Why you have an accent in a foreign language?

It is because pronunciation, stress and rhythm are rarely taught well.

Open a textbook for a foreign language, and one of the first things you see is an alphabet, enumerating the letters used in the writing system and the sounds they represent. This is obviously crucial for unfamiliar systems, say those of Greek or Russian. But even for languages that rely on the Latin alphabet, the guide will explain how diacritics such as accent marks change a letter's pronunciation, and quirks such as the -***ch***- in German or -***gl***-in Italian. (The first often sounds like the ***ch*** in Scottish loch, the second like the -***ll***- in million.)

And with that, it's off to master greetings, vocabulary and so on, with little further thought for pronunciation. This is a shame. There is much more to learning a foreign accent than the sounds that the letters on the page represent. To begin with, the rough equivalents given in English are often quite rough indeed. In French, the ***p*** in Paris sounds rather different from the ***p*** in English, a contrast often neglected in textbooks: the French version lacks the strong puff of air of the English one. (Hold your palm in front of your mouth and say "Paris" in English. Then try making the ***p*** without the puff, and you'll get the French kind.)

Even when textbooks or instructors mention this sort of nuance, the next step is often missing. As with chemistry, the important thing is not just how the elements behave in isolation, but how they come together. Each language has

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rules for these combinations, which native speakers (and many teachers) generally grasp but don't or can't explain.

Consider an easy example. All French words are stressed on the final syllable, a rule typically explained in textbooks. But the importance of the rule is often underplayed. It applies not only to French words but to any foreign name: French-speakers are acquainted with a Texan city called ***yoos-TON***, not the English ***HYOO-ston***. The final stress is quite emphatic, usually involving a higher pitch and greater volume. Meanwhile, English words often have a secondary as well as a primary stress: in "civilisation" the primary stress is on the fourth syllable and the secondary stress is on the first. In French, the final-syllable stress is so strong as to leave little room for any other.

Next, languages differ in what linguists call phonotactics—in effect, what is a permissible syllable and what isn't. The ***p*** in psychology and pterodactyl is silent because English phonotactic rules do not allow native words to begin with ***pt***- or ***ps***- sounds. English does let these consonants join in the middle of words, like uptown and upside, so English- speakers can certainly pronounce them. But the rule about beginnings means that even if you encourage them to pronounce the ***p*** in psychotic, they tend to insert an extra vowel to make it fit the template, and say puh-sychotic. Anglophone commentators discussing Kylian Mbappé, a French footballer, find themselves compelled to add a third syllable, calling him Em-bap-ay.

A similar befuddlement affects many foreigners learning English, perhaps even more so. The reason a Spaniard might say he is from Espain when speaking English is that ***sp***- , ***st***- and other consonant combinations are forbidden at the beginning of Spanish words, which is why the capital of Sweden is Estocolmo. That is just one example. English is unusually rich in consonant clusters that are, in practice, not allowed in other languages. Google a video of foreigners trying to say squirrel for another case study. The word combines an unusual ***skw***- at the beginning, an odd vowel sound in the middle that most languages lack, and the tricky ***-rl*** at the end.

Another reason people are betrayed by their accents in other tongues, even if they are otherwise proficient, is that a language's rhythm can be hard to pin down. They differ in how they space the syllables in a sentence. Cantonese and Italian, for instance, are "syllable-timed": every syllable has roughly similar duration. Read this sentence aloud and try to pronounce every syllable this way, and you may find yourself halfway to mimicking an Italian. English is "stress-timed" (though less strictly), meaning that stressed syllables occur at roughly regular intervals, the remainder tending to be less distinctly pronounced. This is how you could distinguish Italian from English being

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spoken through a wall, even without being able to make out any individual sounds or words.

English-speaking tourists sometimes find themselves speaking English with a weird hybrid accent when they go abroad. Linguistic rhythm is infectious. But as with drumming or dancing, a little explicit teaching never hurts.

1. **Answer the questions**

1

Why is it important to pay attention to pronunciation nuances when learning a foreign language?

2

How does the pronunciation of the letter "p" in French differ from its pronunciation in English, and why is this difference significant?

3

What is the significance of stress patterns in different languages, such as final-syllable stress in French and secondary stress in English?

4

How do phonotactic rules influence pronunciation in different languages, using examples like "psychotic" in English and "Kylian Mbappé" in French?

5

In what way does English differ from other languages in terms of consonant clusters, and how does this impact pronunciation for non-native speakers?

6

Explain the concept of syllable-timed versus stress-timed languages, using Cantonese, Italian, and English as examples.

7

How can linguistic rhythm affect the way people speak a foreign language, and why might English-speaking tourists develop a hybrid accent when traveling abroad?

2. **Explain the meaning of highlighted words. Make your own examples with them.**

3. **Watch the video. What in your opinion is more difficult? Pronunciation or spelling?**

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4. True, False or Not Stated

1

The author has written a book about English spelling.

2

The author believes that English spelling is completely illogical.

3

The author compares spelling a word to uncovering the layers of an onion.

4

The first layer of a word is its spelling.

5

The author provides examples of bound base elements.

6

Compounds are formed by a single base.

7

The letter 'W' in the word 'two' is important for its relationship with other words like 'twice' and 'twelve.

8

The author provides a detailed analysis of the word 'one'.

9

The word 'alone' is formed from the base L-O-N-E.

10

The word 'onion' is marked by the state of division.

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