High and realistic goals, suitable for adult learners with different capacities. How far will a strict linguistic-phonological analysis take us in communicative and educational reality?

If a native-like L2- pronunciation is the only acceptable learning target, every phonological and phonetic feature will be of importance. Adult L2 learners seldom reach this goal. This is discussed in the case of English by e.g. Jenkins (2000, 2002), for Swedish by Bannert (1984).

Jenkins introduces the Lingua Franca Core, i.e. phonological and phonetic features assumed to be more crucial to intelligibility than others. Swedish is not a lingua franca in a global sense, but it is used in Sweden and in Finland as a means of communication between native speakers with different regional accents and between native and non-native speakers and among non-native speakers with different L1’s. The suggestions for core features in Swedish phonology are based on empirical studies, structural circumstances and teaching experience. The suggestions include considerations as to what phonetic/acoustic details play a role in realizing the phonological contrasts.

In older didactic tradition, the features that were hard to learn got the highest priority and investiture, regardless of their importance to communication (provided that pronunciation was taught at all). Among such features are the tonal word accents and a voiceless fricative [h], that can be substituted by [j] or [s] with maintained clarity. And vowels, vowels, vowels...

The overview below shows 6 columns. Each phonological contrast can however be associated with a combination of acoustic cues. On the phonetic level there is often a combination of spectral, temporal and tonal features, signaling the contrast. L2 speakers may perceive and produce a phonological contrast, but use other phonetic cues or combination of cues, based on a foreign accent.

Overview of Swedish Phonology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prosody</th>
<th>Segments / phonemes</th>
<th>Phonotactics and phonological processes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>Length/quantity</td>
<td>Tone/intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distinctive stress on word level:</td>
<td>A quantity distinction involving complementary vowel and consonant duration as well as spectral difference between long and short vowel allophone</td>
<td>A tonal word accent contrast, realized in higher prominence categories (accentuated and sentence/local accent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racket – ra ket ‘rocket’</td>
<td>tag – tail ‘ugly’ – ‘full/drunk’ etc.</td>
<td>Accent 2 (grave) ånden ‘the spirit’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On phrase level: Hälsta på någon ‘to greet someone’ Hälsta på någon ‘to visit someone’

Tonal word accent is formally phonemic in those varieties utilizing it, but proven to be of less importance to intelligibility in practice. It has several regional kinds of realization and is neutralized in singing. Tones in Swedish do probably have a more important role in telling the listener which words are “news” (rising pitch) and when the utterance is completed (falling pitch).

No distinct tonal patterns for statement or question.

Phonemes; vowels and consonants. The front rounded vowels [y] and [u] are known to be rare in the world’s languages. From experience we can tell that L2-speakes make themselves understood without discerning all 9 vowel phonemes. The exact vowel quality varies between languages, as does the quality difference between long and short vowel allophones.

The consonants are greater in number and also in possible combinations. A text where vowels are removed (or replaced by e.g. an asterisk) is much easier to read than a test where consonants are removed.

Concluding

General: give priority to features shared by most regional varieties and not to ‘local specialties’ even though they might be part of a high status variety.

Segments: Consonant realization and intact consonant clusters are more crucial to intelligibility than vowel quality.

Prosody: Stress and quantity are more crucial than the tonal word accents. Stress and quantity can be assumed to provide a temporal-rhythmic base for intelligible Swedish.

In didactic practice, the phonetic feature of duration is a very convenient means of promoting both the phonological contrasts of stress and quantity, since it is the main acoustic correlate (perceptual cue) to both. The teacher can kill two birds with one stone.

For an effective pronunciation teaching, one must take into account phonological factors, the relative weights of phonetic/acoustic cues in realizing the phonological contrasts, as well as knowledge about which features are easier and harder to learn and which features are crucial for intelligibility. More research in this area is required.

References


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