



CONTRASTIVE PHONETICS OF ENGLISH, FRENCH AND MODERN
 GREEK IN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND INTERPRETING

Ekaterini Nikolarea

Dept. of Comparative Literature
 University of Alberta, Edmonton
 Canada T6G 2E6

ABSTRACT

Based on the assumption that language is auditorily based and phonemes are auditorily perceived elements, this paper proposes a microlinguistic contrastive analysis of the vowel and consonant systems in English, French and Modern Greek. Consequently, the point of the discussion will be the three types of physical reality of these languages (articulatory, acoustic, auditory) and the functional difference in each language. This paper will also examine the implicational value of the notions of 'transfer' and 'interference' as a source for further experimental studies into the predictability of the English, French and Greek learner's difficulties and their bidirectional pedagogical potentiality: language teaching and interpreting.

I. INTRODUCTION

I shall restrict myself to the applied segmental phonology of English (E), French (F) and Modern Greek (MGr) following four steps in executing an Applied Contrastive Analysis (ACA): draw up a phonemic inventory of E, Fr and MGr, providing comparative charts; equate phonemes interlingually; list their phonemic variants and state the distributional restrictions on the phonemes and allophones of each language. I do not claim, however, that it will be an exhaustive ACA. I would rather use three different approaches, where feasible: the articulatory, acoustic and auditory ones in order to obtain a bidirectional ACA. My aim will be to show the similarities and differences can explain the transfer and interference, errors and difficulties of the Greek (Gr) learner of E and Fr and vice versa and their pedagogic aspects.

II. THE VOWELS

MGr has a very simple symmetrical five vowel system in contrast with the 15 vowels of E and the Fr inventory of 16 vowel units. The vowel sounds of MGr are remarkably pure in quality. They tend to be longer and louder when stressed, and to be nasalized before a sequence of consonants of which the first is nasal.

From a contrastive perspective, MGr vowel system lacks all the intermediary sounds of E and Fr, and vowel length is not a distinctive feature at all. Consequently, the Gr learner of E and Fr will have difficulties to distinguish sleep /sli:p/

from slip /slip/, peur /pœr/ [o open] from peut /pø/ [ø closed] and s/he will tend to collapse the 15 E vowels and the 16 Fr ones as follows:

English		MGreek		French
i: } i }	/ɪ/	ɪ	/ɪ/	{ ɪ y
e } ɛ } æ } ə: } ə }	/e/	e	/e/	{ e ø ɛ ɛ œ ɛ̃ è
a } ɑ: } ʌ }	/a/	a	/a/	{ a ɑ ɑ̃
ɔ: } ɒ } o }	/o/	o	/ɔ/	{ ɔ ɔ̃ o
u: } u }	/u/	u	/u/	{ u

The E and Fr learner of MGr will find difficult to pronounce /e/ and /a/ very open when medial and stressed.

III. DISTRIBUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CONSONANTS IN E, Fr AND MGr

The voiceless plosives /p, t, k/ are unaspirated in MGr as well as in Fr but they can be aspirated [p^h], [t^h], [k^h] in E. Thus the Gr and Fr learner of E will not have any difficulties with the acoustic properties of the E aspirated plosives but rather with articulation. The consequence of this articulatory interference will be the "foreign" accent of the Gr and Fr learner of E.

The dental fricatives /θ, ð/ are similar only in E and MGr. The Fr consonant system lacks of these consonants. Consequently /θ/ becomes /t/ and /ð/ /d/. Although the Fr learner of E and MGr can distinguish the acoustic properties of these sounds, s/he cannot articulate them easily. The situation becomes more complicated when s/he encounters the following similar pairs:

δίνω /ðino/:	give	} in MGr	theme/θim/	} in E
ντύνω /dino/:	dress sb		team/ti:m/	

We are now concerned not only with physical or physiological reality, but also with mental reality. In the above case, we can view interference from

V. SUPRA-SEGMENTAL CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS

5.1 STRESS

Stress is the force of breath with which sounds are produced. This force is relative that means that the strength or weakness of the force is determined in relation to other forces of breath in the utterance(s) of a person.

Stress in English is not fixed. There is no way of knowing in advance where the different stress levels will occur in English speech. All linguists do not agree as to the number of relative stress phonemes in English. Some believe that there are four phonemic word stress levels; other linguists believe there are three phonemic word stress levels. The three-stress theory of English is, from a teaching point of view, more practical because it pays attention to the primary stress level which yields the meaning contrasts. But the stress in English when compared and contrasted with that in Greek is important but not distinctive.

Modern Greek, on the other hand, is a syllable-stressed language, that is stress is a semantically significant feature as it is not in French and sometimes in English. The position of the stress in many cases is the only distinguishable feature in the pronunciation of two different words, as shown by the minimal pairs such as:

1. a) γέρος [jéros]: old man /jéros/
b) γερός [jerós]: strong, robust /jerós/
2. a) διπλωμάτων [ðiplomáton]: diplomas (gen. pl.) /ðiplomáton/
b) διπλωματών [ðiplomatón]: diplomats (gen. pl.) /ðiplomatón/

MGr still preserves the effect of the "antepenultimate rule" or the "law of the three syllables" of Ancient Greek, according to which the stress in Greek words falls only on one of the last three syllables: (1) on the last syllable of a word (ultimate or "oxytone") (2) on the next to the last (penultimate or "paroxytone") and (3) on the second from the last (antepenultimate or "proparoxytone").

The lack of this distinctive function of stress in English and French makes MGr rather difficult to teach and learn. The very first question which the E and Fr learner may raise is which syllable of a given word is stressed. Although there are not many precise rules for determining the primary stress of words, there are four general principles of stress which the learner should keep in mind. One more difficulty is that the words must be learned individually.

5.2 INTONATION

In English, intonation contours can be described in terms of four phonemic pitch levels (low, low-mid, high-mid, high) and three directions of pitch change. French intonation contours may also be described in terms of pitch levels and the direction of pitch movement but there are some important differences between French and English intonation contours. Modern Greek, however, does not make a distinctive use of pitch.

In English as well as in French to a certain extent intonation does have a differentiative function but it is seldom to differentiate words

and sentences from each other. In MGr intonational patterns play grammatical, syntactic and semantic function. In order to contrast the function of intonation in English, French and Modern Greek the following examples are given:

1. John is here? ↗ It echoes question but it mainly expresses surprise or disbelief.
2. Il est parti? ↗
(has he left?) In this YES-NO question intonation serves two primary functions: (1) it is a grammatic unit and (2) it conveys emotive and affective meaning

In French there are two other ways of forming the same question:

- (1) by inverting the subject and the verb
e.g. Est-il parti? (Has he left?/Did he leave?)
 - (2) by prefixing Est-ce que before the declarative sentence e.g. Est-ce qu'il est parti? (Has he left?/Did he leave?)
3. /Θα μου δώσει το βιβλίο/? ↗ In MGr the rising intonation (will s/he give me the book?) and a semantic function. It is the ONLY possible way to ask a question. The MGr YES-NO questions are restricted by the fact that MGr has neither the variety of auxiliary verbs as English does nor the alternatives of French in order to form a question. If the E or Fr learner uses the same sentence but with a falling-raising intonation e.g. Θα μου δώσει το βιβλίο ↘ ↗ the native speaker will not answer the question but s/he will think that his/her interlocutor is simply uncertain.

VI. CONCLUSION

Clearly, much of what I have suggested is taken from my own experience in living in France and Canada and as an English, French and Modern Greek teacher. My speculations and suggestions require extensive justification which it is not possible here. My main purpose has been to open discussion of Contrastive Phonetics among English, French and Modern Greek, which has not been ventured yet. In a world where mass communications bring foreign languages in constant contact (i.e. E.E.C., bilingual and multicultural countries), there is a growing-up awareness of interpreters and translators. Confining myself to interpreting, I believe that an Applied Contrastive Phonetics of English, French and Modern Greek has lots to offer; only if we consider that the interpreting of a foreign language into the target language (TL) requires a perfect ear, immediate understanding of the foreign sounds, phrases or idioms, and ability to find the appropriate counterparts of the TL at once, we can better understand the importance of such an Applied Contrastive Phonetics. This paper has been intended to be an open invitation for further experimental studies and pedagogical exploitations: language teaching (advanced level) and interpreting.