

The Impact of Bantu Languages on English Pronunciation

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Bantu languages are dialects spoken in the central and southern Africa. These languages have some prosodic features different from English, not widely discussed in the literature. When speakers of these languages come to learn English, they confront pronunciation difficulties which might hinder their intelligibility. Sounds, such as the bilabial fricative /β/ and the alveolar affricate /ts/ are some Bantu language segments that may interfere with English speech intelligibility. The epenthetic phenomenon (vowel insertion) in several Bantu languages is also an issue English as a second language (ESL) instructors need to be cognizant. In addition, English segments, such as the interdental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ and vowel sound distinctions constitute a puzzle to Bantu language speakers. This paper examines the literature on Bantu language phonology in order to identify prominent discrepancy sounds from English, and proposes some pronunciation activities to be used with learners from Bantu language backgrounds.

Keywords: Bantu languages, pronunciation, metathesis, epenthesis

Introduction

Pronunciation is a broad topic, because it encompasses phonetics—the production and perception of human individual sounds, and phonology—the combination of these segments in a speech (Gut, 2014). In this paper, however, pronunciation will be discussed at the segmental level (phonetics). In addition, the phonetic symbols and transcriptions used in this paper are those suggested by Avery and Ehrlich (2016, p. 7).

Pronunciation is as relevant as grammar albeit its absence in overt teaching in many teachers' lesson plans (Harmer, 2015). In some cases, pronunciation problems provoke rather series incomprehensibility (Avery & Ehrlich, 2016) more than grammatical flaws. Thus, there is a need for raising every English as a second language (ESL) teacher's awareness of the relevance of English (L2) learners' oral output for a successful interaction.

Fruitful pronunciation teaching begins with teachers' familiarity with their learners' linguistic backgrounds (Avery & Ehrlich, 2016). Nevertheless, speakers from different L1 backgrounds face a plethora of English sounds that are not realized in their L1 sound systems.

Therefore, this paper will discuss some crucial findings (Downing, 2004; Macharia, 2013; Makalela, 2007; Njeru, 2013) on segmental features of a number of Bantu languages that might profoundly impact English pronunciation. In other words, the paper will identify problems that Bantu (L1) speakers encounter when pronouncing some English words. The goal is to provide some pronunciation insights to ESL teachers who have learners from Bantu language backgrounds, so that these instructors can be aware of the troublesome segments. The discussion will start with a brief definition of Bantu languages.

Bantu Languages Definition

Bantu languages are a subset of Niger-Congo languages mostly spoken in the center and south part of Africa (English Oxford Living Dictionary, n.d.; Downing, 2004). According to Downing (2004, p. 120), there are more than 500 Bantu languages which extend from southern Cameroon in the west to southern Somalia in the east. Some languages of this group are tonal, whereas others bear accentual features. Many of them possess stress-accent independent from tone, while very few of them lost their tone to conserve only stress.

Main Phonetic Features of Some Bantu Languages and Their Implications for English Pronunciation

This section is devoted to bringing some segmental characteristics of a number of Bantu languages, namely, Kikuyu¹, Kimbundu², Umbundu³, Kiambu⁴, and others. The phonetic specificity of these languages is believed to impact negatively on the acquisition of English pronunciation.

In a study conducted in Kenya with Kikuyu speakers, Macharia (2013) stated that there is a huge phonological discrepancy between Kikuyu and English. Kikuyu, as well as the majority of Bantu languages, do not permit consonant clusters. When a speaker of one of these languages encounters a consonant cluster, he/she will split it inserting a vowel in it. For example, the English word “class” /klæs/ will more likely be pronounced /kəlæs/. Likewise, this epenthesis in consonant clusters is noticed in Kimbundu (the author’s L1).

In his research, Macharia (2013) equally identified a pre-nasalization of some plosive sounds. In Kikuyu, the segment /d/ is preceded by the nasal alveolar /n/, whereas the voiced velar stop /g/ is preceded by /ŋ/. For instance, the English words “dinner” /dɪnə(r)/ and “game” /gɛm/ will very likely be pronounced /ndɪnə(r)/ and /ŋgɛm/ respectively by Kikuyu speakers. Similarly, native speakers of Umbundu will present identical English pronunciation problems.

The researcher also noticed the substitution of certain consonant sounds as the following:

1. The lateral /l/ is normally substituted by the trilled /r/. For example, the English word “look” /lɒk/ will be uttered /rɒk/. In Kimbundu, however, the opposite happens. The /r/ sound, either retroflex or trilled, is replaced by /l/. Thus, “read” /ri:d/ will be pronounced /li:d/ by a Kimbundu speaker.

2. The labiodentals fricatives /v/, /f/ and the bilabial plosive /p/ are usually substituted by the voiced bilabial fricative /β/ in Kikuyu. Therefore, the English word “vest” /vest/ will very likely be produced /βesɪtɪ/ since Kikuyu does not allow closed syllables and consonant clusters (Macharia, 2013).

Another phenomenon that occurs in Kikuyu is metathesis—a change in the sequence of sounds or letters in a word without altering the meaning. For example, the Kikuyu term “kioski” can be changed into “kioksi” maintaining the same meaning “kiosk” (Macharia, 2013). Thus, a Kikuyu speaker may interchange the sounds in “task” into “taks.”

In another study carried out in Kenya by Njeru (2013), she stated,

Bantu languages conform to pronunciation. What this means is that, words are written the way we pronounce them. This presents problems when a Bantu speaker of a Bantu (L1) learns English, because English is non-phonetic and spelling (orthography) violates pronunciation. (pp. 130-131)

¹ A Bantu language spoken in Kenya by Gikuyu people (Macharia, 2013).

² A Bantu language spoken in the northwest of Angola.

³ A Bantu language spoken in the central and southwest of Angola.

⁴ A Bantu language of Kenya.

This quotation corroborates Macharia's (2013) assertions about the huge discrepancy between English and Bantu languages as far as pronunciation is concerned.

Like in Macharia's (2013) study, Njeru (2013) found that speakers of Kiambu and other languages omitted, misordered, and misformed English words (metathesis phenomenon).

Makalela (2007) undertook another elucidative study in South Africa. He studied the features of Black South African English (BSAE) dialect focusing on the role of the nine Bantu languages (Sepedi, Setswana, Sesotho, isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, Siswati, Xitsonga, and Tshivenda) for its development. All these languages are spoken in South Africa.

According to Makalela (2007), BSAE pronunciation showed the heritage of the mentioned Bantu languages both at the vocalic and consonantal level. For example, there is no distinction between long and short vowels. Thus, the front vowel /ɛ/ is produced instead of /æ/. The word "fat" will be pronounced /fɛt/ instead of /fæt/. In addition, the schwa sound /ə/ is pronounced as a full strong vowel. Words that end in "er" as in "farmer" /famə(r)/ will be produced /fama(r)/.

Makalela (2007) also identified noteworthy consonant problems. Firstly, the interdental sounds /θ/ and /ð/ are uttered /t/ and /d/. Thus, words, such as "with" and "without" will be pronounced /wɪt/ and /wɪdaʊt/ respectively by BSAE speakers. Secondly, the /ŋ/ as in "sing" is replaced by /g/, and therefore, the word will be pronounced /sɪng/. Thirdly, the retroflex alveolar /r/ is trilled.

Despite Makalela's (2007) outcomes on interdental sounds, it was also found that the combined letters "th" yields the voiceless alveolar affricate sound /ts/ in isiZulu, one of the Bantu languages spoken in South Africa. If one, for example, listens to the national anthem of South Africa, the passage in isiZulu "Yizwa imithandazo yethu (Hear our petitions)", he/she will hear /yizwa imitsandazo yetsu/ (Nkosi, 2012).

The findings observed above about Bantu languages pronunciations are transversal to a number of other languages (Avery & Ehrlich, 2016). Avery and Ehrlich (2016) also identified similar consonant gaps in many languages. The absence of consonant clusters, and the interdental /θ/ and /ð/ have been leading many ESL students to recurrent errors of empathizing clusters, and replacing /θ/ by /t/, /s/, or /f/, and /ð/ by /d/ or /v/.

Downing (2004) conducted a remarkable study on accent typology of African languages. Within 28 Bantu languages studied, only two were not governed by the penult stress-position rule. In other words, 92.9% the Bantu languages, in her study, bear their stress on the next-to-last syllables. In the light of these findings, ESL learners whose L1s are one of these languages will mispronounce a number of English words, which do not carry stress on the penultimate syllables. A word like "beautiful" /'bjʊtəfəl/ will very likely be uttered /bjʊ'təfəl/, shifting the stress from the first to the penultimate syllable. To alleviate the Bantu languages influenced pronunciation flaws discussed throughout this paper, interventions may be devised to help ESL learners from these African language backgrounds to overcome these problems.

Pronunciation Intervention Exercises

Some of these exercises were used with one of my tutees, Barasa Lunga⁵, an ESL learner who speaks Bambara⁶, Sarakole⁷, and Wolof⁸. Although these languages are not Bantu, the diagnosis of speech samples

⁵ A pseudonym to protect the subject's identity. Barasa is an ESL learner at Spring International Language Center, University of Arkansas. She is from Mali and enrolled in an intensive English program to pursue a college degree in the U.S..

⁶ A Mande language spoken in central northern Mali.

⁷ A Mande language spoken by Soninke people in Mali, Senegal, Gambia, and surroundings.

⁸ An Atlantic language spoken in Senegal, Gambia, and Mauritania.

showed a strong prosodic similarity to the literature on Bantu languages' phonology (see Appendix). Based on the language sample analysis, the main intervention comprised two aspects: vowel sounds distinction and consonant replacement. Regarding the vowel discrimination, the emphasis was placed on the /ɑ:/, /æ/, and /e/ vs. the schwa /ə/. Referring to consonants, however, the focus was on the contrast between the /θ/ and /ts/, /θ/ and /f/, /ð/ and /d/, /l/ and /r/.

Exercises on Vowel Sounds Distinction (/ɑ:/, /æ/, /e/, and /ə/)

Let the learner practice the contrastive vowels in minimal pairs (Avery & Ehrlich, 2016, p. 200) and near minimal pairs.

/æ/	/e/	/ɑ/	/ə/
pan	pen	pot	parrot
sand	send	smog	support
land	lend	log	lemon
laughed	left	lop	alike
ham	hem	hog	happen
sad	said	sock	salad

After the instructor realizes that the student can try to differentiate the sounds, the learner can play the game "I got it." It is quite simple and easy to practice (see Table 1).

Table 1

Sample Chart for the "I Got it" Game

	/ɑ/	/æ/	/e/	/ə/
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				

A. Draw a chart on the board, or give out a handout with the chart.

B. Instruct the learners that you are going to utter a word in every 10 seconds. The learners have to listen carefully to the words and write them in the right cell based on the focused sounds to be discriminated.

C. Give time to answer any question regarding the exercise.

D. In a pre-selected list of words containing the target sounds, randomly recite the words. These are some suggested words:

pet	lap	dance	stop
man	lend	dot	bet
sand	shop	sister	mob
men	allow	career	red
frog	land	pop	thousand

Exercises on Consonant Sounds (/θ/ and /ts/, /θ/ and /f/, /ð/ and /d/)

The problem noticed on the interdental fricative sounds can be addressed starting from showing the manner and places of articulation of the sounds, so that learners are aware of the differences in their production. For effective instruction, teachers can practice the sounds by using their own mouths, a picture (Avery & Ehrlich, 2016, pp. 13-19), the YouTube (English, 2011; English Language Club, 2014; English Lessons 4U,

2014), or some minimal pair activities (Luke & Hollie, n.d.; English Club, 1997a). For more advanced learners like Barasa, tongue twister activities (Recine, 2016) can be introduced when students become confident with the minimal and near minimal pairs (see Table 2).

Table 2

Minimal and Near Minimal Pair Repetition Exercises for the Sounds /ð/ and /d/, /θ/ and /f/, and θ/ and /ts/

/ð/	/d/	/θ/	/f/	/θ/	/ts/
then	den	thin	fin	length	let's
though	dough	three	free	path	pats
their	dare	thread	Fred	Ruth	roots
those	doze	throws	froze	month	mounts
thy	die	thresh	fresh	both	boats
they	day	thirst	first	bath	bats

Minimal Pair and Near Minimal Pair Repetition Exercises (/l/ and /r/)

English pronunciation problems faced by Kikuyu and Kimbundu speakers, regarding the substitution of the lateral /l/ by the trilled /r/ and vice-versa can be addressed by the following minimal pairs exercise (English Club, 1997b) (see Table 3).

Table 3

Minimal Pair Repetition Exercises for /l/ and /r/

/l/	/r/	/l/	/r/
lead	read	collect	correct
light	right	led	red
fly	fry	clash	crash
lace	race	flee	free
alive	arrive	lamp	ramp
law	raw	lay	ray

Minimal Pair and Near Minimal Pair Repetition Exercises to Address Metathesis Problem

As seen previously, Kikuyu speakers sometimes change the conventional sequence of sounds or letters within a word without altering its meaning (Macharia, 2013). For these students, the following exercise may help them understand that, in English, interchanging and/or reordering certain segments can generate new words with different meanings (see Table 4).

Table 4

Minimal Pair and Near Minimal Pair for the Consonant Clusters /ks/ and /sk/

/ks/	/sk/	/ks/	/sk/
tax	task	bucks	busk
axe	ask	freaks	frisk
box	bask	hacks	husk
weeks	whisk	mocks	mosque
dux	dusk	flax	flask
bricks	brisk	decks	desk
max	mask	reeks	risk

Conclusion

Various studies (Downing, 2004; Macharia, 2013; Makalela, 2007; Njeru, 2013) reveal the influence of Bantu languages on English. Thus, the problems of vowel sound discrimination (Makalela, 2007) and the epenthesis phenomenon at several levels (Macharia, 2013; Makalela, 2007) were striking.

Although English pronunciation problems seem to be transversal to every English language learner (Avery & Ehrlich, 2016), ESL learners from Bantu language backgrounds demonstrate some peculiarities.

1. They usually replace the voiceless interdental sound /θ/ by the voiceless alveolar affricate sound /ts/ (Nkosi, 2012).

2. They frequently pre-nasalize the plosives /d/ and /g/ by the nasals /n/ and /ŋ/, respectively.

3. They sometimes metathesize words (Macharia, 2013).

4. They tend to stress penultimate syllables (Downing, 2004).

The four features previously stated seem to be specific to some Bantu languages. Therefore, ESL instructors should be cognizant of these linguistic characteristics by carrying out a “diagnosis of speech samples” (Avery & Ehrlich, 2016, p. 175-176). This pre-assessment of ESL learners’ pronunciation habits might help teachers identify which English segmental aspect needs to be emphasized to elaborate appropriate intervention exercises that meet students’ needs.

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Appendix: Language Samples

(The * means a prominent pronunciation problem error)

1. My studies going well.
2. I try to be *wif /wɪθ/my new *enbiroment /ɪn'vaɪrənmənt/.
3. When I was in my country, only introducing myself was difficult.
4. Here, I *tsink /θɪŋk/ listening are very improving, too.
5. I *tsink /θɪŋk/ English is a *tred /θɜ:rd/ language.
6. It is not easy to find people who speak English *dea /ðe(r)/.
7. We left our country to come to study here.
8. I can say *dat /dæt/.
9. I am very *efred /ə'freɪd/ because I do not know what will come next.
10. I am *efred /ə'freɪd/ because of *de /ðə/ new president law.
11. I will let *dem /dəm/ to stay for *de /ðə/ moment.
12. We do not know what will happen.
13. If *dey /ðei/ ask me to give my advice, I will tell *dem /dəm/ to wait.
14. I would feel very *anksios /'æŋkɪəs/.
15. *Dis /ðɪs/ is *samtsing /sʌmθɪŋ/.
16. I am not from *doz /ðouz/ country, but still am *efred /ə'freɪd/.
17. If I have to be like *doz /ðouz/ *pipel /'pi:pl/ coming from *doz /ðouz/ country, it would be worse.
18. You leave your job, come here *dat /dæt/ you want to study for one year or two year, in one *manf /mʌnθ/ or two *mans /mʌnθ/, *dis /ðɪs/ new politics come.
19. You do not know what to do, so you would be very *anksyos /'æŋkɪəs/.
20. I *fink /θɪŋk/ *de /ðə/ word shock is a little bit strong for me.
21. I *fink /θɪŋk/ *dat /dæt/ here *de /ðə/ difference between my country and here.
22. I noticed *dat /dæt/ *pipel /'pi:pl/ are really very kind here.
23. For example, sometimes if am trying to cross *de /ðə/ road I see *dat /dæt/ drivers give priority to women.
24. In my country, *dis /ðɪs/ is not *de /ðə/ case.
25. Cultural shock, I may say is a little bit change between my country and here.
26. Here, I noticed *dat /dæt/ *pipel /'pi:pl/ *evrɪtsing /'everɪθɪŋ/ *dey /ðei/ do like if you come across *wif /wɪθ/ one person *widaut /wɪ'daʊt/ awareness *dey /ðei/ say sorry or I am sorry.
27. *Tsings /θɪŋs/ like *dat /dæt/.
28. *De /ðə/ is no need in my country to do it.
29. You can just say or excuse me and you just continue.
30. I do not know to say it.
31. I *tsink /θɪŋk/ *dey /ðei/ are kind more gentle.
32. I *tsink /θɪŋk/ I did not get you in the first part of the question.
33. Before *dey /ðei/ go.
34. I *tsink /θɪŋk/ if I understand de question, I *tsink /θɪŋk/ *dat /dæt/ for *pipel /'pi:pl/ to be fine in somebody's else culture.
35. *De /ðə/ best *tsing /θɪŋ/ is to try to understand first de culture.
36. If you see *dat /dæt/ you understand *dea /ðe(r)/ real culture, you can know how to behave *wif /wɪθ/ *dem /dəm/.
37. We all have 10 or 20 difference cultures even in our home country.
38. You may be in one country, and you may have ten or twenty difference culture between you in your country. I *tsink /θɪŋk/ it can be easy for *pipel /'pi:pl/ to be normally adapted to *anada /ə'nʌde(r)/ culture.
39. As I told you in the beginning, we all came from different, hummm, *elas /'eriəs/.
40. I *tsing /θɪŋk/ *dis /ðɪs/ is for me is not complicated.
41. As I told you I'm not shocked.