

Stuck in TAR: how we prevent learners from handling everyday speech.

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Introduction

Why is there such a large gap between the rules about speech that we teach in the classroom, and the everyday speech that learners have to handle when they first arrive in an English-speaking environment? I have made a career out of making presentations and writing papers which take a rule about speech (question intonation, stress-timing, etc.; cf. reference list) and demonstrating that, in everyday speech, the rule 'ain't necessarily so'. I have done this for so long with a sufficient number of topics that I have begun to wonder why there are so many rules that 'ain't necessarily so'. As a consequence this is not going to be another 'it-ain't-necessarily-so' paper: I want to burrow deeper, to propose an explanation for why there are so many discrepancies between everyday speech and the rules we teach.

RATES

Everyday speech is characterised by rough and tumble: speed, accent, noisy environment, colloquialisms, slang, uncontrolled vocabulary, and the rapid to-and-fro of conversational interaction. Henceforth I am going to refer to this **Rough And Tumble of Everyday Speech** as RATES. I shall explain TAR below.

Observing and generalising

Teachers cannot prepare learners for all eventualities, so it is important that that they (learners) are taught strategies to learn from the language they encounter, to be able to notice what's going on, to observe patterns, make generalisations and operationalise in their own language use what they have noticed and observed. These learning strategies will help them handle (both in speaking and listening) the RATES in which they are required to work, study, and socially flourish. By 'strategies' I don't mean such things as 'guessing from context' or 'predicting', though these are important skills, I mean having strategies for observing and learning from the acoustic blur of RATES.

My contention is that our textbook rules about speech are obstacles to effective observation and learning.

Textbook rules

One feature of many of the rules is that they have a scientific status: they are hypotheses - ideas that are sufficiently clearly

expressed so they can be tested by evidence of RATES. Here is a sample of clearly expressed hypotheses:

- yes/no questions have rising intonation
- wh-questions have falling intonation
- English is stress-timed
- French is syllable-timed
- high-falling intonation mean 'surprise'
- a fall-rise tone means 'I'm not certain'

The evidence of RATES is very much against these rules (for questions, cf. - Cauldwell & Hewings, 1996; Cheng, 2004; for timing, cf. Cauldwell, 2001; for emotion/attitude cf. Cauldwell, 2000; Stibbard, 2001). In fact I would go so far as to say that in RATES, none of the above hypotheses is true. If you accept my view, then you have to accept also that the rules, the hypotheses, have a different scientific status: they are refuted hypotheses.

Speech scientists and speech priests

If scientists find that their hypotheses are refuted they begin again with a new hypothesis. But ELT does not have many speech scientists, we tend to be speech priests – continuing to believe in the rules as if they were articles of faith, in defiance of the evidence. I include myself in this. Being closely associated with the work of David Brazil, I tend to interpret RATES in terms of Discourse Intonation. But the more evidence I encounter, the less confidence I have about the rules I once learned.

To help learners survive and flourish in RATES, we need to abandon these rules, and learn to look afresh at the speech learners we have to handle. But we don't, for two reasons.

Reason 1: Rule dependence

First, ELT, like most of education, is dependent on rules. It is part of the professional expertise of teachers to have a deep knowledge of rules and exceptions. The view seems to be that without rules, there can be no teaching. Additionally it is part of classroom competence to be able to teach learners to use these rules in tests and examinations. But the problem with the evidence of RATES is that it points to a world where no rules hold sway, where all rules are broken.

Additionally, the evidence undermines fundamental assumptions that lie behind the formulation of the original rules. Assumptions such as:

- there must be rules of the form: *pattern 'x' gives meaning 'y'*
- languages are timed

·there are causal links between intonation and attitude'

The rules don't deal with the reality of human interaction. But, being rule-dependent, we ELT professionals fear broadening our expertise to encompass a RATES that either has no rules, or has rules that are so complex that they cannot be taught. Because of this fear, we opt for denial, and ignore the evidence of RATES. 'Human kind cannot bear very much reality' wrote the poet TS Eliot - and as human beings we opt for the comfortable discredited fictions over the reality of RATES.

The problem with this is that many of our learners, and particularly those who want to flourish in RATES, have to learn to handle this reality. I'll come back to how we might do this later.

Reason 2: TAR

The second reason for the survival of these rules can be found in a paper by Richard Dawkins, the Charles Simonyi Chair in the Public Understanding of Science at the University of Oxford (Dawkins, 1996). He identifies three bad reasons for believing anything - **T**radition, **A**uthority, and **R**evelation (henceforth TAR). He writes that 'Tradition means beliefs ... from books handed down through the centuries' (p. 19) 'Authority ... means believing it because you are told to believe it by somebody important.' (p. 20). Revelation is described as a process of an individual's private thinking about a topic until he/she becomes more and more sure about the truth. The examples in his paper concern religion - I can imagine his paper being deeply offensive to at least two major world religions. But, at the risk of being offensive myself, let me translate them in terms of our field. Tradition, is 'because it has been in the textbooks for as long as we can remember'; Authority is 'Because Professor X said so'; and Revelation is native-speaker introspection. Our field is dominated by the rules of TAR: we are too respectful of, in fact we are mired in, the rules of TAR. The evidence of RATES - too scary - is denied.

This is why I believe there is a gap between classroom-work, and the RATES of real-life. This is why, I believe many learners leave our classrooms well-schooled in rules, but unable to handle RATES as well as they would like, and as well as their hard-work deserves.

Future action

So what should we do? In the medium and long term, we ELT professionals (phonologists, teacher-trainers, teachers) need to look at real speech, describe it in its own terms (e.g. in ways outlined by Brazil 1995; and Shockey, 2003) - not pretending that it is a deviant substandard form of writing. Then derive a description, a phonology for listening, that is pedagogically

viable. By pedagogically viable, I mean one that helps learners become effective handlers of RATES more quickly. What I believe we will find is that RATES has patterns, but these patterns do not have any causal relationship with meanings or functions of any kind. The relationship between the patterns and meaning is one of co-occurrence, not causation.

Immediate action

Many theoretical papers identify problems and call for solutions but don't offer any solutions. But I do have a solution to propose, and, at the risk of being accused of blowing my own trumpet, I shall do so.

Streaming Speech: Listening and Pronunciation for Advanced Learners of English (Cauldwell, 2002; 2003) provides access to twenty-three minutes of unscripted recordings of biographical monologue, conversation, anecdote, and lecture. It is an electronic publication which allows learners to interact with unscripted recordings and their transcriptions. They see the transcription on screen, they click on it, and hear it as it was originally spoken. The presentation of the transcript uses the conventions of Discourse Intonation (Brazil, 1997). This has the advantage of highlighting the variability of RATES – the varying speeds, the crushing of the soundshapes of words. Despite the adherence to Discourse Intonation, *Streaming Speech* is 'rule-light' – it does not present rules about how speech ought to be – it presents evidence of expert speaker performances, with only occasional reference to rules, and then only to debunk them.

Lian (2004) in a review of *Streaming Speech* writes that

... it offers the following statement/question: "This is what you've got, how do we deal with it?"
... the approach here is to provide learners with the tools which will enable them to develop internal mechanisms for making ordinary, everyday, language comprehensible. These mechanisms can be generalised beyond specific texts and should help learners to become self-managing in due course.

Giving learners direct encounters with RATES with a program such as *Streaming Speech* gives them a better chance of being able to handle RATES on arrival in an English-speaking environment. There is an additional advantage that is perhaps embarrassing for us as teachers to consider. They can learn independently about the reality of RATES, without having their learning mired in the rules of TAR, without having rule-governed interventions of ELT obstructing their way.

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