

## Documenting rhythmical change

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It has often been remarked that the essential auditory identity of a language, the immediate impression conveyed upon a first or a passing encounter, derives from the character of its prosody (in a broad, Firthian sense). Evidence on the point comes from the way young children (before the end of the first year) are able to differentiate prosodic features from the auditory soup which surrounds them and to introduce them into their own discourse, long before segmental distinctions come to be discriminated and used. The evidence is somewhat mixed, as regards the role of intonational features, but is substantial with respect to rhythm. For example, the latest study I have seen (Levitt and Aydelott Utman 1992) compares the syllable durations of French and American infants, and shows that the French-learning infant produced more regularly timed non-final syllables and showed significantly more final syllable lengthening than the English-learning infant. In other words, there was evidence of the emergence of the 'machine-gun' rhythm typical of French syllable-timing, while the English child maintained the 'morse code' rhythm typical of English stress-timing (see Lloyd James (1940: 25) for the former pair of terms, Pike (1945: 35) for the latter pair).

The persistence with which this distinction is still referred to testifies to the value of the original insight, which continues to motivate research in such fields as child language acquisition, speech pathology and foreign-language teaching. None-the-less, the value of attempting to classify the languages of the world into two main rhythmical types has been questioned several times (e.g. Mitchell 1969; Roach 1982). A particular problem in carrying out studies of comparative rhythm is the subjective nature of the task, which is apparently much influenced by the mother tongue of the speaker. This is a problem which concerned Abercrombie (1967: 97):

We talk, for convenience, about 'hearing' rhythm, but in fact we *feel* it, entering empathetically into the movements of the speaker, to which the sounds we hear are clues. But in order to have this immediate and intuitive apprehension of speech rhythm it is necessary, of course, that the speaker and hearer should have the same

mother-tongue – otherwise 'phonetic empathy' will not work: the sounds will not be recognized as accurate clues to the movements that produce them.

The notion of rhythmical empathy is intriguing. Of particular interest would be a language which manifested both stress-timing and syllable-timing, as native speakers could try out their intuitions against both types, and some interesting experiments could be devised to bear on the issue. Such 'mixed' situations may be more common than is often realised. Roach, in fact, after a study in which inter-stress intervals were measured for a range of languages of both types, concludes 'there is no language which is totally syllable-timed or totally stress-timed – all languages display both sorts of timing ... [and] different types of timing will be exhibited by the same speaker on different occasions and in different contexts' (1982: 78). This is fair comment, but I do not think the conclusion has been followed up by appropriate empirical observation. Just how much syllable-timing is there in English, for example?

If we go looking (I restrict my search to British English), we shall certainly find it. For example, I have heard it recently in the following range of contexts:

It can be heard when adults use baby-talk to very young children or animals. The 'Isn't he a lovely little baba, then?' type of speech, typically produced with much articulatory simplification and much labialisation, is also typically isosyllabic. Of course, a great deal of infant speech (at least, until the fourth year) itself demonstrates this rhythm, especially when children are trying out new structures. It is not surprising, therefore, to find it when adults adopt a comic infantile speech style, such as the character of Bluebottle in BBC Radio's *Goon Show* or of Frank in BBC Television's *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em*.

Syllabic rhythm is common in speech which is expressive of several emotions, such as irritation and sarcasm. 'Oh we are in a bad mood today', with a clipped stress on each syllable.

Several children were heard playing Dr Who and the Daleks – the latter efficiently using the syllabic rhythm characteristic of their (and much other alien) speech.

Many cartoon characters are given a syllable-timed mode of speech, especially those representing monsters, aliens, bad guys and other stereotypes.

A great deal of popular music is syllable-timed. A clear example is the rhythm of ABBA's 'Money, money, money'.

Speech standards for the air and sea services (known as Airspeak and Seaspeak), because they need to articulate with extra clarity, often tend towards syllable-timing, with grammatical words made prominent and an even rhythm throughout. Public announcements generally move in this

direction as is often (though not always consistently) heard at bus stations, railway stations and other such locations.

Various television and radio commercials adopt a staccato or spiky rhythm in their slogans which is moving in the direction of isosyllabicity. 'Drinka pinta milka day' is one of the most famous. Several media presenters (especially news reporters, such as BBC Television's Martin Bell) also adopt a somewhat isosyllabic style of delivery, the clipped manner of presentation presumably striving to convey an impression of control, crispness and precision.

Doubtless there are several other such contexts which could be usefully collected and analysed, and conclusions drawn about the perception and empathy of native speakers, as they respond to different types of rhythmical utterance. In aggregate, however, these contexts do not amount to a great deal. It is still the case that British English as a whole would give the general auditory impression of being stress-timed.<sup>1</sup> Is it possible to conceive of a single language in which stress-timing and syllable-timing are both present in significant proportions and in comparable speech situations?

There is such a language. And it is in fact English – or, to be precise, World English. This language has in recent years, in certain of its dialects, been undergoing a prosodic development of considerable potential significance – comparable in its importance, possibly, to the prosodic change which affected the language in its earliest days, when stress-shifting was a factor in the loss of inflections. The situation is probably unique, arising out of the unprecedented status of English as a world language, within the last hundred years or so, which has brought it into contact with a range of languages of diverse structural types, most of which have rhythms of a broadly isosyllabic character. These situations have resulted in varieties of modern English in which the syllable-timing has been transferred from the contact languages, producing a natural variety of isosyllabic English spoken as a mother tongue by large numbers of people, and viewed as a local spoken standard.

This situation is most dramatic in the subcontinent of India, where one of the most noticeable features of Indian English – and the one which contributes most to the difficulty British speakers have in understanding Indian speech – is the failure to preserve traditional stress distinctions because of the isosyllabic rhythm. Syllable-timing is a noticeable feature of the native languages of India, and is a characteristic of the official language, Hindi. The importance of this particular variety of English lies in the number of people who speak it. In India alone, with a current population of about 850 million, and assuming some 3 per cent are fluent in English (Kachru 1982: 378), there are over 25 million speakers – nearly half the size of the English-speaking population of Britain. Less conservative estimates double that figure.

To what extent could the syllable-timed speech of India influence other varieties, such as Standard British English? This is unlikely, because Indian English has a low-prestige value in Britain; however, not all regional varieties are in this position. The second most noticeable area where syllable-timing is normal is the creole English spoken throughout many of the islands of the Caribbean, and now (through immigration) in several parts of Britain. This culture has a much higher prestige rating, especially among the young, thanks mainly to its popular music, and the rhythms of reggae and rapping. I recently observed a rapping competition in this country, where most of the participants were not of West Indian ethnic origin. All participants, however, rapped using the isosyllabic rhythms characteristic of that style of performance. Whether such teenage imitative ability is likely to have any permanent effect on their speech, or on the speech of others, I cannot say: but their fluency in this alien rhythmality was certainly impressive.

There is a syllable-timed English emerging all over the world. It is noticeable in South Africa, where it is a dominant feature of Afrikaans-influenced English, and of the English of many black people. Most other African varieties of English are syllable-timed. The phenomenon is also a noticeable feature of pidgins and creoles all over the world, such as Krio in West Africa and Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea. It is noticeable in the United States, especially in those areas where mixed varieties of Spanish and English (such as Tex-Mex) have developed. There are millions in Florida, Texas, California and New Mexico who speak a variety of English which displays the syllable-timed rhythms of Spanish. Many in the cities of the north are second- or third-generation Italian immigrants whose speech is distinctively Italian in rhythm, and other isosyllabic languages display similar influence. It is too early to say what is happening in the corridors of power of the European Community, but according to several local observers a form of 'Eurospeak' is already emerging. I would not be surprised to find it characterised by a tendency towards isosyllabism in due course. Decades of experience of teaching English as a foreign language tells us that most learners have considerable difficulty mastering the weak vowel system in the language, and the most usual residual deficiency in a fluent learner's accent is likely to relate to this area. Given a community of English-using foreigners where this deficiency is shared, it would not be surprising to see it emerge as a standard feature in due course.

As we move into a world where British and American speakers of English are outnumbered by the totals of those learning English as a second language, intriguing questions arise. What will we begin to listen out for in the new dispensation? Will we cease to feel the need to pay attention to word-stress rules altogether? And will this matter? Many phoneticians and teachers have spent hours working with foreigners on their aberrant word stress, but we seem to know very little about the extent to which native

speakers encounter a genuine problem of listening comprehension if such patterns are not followed. How many ambiguities actually arise within Indian English as a consequence of isosyllabism? And then with reference to phonetic empathy: what will happen to our intuitions, when the majority of the English-speaking world use varieties of English which are to varying extents isosyllabic?

There are many such unanswered questions, but one thing is plain. The linguistic situation is far more fluid than our early attempts at prosodic classification would lead us to expect. It is also – at least in respect of English – more rapidly changing than at any time in recent centuries. There is an urgent need to carry out some empirical studies of the range of rhythmical expression found in the new Englishes, and of the nature of the diffusion which is currently taking place. Perhaps the lack of stress in the new varieties is being compensated for by other kinds of contrastivity, such as changes in vowel quality, pitch or duration. Perhaps some kind of rhythmical bidialectism will emerge, as the varieties come increasingly into contact with each other. Or perhaps the whole question of rhythmical types has been overrated and nothing of consequence will take place in the language, while it develops its new rhythmical dimension. As Doc himself put it, at the end of an account of rhythmical types in his Pelican *Phonetics*: 'indeed there is no reason why there should be any rhythmical basis at all, in the sense of some feature recurring at regular time intervals' (p. 239). A breathtaking comment which I never fully grasped until now.

#### NOTE

- 1 Some accents display a noticeable tendency towards syllable-timing – certain varieties of Welsh English, for example. It is actually possible to be momentarily confused between Welsh and Indian speakers (see further below) – an observation which from time to time motivates local amateur linguists in Wales to conclude that Welsh was the original language of the Indo-Europeans!

Jack Windsor Lewis reminds me that a comic exaggeration of the fact that at least residual traces of a typical Welsh accent can occasionally be confused with a non-retroflex type of Indian English accent was made the subject of a review sketch on the London stage in the early 1960s (probably by Peter Cook for *One Over the Eight*). A darkened stage represented apparently a cageful of Welsh miners. The joke was that only when the pit cage ascended from the darkness into the light were the miners able to realise that one of their number was an Indian.

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