englishes is Kachru's (1985, 1992) model of Three Circles of English. Kachru's first circle includes the varieties that "have traditionally been recognized as models since they are used by the 'native speakers'" (Kachru, 1985, p.16). These varieties are spoken in countries where English is the primary native language of the population – e.g., the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia. This circle is viewed as central to English itself – as Trudgill puts it, "the true repository of the English language is its native speakers" (Trudgill, 2002, p. 151). The second circle comprises countries that have British colonial ties, where English is widely used in social life and the government sector. Most countries in that circle are former parts of the British Empire upon which English was imposed at one time – such as India, Singapore, or Nigeria. Hence these varieties are referred to as "postcolonial Englishes" (see Schneider, 2007). For users of these varieties, English is either a native language or, more commonly, a second language (ESL). Finally, the third circle, consists of countries around the world where English is a lingua franca as a world language. For speakers of these varieties, it is a foreign language (EFL). Kachru identifies these varieties as norm-dependent and "exonormative" (Kachru, 1985, p. 17). It is important to note that the distinction between ESL and EFL is not clear-cut and some scholars argue that it "does not wholly reflect sociolinguistic reality". Namely, "[t]here is more use of English nowadays in some countries of the expanding circle, where it is 'only' a foreign language" (Crystal, 2003, p. 67).

Polish English belongs to the third, expanding circle. The variety started forming only in the 21st century, with the country joining the EU in 2004. This brought much more international contact and, in turn, much more English to Poland. It started to be widely taught in all state schools and is now an obligatory part of the state curriculum (Kasztalska, 2014). Currently, most job postings specify that an applicant should know English, most commonly requiring the CEFR B2 level, which came to be an acknowledged standard. English is present in the media as well – young people consume TV series and movies on international streaming platforms like Netflix, most often in English with Polish subtitles. Consequently, English has become ubiquitous in Poland and it is precisely in that context that language change has taken place. The seed of English has been sown onto the Polish soil and the language has grown into something new.

Importantly, English in Poland has never been studied as a World English variety. Previous studies of English spoken by Poles were intrinsically prescriptive and rooted in the didactic perspective that "learners" (not "speakers") should aim to mimic native English pronunciation and eliminate any L1 interference in their speech (Krynicki et al., 2008; Mazurkiewicz, 2009; Polok, 2017). The studies talked of "pronunciation problems", "L1-induced errors", "mispronunciations", and "strongly accented Polglish" (Dziubalska-Kołaczyk, 2006, pp. 1-5). This study approaches *Polish English* from a different point of view: the perspective of language change in the framework of World Englishes. It constitutes an empirical inquiry into a World English variety that Kachru himself called for as needed in the contemporary academic discourse of English studies (Kachru, 1985, p. 26).

An important question to be raised is whether *Polish English* can be said to constitute a World English variety or is it just an accent, or just an L2 variety? Kachru (1992) argued that the very issue of judging whether something is a variety or not constitutes in itself a paradigm that should be

challenged; instead of labelling and judging, we should focus on describing and studying the processes that take place. The proposed bias-free approach offers a significant advantage – it offers linguistic explanations for the birth of given phenomena, instead of simply labelling them as "errors". Furthermore, the accent-variety conflict is, as King (2006) notices, "the universal outcome of the struggle for two languages for control of the [High language] domain: the substratum language percolates upward and leaves its print on the superstratum language" (p. 37). Deeming a potential variety as a mere accent is in favor of the "superstratum" language, which in this case, is English. This study takes on a more "democratic" approach, studying *Polish English* as a variety, analyzing it as the result of the entanglement of the substratum and superstratum languages. The proposed bias-free approach offers a significant advantage – it offers linguistic explanations for the birth of given phenomenon, instead of simply labelling differences as "errors".

Studies describing World Englishes are mostly concerned with the varieties of the outer circle. They have been conducted, for example, for Indian English (Sailaja, 2009), Singapore English (Deterding, 2007), and Hong Kong English (Setter et al., 2010). When it comes to the expanding circle, for example, Chinese Englishes (Bolton, 2003) or Russian English (Proshina, 2010) have been described, but the varieties from this circle have not been studied to any great extent.

Polish English could be attributed to belonging to a group of *Euro Englishes*. However, a continent on which varieties are spoken is not the most important variable; to speak of African, Asian and European English would be a simplification and generalisation of the linguistic landscape. The most important variable is the L1 of the population of the given country, which changes from state to state, not from continent to continent. *Polish English* belongs to a group of Slavic Englishes, whose "description is not as complete as those of other varieties […] [and] the prescriptive approach to English which has prevailed in East European educational institutions for so many years should now, to a certain degree, give way to descriptive and intercultural approaches" (Proshina, 2010, p. 311). This study contributes to the research in the area of the expanding circle varieties.

Research hypothesis

The research hypothesis is that the test participants will – in the overwhelming majority – exhibit the three major pronunciation features expected in the study. The chosen three features are the most commonly observed in the author's personal experience of teaching English to Poles. The study aims to verify what share of participants will exhibit them. Should this share be significantly high, that would indicate that the features in question are indeed commonly shared by the speakers of the variety. Moreover, the study's goal is to analyze the features in question in greater detail with the use of phonetic analysis software.

METHODS

Participants

Participants are native speakers of Polish who are no longer learners of English but its users. This means they possess a degree of proficiency in the language. A standard for measuring English proficiency is the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which offers a scale from A1 to C2 (Council of Europe 2001, 2020). Speakers proficient at the B1/2 level are referred to as "independent". It is precisely those users that can be characterized as speakers and co-creators of the

Polish English variety. Moreover, the B level users constitute the largest group of English speakers in Poland. The A level, "basic" users, are still learners; they rarely engage in communication in English and their lack of aptitude prevents them from contributing to language change. As for the C level – the "proficient" users are closer to the competency of a native speaker than to that of *Polish English*. Over the course of their lengthy learning process, they have been trained to get rid of any indicators of L1 interference, hence they do not belong to the community of *Polish English* speakers. These advanced users belong to the wide community of World Englishes but are closer to inner-circle variants. Therefore, the study's participants demonstrate B2 proficiency, which has become a commonly held standard in Poland. It was indicated in the experiment invitation that the project is looking for B2, intermediate English speakers. In order to check research subjects' proficiency, a part of the experimental procedure was a language aptitude test. Participants completed the "Test Your General English" online test provided by Cambridge Language Assessment. All of the participants passed the test with a B2 score. When it comes to age, the participants belong to the 20-30 year-old group; the average participant age was 24. This age group choice was not coincidental, for it is the young people in Poland who speak English. Older generations did not have English instruction during their education (Russian or German used to be taught). Moreover, very often it is the younger generation that drives language change. As to gender, the author aimed to obtain a gender-balanced sample, aiming for the 50/50 male/female distribution, yet the final group consisted of 12 female and 8 male participants.

Anticipated risks

An important risk pertaining to studying people's behavior – including pronunciation – is demand characteristics, an experimental artifact described by psychologist Martin Orne. It refers to the fact that the participant's "knowledge of the true purposes of an experiment might vitiate its results" (Orne 2009, 110) since the research subjects tend to alter their behavior in order to fit the experiment's expectations. If the participants of this study were informed about the experiment's goal and the research hypothesis, they would tend to overenunciate and produce speech that is not representative of their actual language use in natural conditions. Therefore, to address the demand characteristics, the experiment utilized antecedent deception to conceal the study's purpose. Namely, the participants were told that the goal of the experiment is to study the changes in loudness while reading English texts. This was to redirect potential demand characteristics towards the sheer loudness of production. Only afterwards was the true purpose of the experiment revealed to a participant.

Procedures

To mitigate the risk of poor audio quality, the recordings were made in a phonetics lab at the author's university, which is sound-proofed and optimized for acoustic data collection.

The experiment procedure consisted of four stages:
1. Participant signs the experiment participation and data processing agreement.
2. Participant takes part in an online English proficiency test.
3. Participant reads the text aloud while being recorded.
4. Participant is told about the research goals; post-experiment discussion is held.

Data analysis and presentation

Data analysis was two-fold. In the first stage, the recordings were analyzed in the framework of auditory phonetics – three phonetically trained native speakers of English were hired to reflect upon the audio samples and provide a binary response whether a given participant exhibits any of the three features in question, exemplified below with the words *mother, doing* and *great*. This was done for the sake of the study's objectivity, to avoid any bias a *Polish English* speaker may be subject to. The second stage employed acoustic phonetics with the use of *Praat* software (Boersma & Weenink 2022). Spectrograms were generated for the parts of the recordings in which the key words were uttered. The pronunciation phenomena are illustrated in contrast, with two pronunciations of the same word. The first was produced by a speaker of RP, whereas the second was uttered by a speaker of *Polish English*. The features in question are illustrated as segmented *Praat*-generated spectrograms (view range of 0-5000 Hz) with pitch and intensity shown.

RESULTS

Out of the 20 research participants, **all 20** exhibited the three expected pronunciation features. In the strongest cases, all three native speaker judges responded that the participant exhibited a feature; in weakest cases, only one out of three judges indicated the presence of the feature. No participant was marked as not exhibiting all of the features. The three features in question are presented and discussed below.

Dental fricative approximation

The first feature is the approximation of the voiced dental fricative /ð/ to a voiced alveolar stop /d/ in words like *mother* /ˈmʌðə(ɹ)/. Figure 1A represents the RP pronunciation of the word *mother*, whereas Figure 1B shows the *Polish English* pronunciation of the same word.

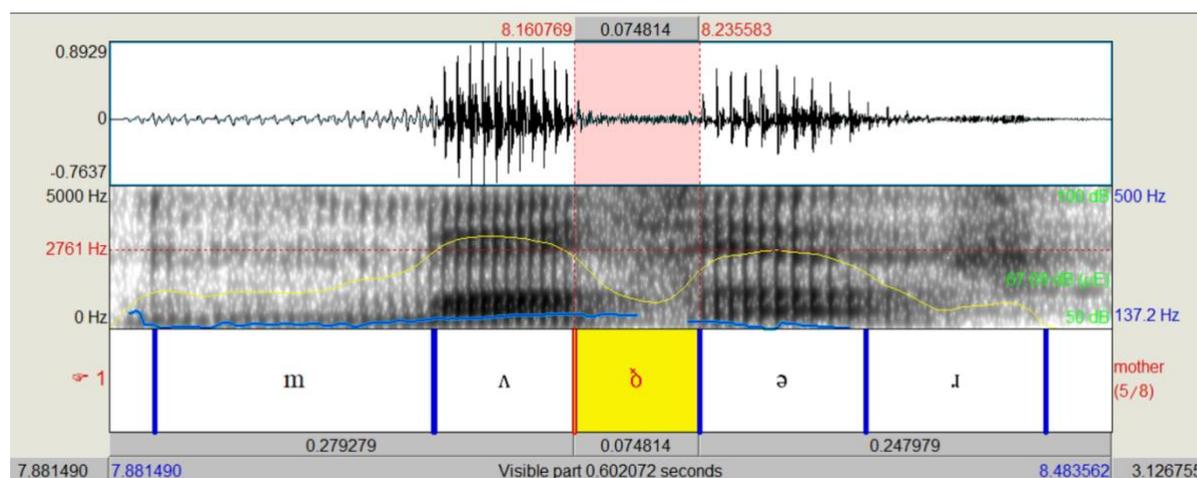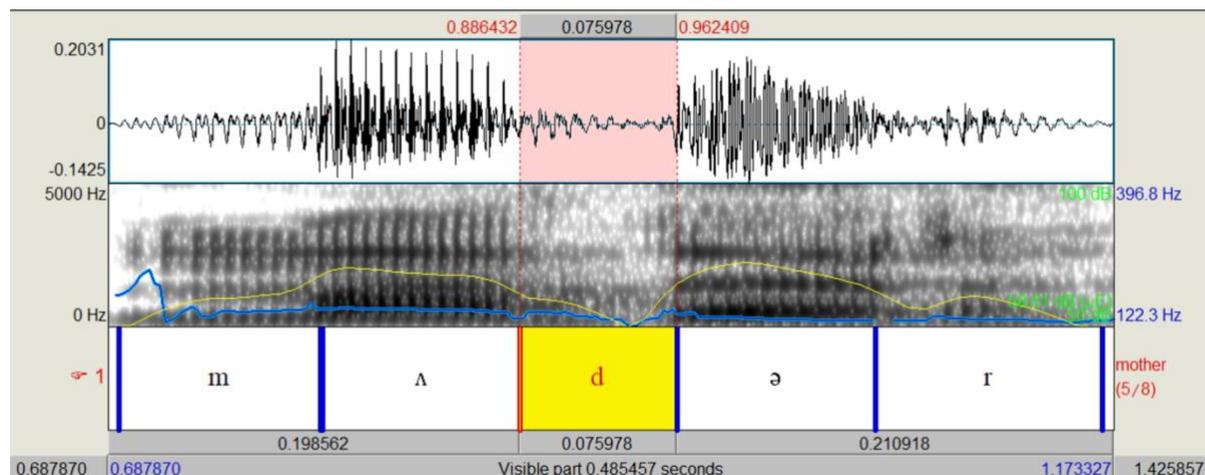**Fig. 1a**
RP pronunciation of the word 'mother'.

Fig. 1b
Polish English pronunciation of the word 'mother'

The highlighted sound in Figure 1a is a model voiced dental fricative: there is clear turbulence during restricted airflow. The parallel sound in Figure 1b however, is clearly different. At the end of the sound there is visible stop and plosion constitutive of a /d/ sound. This change is an example of the phenomenon known as *th-stopping*, the realization of dental fricatives as dental or alveolar stops. This feature has been found in many other World English varieties – for example Dutch English or West Indian English (van den Doel, 2006). This study shows that it is also manifested in *Polish English*.

One of the reasons for this phenomenon is that the Polish phonetic repertoire does not include any interdental sounds. Placing the tip of the tongue between the teeth is a foreign articulatory position for Poles. Therefore, they approximate the dental fricatives to the closest sound, which is the alveolar stop /d/. Consequently, words that constitute English minimal pairs such as *day /deɪ/ – they /ðeɪ/* become homophones. However, th-stopping rarely leads to confusion in *Polish English*. Devoid of a given minimal pair, speakers rely more heavily on context in situations where a minimal pair would clear up the confusion. This approximation can be explained with the Principle of Least Effort, originally proposed by Zipf (1949). Since speakers can avoid the additional effort of producing a foreign phoneme and still communicate while approximating it to a known sound, they simply choose such a solution as the simpler and more effective one.

Rendering of the voiced velar nasal

The second feature is the pronunciation of the voiced velar nasal /ŋ/, as in *doing,* with a final, additional sound produced as a [g]. Figure 2a shows the RP pronunciation of the word *doing*, whereas Figure 2b depicts the *Polish English* pronunciation of the word.

Fig. 2a
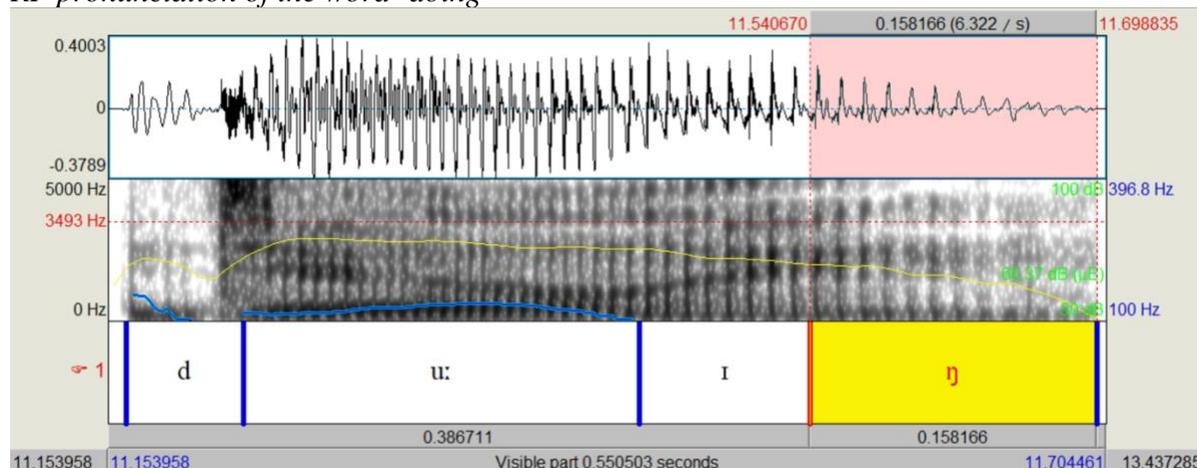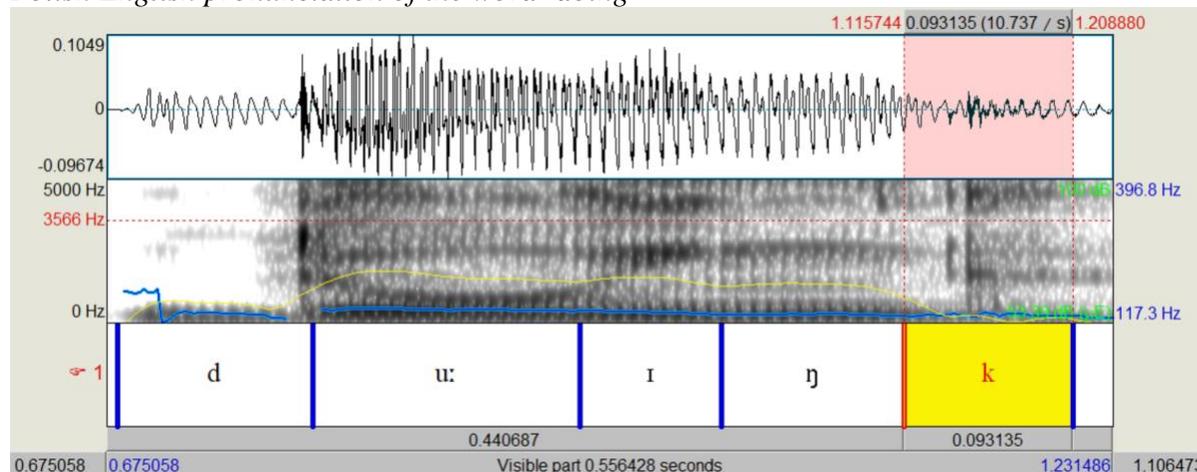*RP pronunciation of the word 'doing'*

Fig. 2b
Polish English pronunciation of the word 'doing'

The spectrogram in Fig. 2a shows a clear velar nasal, which is the final sound of the uttered word – it disappears steadily as the word comes to an end. A similar sound occurs in the *Polish English* pronunciation, yet as it begins to fade away, the plosion of a voiceless velar plosive /k/ appears and becomes the final sound of the word.

The voiced velar nasal is present in Polish phonology, yet its use is limited to certain contexts. It constitutes an allophone of the voiced alveolar nasal /n/ before sounds such as /k/ or /g/ in words like *bank* /baŋk/. This may be the reason why the sound is produced with a plosive at the end – to mimic the context required for the sound to appear in the speaker's L1. Moreover, the produced /k/ sound corresponds to the final letter of the word *doing*. One of the characteristic traits of the Polish language is its nearly perfect grapheme-phoneme correlation; an overwhelming majority of cases each letter of a word is pronounced. Speakers of *Polish English* seem to impose this regularity on their English and pronounce the final *g* in words like *doing* or *working*. However, this imposition does not result phonetically in a voiced velar plosive /g/, but in a voiceless velar plosive sound /k/, since the consonant undergoes final devoicing, which is a must in Polish. This shows that the pronunciation

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of the final [g] → [k] phoneme is a regular, systematic characteristic, stemming from a grapheme-phoneme induced correlation which results in a sound that undergoes a phonological process of the speakers' L1.

Realization of r

The third feature is the realization of the voiced postalveolar approximant /ɹ/ as a rhotic alveolar trill /r/. Figure 3A presents the RP pronunciation of the word *great*, whereas figure 3B shows the *Polish English* pronunciation of this word.

Fig. 3a
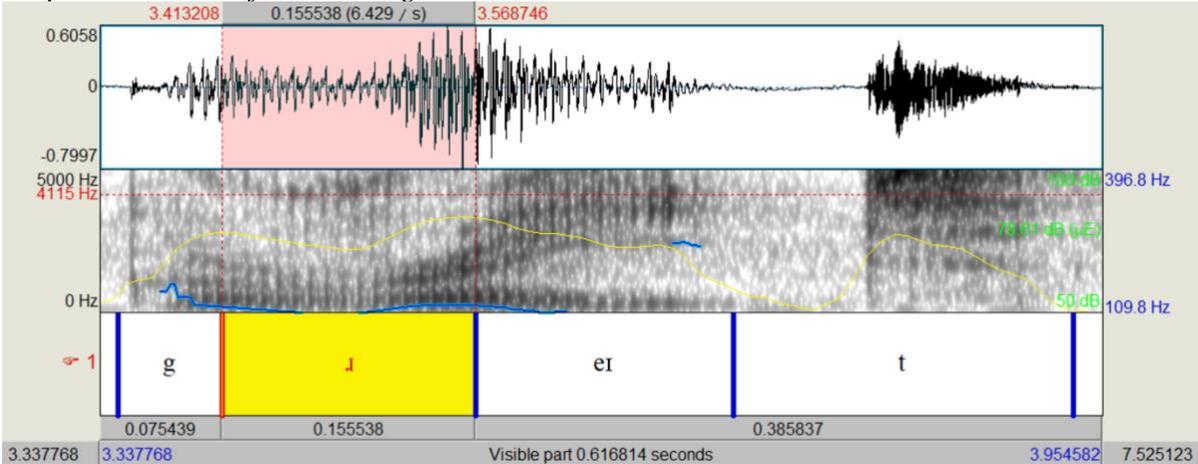*RP pronunciation of the word 'great'*

Fig.3b
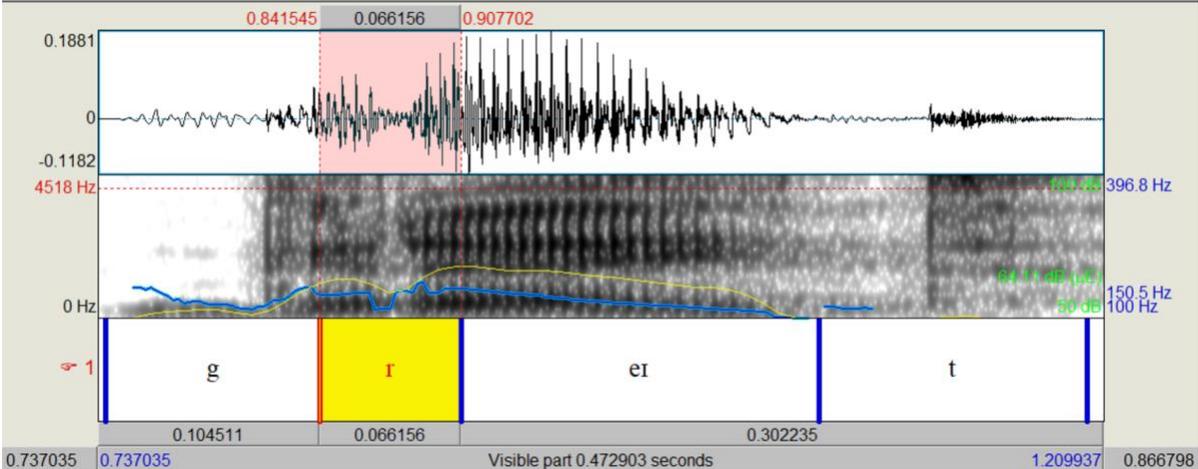*Polish English pronunciations of the word 'great'*

Figure 3a shows the voiced postalveolar approximant /ɹ/ – there is no momentary closure of the airflow. In figure 3B, however, the air passage is clearly closed in the middle of the sound – that happens because of the tongue vibration characteristic of a trill sound.

There are no postalveolar approximants in Polish; therefore, speakers resort to the closest similar sound, which, in this case, is /r/. Rhotic alveolar trills are hard to produce for some native English speakers, yet they come naturally for Poles. This is why Poles resort to using the /r/ they know. This is another example of speakers creating a language their own, modifying it to their own needs and for their own ease, in the spirit of the Principle of Least Effort.

DISCUSSION

The study showed that all 20 participants exhibited the predicted pronunciation features. The result was, in a way, surprising. The author expected a majority of the participants to exhibit the characteristics, but a 100% score was unanticipated. Of course, the study should be conducted on a larger sample to obtain a more reliable result – and it will be done in the author's PhD dissertation project in preparation. The study confirmed the author's observations from years of didactic work and turned them into potential scientific findings, which constitute a solid ground for future inquiry.

It is also worth noting that there are definitely far more features to discover and describe when it comes to characteristics of the *Polish English* pronunciation. This will be done in the author's future work with a larger group of test subjects. Even the above three spectrograms show more issues than those in question – for example, Figures 1a and 1b present the difference between the schwa /ə/ sound in RP and *Polish English*. It shows that Poles may not perform syllable reduction and render the schwa sound as an open mid-front vowel /ɛ/. Other phenomena can be found when it comes to intonation patterns, VOT, and word-stress. Moreover, phonological processes can also be observed in *Polish English*. One of them is palatalization, which, while present and common in Polish (Rubach, 1984, Gussmann, 2007), often gets transferred onto English. The *m* consonant in a word like *meet* /miːt/ would get palatalized (/m/ → [mʲ]) because of the following vowel. Applying a contrastive approach (Sobkowiak, 1996) between native-English pronunciation and *Polish English* pronunciation will yield numerous divergences and phenomena to be described and explained.

Finally, let us discuss the didactic applications of the study. What is most important is the approach taken towards *Polish English.* It was analyzed descriptively, as a language variety used by language users – not prescriptively, as a collection of mistakes committed by language learners. It is good to incorporate the descriptive approach in the classroom. If most – if not all of – our students exhibit certain pronunciation phenomena, it is worth asking the question: is it just a ubiquitous mistake or a feature of the students' variety? If it turns out to be the later, the instructor should not waste precious lesson time on fighting those features – as long as they do not impede intelligibility. This is a key aspect of this problem. If a feature – such as the realization of the postalveolar approximant /ɹ/ as a rhotic alveolar trill /r/ – does not lead to communication problems, and does not disturb minimal pair differentiation, we could just accept it and focus on other issues such as intonation or stress patterns. The question of the phonetic characteristics of *Polish English* and other World English varieties and their influence on mutual intelligibility between interlocutors of different varieties constitutes a promising research area, too.

Live discussion during the 13th Annual Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference after this paper's presentation showed that some of the features of *Polish English* can also be found amongst speakers of *Spanish English*. One of the teachers present in the audience noted that he came to accept some such pronunciation features as variety characteristics that are harmless – they do not impede intelligibility. Resorting to L1 phonemes and substituting them for target L2

sounds lightens the cognitive load for the speaker and allows for easier communication. This approach helps the students feel more confident with the way they speak, making it easier for them to break the communicative barrier and actually talk. If they keep striving to mimic a native standard such as RP, they may never feel like they are "good enough to talk", as one of the author's students put it. As teachers, we are used to eradicating and "fixing" mistakes in the speech of our students. This paper aims to show that sometimes it is good to accept mistakes, for they can be more than mere mistakes – in another perspective, they are indicators of language change, language evolution and signs that our students making the language they study their own.

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