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RECOGNIZING NATIONAL ORIGIN BY MEANS OF PHONETIC DATA

Abstract

The paper presents the author's impressions resulting from a contact with a new kind of application of linguistic information, namely, recognizing national origin of a refugee by linguistic analysis.

Key words: articulatory phonetics, foreign language pronunciation, substandard speech, linguistic identification of national origin

A couple of years ago an institution from Holland (Thaalstudio) asked me to give my opinion about the national origin of a boy claiming that he comes from Kosovo. This institution does such reports for the authorities who give refugees the asylum. I did not know before about this kind of applied linguistics. I was very much afraid of such a kind of responsibility, I was afraid of doing harm to the boy, by not knowing the Albanian language enough and I did not want to do it. But they insisted, so finally I did it. They sent me a tape with a kind of an interview and another report which, evidently, was not objective and tried to deny the claim of the boy that he was from Kosovo. Happily, a month earlier I had been some time in the town the boy claimed he came from and I remembered some places he described in the interview. Additionally I consulted several dialectal descriptions and made my report on the basis of the phonetic information. The final result is unknown to me. I can only hope that my report was of some help, that I helped the boy, although it was not really possible to confirm or deny his regional origin. I was happy that I could disqualify another report and showed that the Kosovian origin of the boy was very probable.

My experience is very poor. I have been an expert only once and I have no idea whether my observations were helpful. When I got the recording, I started to think how to do this. It was short, very poor lexically and there was not enough syntactic material, thus the phonetics was the only choice. However still the material was not rich. In fact I also had no choice as far as the method was concerned, but then the Thaalstudio asked me some additional questions which astonished me and I tried to think how this work can be done in general. The conclusion is that there is no method, a single proper way does not exist. Each case should be treated individually. Apart from the sample itself, there is a number of factors determining the choice of how to do it when languages of Eastern Europe are concerned.

– First of all it is the ecological (social) characteristic of the language. If the literary standard tradition is relatively long, it has a high prestige, then practically people do not speak dialects any more and regional elements appear rarely and not in the speech of all speakers of the region in question. The colloquial form of the literary standard may be more helpful, but usually we do not have the comparable data. Even if this language variety has been described in details – it changes in time very quickly.

– This problem is connected with the social background of the person whose speech is investigated. And also individual talents of the speaker are important.

– Even if regional features are evident, still it may be difficult to determine nationality of the speaker. For example there exists in Polish the so-called borderland pronunciation, which is very well described, both in its northern and southern variation. However this type of pronunciation occurs on both sides of the border between Poland on the one side and Lithuania, Byelorussia and Ukraine on the other side. The difference may be in the degree and consequence of realization of certain features, for example labio-velarization is very strong in the northern borderland pronunciation, but if it is weak this does not necessarily mean that the speaker is a citizen of Poland. On the other hand a strong labio-velarization appears in the speech of Poles from e.g. Lithuania or Russia, as well as in Russians speaking Polish. I am sure that I am able to recognize Russian origin in any language, even if the person speaks a foreign language very well. I recognize it by palatalization and labio-velarization. The latter feature is always present in some degree in the pronunciation of Russians, but I am not able to tell how I recognize Russian origin and how I distinguish this origin from other Eastern Slavic or borderland Polish.

– I think that the general sounding of a phonetic text may be identified as belonging to a particular variety of a language by the native speaker with good phonetic ear. He recognizes a foreign accent, but usually he is not able to tell how he does it. Even phoneticians have not enough knowledge about very important contrastive features of languages they deal with. Most Eastern European languages are well described as far as the features belonging to the linguistic code are concerned. But if all these relevant phonetic features are properly realized, the natural speech of the language in question will not be achieved.

The most frequent phonetic values of a language are not features belonging to particular segments but to whole classes of sounds in given contexts. Among such features very important is the way of how segments are linked in higher units. Whether the transition from a sound to the next sound is fluent, or neighboring sounds are pronounced distinctly, the realization of the second sound starts when the realization of the first one is completed. In the first case the length of the transition may be relevant, which means that there occur more or less assimilative phenomena in a language, and of course the nature and the degree of these phenomena is important too. Such properties give a common impression of how a language sounds and cause us to describe the pronunciation in general terms of

sensory perception such as, for example, hard, soft, tense, nasal, aspirated, monotonous, singsong, buzzing, clear, non-distinct, well-marked, etc. Such a general character is inherent to particular languages, it is relatively stable, it is not subject to interference, it is difficult to learn and difficult to get rid of. We observe it in pronunciation of foreigners and in the way in which loanwords are adapted. It is connected to phonemic values as well as to type of combinatory allophony and the way in which segments combine on the syntagmatic axis. These values should be known and described but often they are not, especially when a feature is regular but not obligatory, such a feature does not appear in phonetic descriptions. Very often linguists and even phoneticians who are native speakers are not even conscious of them. Descriptions concentrate first of all on phonemically relevant features and on obligatory combinatory variations and usually they neglect important contrastive properties of a language – features which are heard by foreigners but not by native speakers, because for native speakers such a pronunciation may seem automatic, the only possible in human speech, and, as such, it is not recognized.

For example in the contemporary Polish pronunciation a very strong aspiration of voiceless stops occurs, but nobody notices that because this feature is neither phonemically relevant, nor obligatory, although it is quite regular before stressed vowels, and extremely distinct in emotionally marked utterances. A Slav from the South or East is not able to produce this, and a Polish speaker may implant this feature into his Russian or Serbian speech which will be striking. This feature is not investigated and never mentioned in phonetic descriptions of Polish. Of course to use this as an argument we have to know the details about its distribution which we do not.

An interesting example comes from the Prague Opera Theatre. They had there a soprano singer, who was Austrian. Her Czech was absolutely ideal, but still it could be noticed that she was a foreigner. Phoneticians tried to find out what it was and they could not. Her speech has been processed in details – each sound separately, as well as combinations of sounds were realized in typical Czech way. The reason of this minimal perceptive difference was discovered only some years later when the laryngeal stop was discovered in Czech and Polish. She lacked the laryngeal stop. This sound is obligatory neither in Czech, nor in Polish, it occurs in $\pm 50\%$ of the contexts it may appear in. However in natural contemporary Czech and Polish it is always present. In the Eastern or Southern Slavic languages it is extremely rare. Moreover, although the laryngeal stop appears in the same positions in Czech and Polish – its frequency is not the same, namely it is higher in Polish in *lento* speech, whereas in Czech it is opposite – more stops appear in *allegro* realization.

Slavic languages are characterized by special type of assimilative phenomena. The majority of them are connected with the contextual palatalization. This is a typologically relevant feature and it regards only languages located north of Carpathians. However the degree of palatalization varies from language to language.

For example palatalization of dental stops before /i/ is the strongest in Russian where very often it leads even to affricatization, whereas labial stops are the softest in Polish. Just as Russians usually are not able to get rid of contextual palatalization, the Serbs are not able to apply this feature in their speech – they always pronounce hard dentals and labials before front vowels. This is why, in general, Serbs have better English pronunciation than Russians.

To recognize differences between particular types of palatalization we should have at our disposal detailed descriptions, and, unfortunately, in most cases we do not have them.

Slavic languages differ by sandhi phenomena, which consist in voicing and devoicing of obstruents. This feature is rarely heard by non-specialists, thus it may be of some help in recognizing its linguistic origin. Serbian and Croatian do not have sandhi at all. Macedonian has a restricted kind of this phenomenon, the remaining languages have the full form of sandhi, but it occurs in two variations: Russian, Byelorussian, Czech, Upper Sorbian, Bulgarian, Slovenian and North-Eastern Polish have the devoicing type of intra-word sandhi, which means that final obstruents before resonants undergo devoicing (apart of other changes), whereas Slovak, Lower Sorbian and South-Western Polish have voicing sandhi – obstruents before resonants undergo voicing. In Ukrainian we have voicing but devoicing does not occur in any position. Further differences are connected to the fact that in some Slavic languages the consonant **v* remained a sonant, in some other it shifted to an obstruent and now it undergoes the same processes as other obstruents. However in all Slavic languages, except Polish, there are some traces of the older situation when this sound had a sonantic value. Slavic languages differ not only by the quality of sandhi rules, but also by their regularity. In those languages where sandhi represents still a set of phonetic processes it is not regular – its realization depends on the tempo of speech, the degree of preciseness, the situation of the phonetic production. When the sandhi rules are morphemic rules their realization does not depend on the conditions of speech – it is regular regardless of the tempo of speech and may be applied even if the required phonetic context is lost. About the Slavic sandhi we know a lot, but still not everything.

Of course the easiest situation is when the speaker comes from a country where dialects are still in full use, when he or she is not from a big town, and is an uneducated person. Nowadays such a situation perhaps can be found in Kosovo – thus, in this case to recognize national origin should not be difficult. Moreover, we have at our disposal a number of dialectal texts and descriptions on the basis of which a list of distinctive phenomena can be made. The existing general dialectology of Albanian does not provide the true information – it is too general – but we can obtain relevant data from the descriptions of particular dialects. These data show that nearly every village or group of villages has its own dialectal characteristics. Even if the same features occur their combination is specific. Unfortunately the text I received for analysis was too short for such a comparison.

Taking all that has been said into account I must admit that in most cases it is not possible to give an unambiguous opinion about the origin of the speaker. However, sometimes it should be possible to deny the claim of the refugee about his origin. This is exactly the same as in the case of the identification of the speaker on the basis of electro-acoustic spectrum.

PREPOZNAVANJE NACIONALNOG PORIJEKLA POMOĆU FONETSKIH PODATAKA

Sažetak

U radu se iznose dojmovi autora rada stečeni u novoj primjeni lingvističkih informacija: u prepoznavanju porijekla izbjeglice na temelju lingvističke analize.

Ključne riječi: artikulacijska fonetika, izgovor stranog jezika, nestandardni govori, jezična identifikacija nacionalnog porijekla