PRONUNCIATION HURDLES FOR BAKGALAGARI SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH: *PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS*

Kemmonye C Monaka
Department of English
University of Botswana
monaka@mopipi.ub.bw

Tlamelo Baitse
Communication and Study Skills Unit
University of Botswana
tlamelo.baitse@mopipi.ub.bw

Kaboyaone Hiri-Khudu
Office of International Education and Partnership
University of Botswana
khuduk@mopipi.ub.bw

Abstract

This paper discusses pronunciation hurdles encountered by Bakgalagari when they speak English, and focuses on problematic areas in the articulation of especially English monophthongs. English is an Indo-European language which is foreign to majority of indigenous population in Botswana despite the fact that it is an official language in the country. Shekgalagari is one of the more than 25 indigenous languages spoken by between 50 000 (various authors) and 272 000 (Cf. RETENG, 2006; Gaotlhobogwe, 2006) Bakgalagari people in Botswana. As a non-native language, English present many challenges in education and in various areas for native populations. This article examines vowel inventories for English and Shekgalagari and outlines fundamental differences in the two systems, pointing out areas that lead to possible errors in pronunciation for Bakgalagari speakers of English.

Introduction

For speakers of a foreign language, the causes of errors are typically varied (Swan & Smith, 1995). This study is premised on the belief that pronunciation errors are a manifestation of some of the phonetic differences between English and Shekgalagari. Inter-lingual interference, where there is transfer of phonological aspects from the learner's language to the target language, can account for most of these errors (Sridhar, 1980; Selinker, 1992, 1974; Richards, 1974; Jain, 1974; Jackson, 1981). Inter-lingual interference could occur at various levels of linguistic study. The lexical level is concerned with peculiarities in lexical items between two languages. The grammatical level deals with the ordering of grammatical units to produce correct, grammatical constructions/utterances (Reid & Byrd, 1998). The levels of phonetics and phonology focus on sounds and features of sounds, among other things, that each language uses to build meaningful

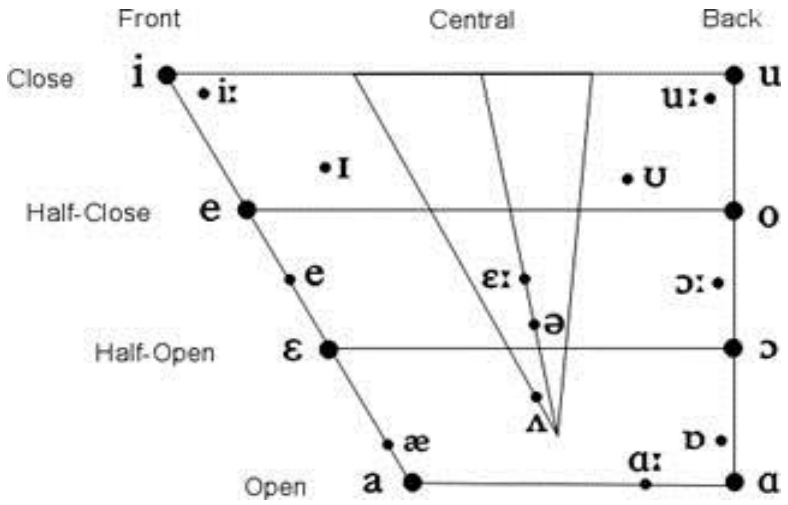
units. This study falls within the domain of the latter, and is narrowed down to examine peculiarities of pure vowels between English and Shekgalagari only.

The phonemic inventories

English vowels

English has 12 pure vowels or monophthongs which are divided into 5 long vowels being */iː, ɜː, aː, ɔː, uː/* and 7 short vowels as follows */ ɪ, e, æ, ə, ʌ, ɒ, ʊ/*. Their distribution in the Cardinal Vowel System (CVS) is shown on Fig. 1.

Fig. 1: The distribution of the English vowels in the CVS



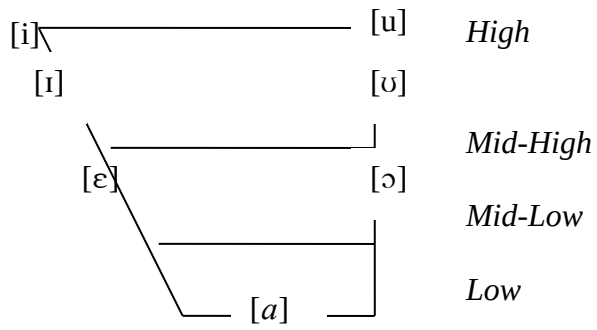
(Naeem, 2010)

English further has 8 diphthongs, namely: */eɪ, aɪ, ɔɪ, aʊ, eʊ, ʊə, ɪə, eə/*.

Shekgalagari vowels

Shekgalagari has 7 monophthongs as follows */i, u, ɪ, ʊ, ɛ, ɔ, a/*. There are no diphthongs or long vowels in the language. The distribution of Shekgalagari vowels in the CVS is shown on Fig. 2.

Fig. 2: The distribution of the Shekgalagari vowels in the CVS



(Lukusa & Monaka, 2008)

Fundamental differences in the vowel systems of English and Shekgalagari

Three differences may be observed between Shekgalagari and English vowels. First, English has 12 pure vowels altogether whereas Shekgalagari has 7 only. Second, English has long vowels which Shekgalagari does not have; and third, the positions of some of the vowels in the CVS indicate that there are differences in quality between some of the vowels.

Areas that lead to possible errors in pronunciation

The problem that the above differences create, particularly for Bakgalagari speakers, is that since their language does not have as many vowel contrasts as English has, they make innovations in the pronunciation of English words, mostly by collapsing together vowels that otherwise contrast in English and producing them with vowels that (roughly) correspond to the vowels in their own language. Consider the following examples.

Example 1

The English vowels /*iː/* and /*ɪ* / are collapsed into the Shekgalagari /*i* /. Consequently, this affects the pronunciation of the following words (a) and (b), among others, which are now rendered as homophones (c). It is left to context to decipher the word intended.

(a)		**(b)**		**(c)**
sit	[*sɪt*]	seat	[*siːt*]	[*sit*]
bin	[*bɪn*]	been	[*biːn*]	[*bin*]
mill	[*mɪl*]	meal	[*miːl*]	[*mil*]
sick	[*sɪk*]	seek	[*siːk*]	[*sik*]

Example 2

The English vowels /*uː/* and /*ʊ* / are pronounced as Shekgalagari /*u* /.

(i)	**(a)**			**(b)**
	food	[*fuːd*]	=	[*fud*]
	soon	[*suːn*]	=	[*sun*]
	tool	[*tuːl*]	=	[*tul*]
	boot	[*buːt*]	=	[*but*]
(ii)	**(a)**			**(b)**
	good	[*gʊd*]	=	[*gud*]
	book	[*bʊk*]	=	[*buk*]
	took	[*tʊk*]	=	[*tuk*]
	cook	[*kʊk*]	=	[*kuk*]

Example 3(a)

The English vowels /*ɜː/*, /*æ* / and /*e*/ are telescoped into the Shekgalagari /*ɛ*/.

(i)	**(a)**			**(b)**
	girl	[*gɜːl*]	=	[*gɛl*]
	purse	[*pɜːs*]	=	[*pɛs*]
	lurk	[*lɜːk*]	=	[*lɛk*]
	curl	[*kɜːl*]	=	[*kɛl*]
	(a)			**(b)**
(ii)	man	[*mæn*]	=	[*mɛn]*
	gas	[*gæs*]	=	[*gɛs*]
	lad	[*læd*]	=	[*lɛd*]
	lap	[*læp*]	=	[*lɛp*]
(ii)	**(a)**			**(b)**
	men	[*men*]	=	[*mɛn*]
	yes	[*jes*]	=	[*jɛs*]
	pet	[*pet*]	=	[*pɛt*]
	bell	[*bel*]	=	[*bɛl*]
	pen	[*pen*]	=	[*pɛn*]

Example 3(b)

The English vowel /*æ*/ may also be pronounced as the Shekgalagari vowel /*a/*, as in the following word. This is however not predominant.

	(a)			**(b)**
	mass	[*mæs*]	=	[*mas*]

Example 4

The English vowels /*aː/* and /ʌ / are reduced to Shekgalagari /*a*/.

	(a)			**(b)**
(i)	card	[*kaːd*]	=	[*kad*]
	half	[*haːf*]	=	[*haff*]
	glass	[*glaːs*]	=	[*glas*]
	class	[*klaːs*]	=	[*klas*]
	pass	[*paːs*]	=	[*pas*]
	lard	[*laːd*]	=	[*lad*]

	(a)			**(b)**
(ii)	cut	[*kʌt*]	=	[*kat*]
	but	[*bʌt*]	=	[*bat*]
	rush	[*rʌʃ*]	=	[*raʃ*]
	love	[*lʌv*]	=	[*lav*]
	mug	[*mʌg*]	=	[*mag*]
	mum	[*mʌm*]	=	[*mam*]

The vocalic mismatch observed in Examples 1 to 4 above is partly caused by the fact that while English has at mot 12 monophthongs in its phonemic system, Shekgalagari has just 7. This causes a significant phonological problem for Shekgalagari speakers of English. Vowel length, height and in English are also affected as illustrated in the following examples.

Example 5

Vowel length is eliminated in words such as:

seat	[*siːt*],	which is rendered as [*sit*]	
food	[*fuːd*]	=	[*fud*]
girl	[*gɜːl*]	=	[*gɛl*]
pass	[*paːs*]	=	[*pas*]

Example 6

Vowel height is changed in words like:

good	[*gʊd*],	which is rendered as [*gud*]	
book	[*bʊk*]	=	[*buk*]

Example 7

Degree of backness is changed as seen in the following examples.

front			**central**
men	[*men*]	=	[*mɛn*]
pen	[*pen*]	=	[*pɛn*]

In all the changes noted in Examples 5 through 7, vowel quality is also affected as illustrated in Example 8.

Example 8

bird	[*bɜːd*]	=	[*bed*]
bad	[*bæd*]	=	[*bɛd*]
pass	[*paːs*]	=	[*pas*]

Examples 1 through 8 illustrate underlying issues that lead to problems in the pronunciation of some English vowels by Bakgalagari speakers of English. It must be mentioned that English compounds the problem for Bakgalagari speakers in presenting a mismatch between orthography and pronunciation for most sounds. This makes it difficult for second language learners to determine the correct pronunciation of a sound from orthographic symbols. For example 'a' in the words *bad*, *facade*, *farther*, and layer, is pronounced /bæd, fəsɑːd, fɑːðə/ and /leɪə/ . In Shekgalagari there is an almost one to one correspondence between orthography and pronunciation. A more detailed study needs to be conducted to clarify these issues for Shekgalagari and other related languages (cf. Monaka, 2006).

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that Shekgalagari and English vowel systems differ phonetically and numerically. This difference is evidently a hurdle for Bakgalagari speakers of English. Errors are complex and must be accounted for by a number of factors including the varied situations and contexts from which second language learners acquire the target language as well as the pronunciations of those from which the language is acquired. For most, the classroom is the place where most of the learning of English takes place; and in most cases the teachers are not native speakers of English. But pronunciation exercises are often introduced at tertiary level, at which point interference of mother tongue in the pronunciation of English by L_2 speakers is deeply entrenched and almost impossible to change (cf. Monaka & Moumakwa, 2016; Monaka, & Baitse, 2015).

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