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SEVERAL SPEAKING DIFFICULTIES IN TEACHING FRENCH TO NON-PHILOLOGY STUDENTS

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Abstract: *Foreign language has become a 'fundamental' subject in training non-philology students for everyday life. In order to achieve this major goal, revised teaching techniques have become a priority, especially as there are no hard and fast rules in the field of foreign language teaching. The proper assimilation of the spoken French pattern (punctuation, stress, intonation, pronunciation) is of the utmost importance in the process of learning French.*

Key words: *spoken vs. written message, stress, intonation, pronunciation, paronymy.*

1. Introduction

Scientific and technical progress during the past few decades has opened up a new stage in the development of higher education with a view to training skilful specialists for the challenges lying ahead. As for the teaching of foreign languages, the prospects look rather bleak in point of teaching-learning methods and strategies, as teachers encounter a variety of problems when working with non-philology students. It is precisely these young people who need to be encouraged and supported in achieving language skills and performance, as this is the shortcut to both intercultural cooperation and personal fulfilment. Social, political and economic circumstances that made it possible for Romania to become a member of the European Union are now creating great opportunities to study. Thus, high-school graduates can choose from a multitude of specialities, can opt to attend a national or European university, and even may decide to work abroad and choose the best offer on the European labour market – now that the implementation of Bologna programme has led to the intrinsic validation of Romanian university degrees within the boundaries of the European Community. It is exactly this opportunity that places great emphasis on the study of a foreign language. We cannot possibly think today of a good specialist if unable to speak at least one foreign language of wide circulation at a level which allows them to handle specialised language. In order to achieve this major goal, revised teaching techniques have become a priority especially as there are no hard and fast rules in the field of foreign language teaching.

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2. Spoken vs. Written Message

It is obvious that our daily lives are caught in an intricate web of audiovisual messages and body language. But the vast majority of received messages are of linguistic nature. Most often the same message happens to have both heads and tails, just like a coin, i.e. a *spoken* vs. *written* duality. Spoken message makes use of additional informative elements, which can hardly be found with a written message. These are discourse markers such as: intonation, speech breaks, verbal flow, intensifying stress – all vitally important for the receiver's understanding of the message. Yet how can a written message preserve all these? Using punctuation is an improper procedure in marking intonation, while non-verbal communication (gestures, facial expressions) which accompanies speech acts is compensated by description, so that the written message usually becomes longer than the spoken one. Sometimes, confusion may easily come between the graphic (written) and phonetic (spoken) message if the student is not helped to pronounce correctly some complex graphic string (see here Léon's theory). One method in dealing with this issue would be to substitute that particular graphic string with a known grapheme. Otherwise, learning and using a phonetic alphabet arise as a necessity in solving the basic problem of reading accuracy and sound-letter relationship.

It is important, during the practice sessions, to focus on those French words whose usage entails a series of difficulties or 'traps' into which Romanian speakers of French tend to fall, due to numerous similarities in terms of vocabulary and language structures between the two languages. It is therefore vital that students should be provided with extended practice on those constructions with no equivalent in Romanian, such as: the adverbial pronouns *en* and *y*, *si conditionnel*, *the sequence of tenses*, etc. A special emphasis should be placed on those words that present extremely slight variations in meaning and which are hard to define. Thus, the French words *adroit, habile, capable, experimenté, ingenieux, industrieux, entendu* all imply a sense of ability, but each has a particular, distinctive nuance. These synonyms cluster around a nucleus-word, which usually is the most frequently used in everyday speech. Thus grouped and placed in relevant contexts, the synonyms gain more precision and distinctiveness in terms of meaning. Although the main objective of a French language course taught to engineering students is to build up technical vocabulary, the matter of synonymy cannot be ignored, as it plays a crucial part in developing students' skills to produce both varied and accurate language output.

3. Stress. Intonation

Stress is yet another difficulty in the correct usage of a foreign language. Intonation was considered by Dascălu-Jinga 'the first linguistic element to acquire (during childhood) and the last to lose (either willingly, when learning a foreign language, or unwillingly, in pathological cases)' (21). It is necessary the proof that punctuation can simultaneously convey semantic and/or grammatical, as well as prosodic information. Paradoxically, the most common case 'seems to be not the rendering of intonation through punctuation (as it is generally believed), but the rendering of feelings and/or attitudes that, in speech, can or cannot be expressed by means of specific prosodic elements.' (Dascălu-Jinga 124). In Romanian, each polysyllabic word has a certain syllable with a more stressed pronunciation than the rest. In most of the

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cases, a change in stress position cannot alter the meaning of a word, but only give it a sort of unnatural 'sound'. There are cases, however, when stress position determines the meaning of the word, and this phenomenon proves the 'phonemic' character of the stress in Romanian language. For example, in the sentences: *Mergeam la lu**mi**na lanternei* and *Lanterna nu lumi**na** îndeajuns*, the stressed syllable in *lumina* determines the grammatical category of the word (noun and verb, respectively) and consequently its meaning. Comparatively, in French language the stress is always fixed and cannot alter the meaning of words.

With French, one may notice that the accurate pronunciation of a sentence has to meet certain requirements (e.g. a spoken string does not correspond to the graphic division into words). In this case, we are confronted with a matter of stress (the *intensifying* stress is an extra force used when pronouncing a particular syllable in a polysyllabic word at the expense of greater energy and longer utterance span). We are familiar with the fact that certain languages have a very important intensifying stress, which is not placed according to the same pattern on all the words of their vocabulary (e.g. in English: *beautiful, across*; in German: *der Vater, die Philosophie*). These are languages with word stress. French also has an intensifying stress, but this is fixed and always placed on the last syllable: *amateur, patriotisme* (most often, this type of stress triggers a prolongation of the corresponding vowel). French is a language with group stress rather than word stress. Consider the following examples: *Elle est venue me voir avec sa mère. Vous aussi vous viendrez. Sa soeur était accompagnée par sa meilleure amie.* One can notice that, at sentence level, stress tends to mark out groups based on *meaning* and to regulate the locutionary effort. Sometimes, stress coincides with a speech break which allows the speaker to recover their breath – these breaks trigger the so-called 'breathing groups', the most important being that which separates two sentences. Normal stress may be accompanied by an additional type of stress, used by the speaker in two particular cases: either to express an emotion (in which case the important word is marked out by first-syllable stress – e.g. *C'est un accident effrayant*) or to emphasise a syllable vitally important for the understanding of the message: *Il ne faut pas confondre **in**verser et **dé**verser* (Morel 125).

Other considerations in this paper will regard *intonation* (or *modulation*, as it is sometimes reffered to) and its inherent difficulties. To stick to the French language pattern, we can say that it has both a rising and falling intonation (with questions or commands). Let us consider the following utterance: *Il est parti*. According to the speaker's intonation, the listener will recognise either an assertion: *Il est parti.* (voice rises then falls on the last syllable) or a question: *Il est parti?* (voice rises steadily and remains in suspence), whereas in the example: *Partez d'ici!* (voice starts at a high pitch and falls steadily), the listener will recognise a command. In the assertive utterance, a sort of balance establishes between the rising and falling intonation. In the case of a longer utterance, however, the problem becomes more complex. This is because it is rather difficult to say exactly where the voice starts to fall towards the end of the utterance. Mention should be made that intonation may vary according to speaker and particularly with a literary text. Yet these variations do not refute the general considerations discussed so far.

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4. Discourse Markers. Pronunciation

Attention should also be paid to oral *discourse markers* – that is, what actually represents the word being about to be uttered. There are two particular types of hesitation, originating either in the speaker's uncertaity, doubtedness, rethink of the matter, or in a discord with the syntactic patterns. In general, French possesses three types of markers to 'socialise' hesitation. The *prolongation* of the final syllable (by keeping voice intensity steady) often accompanies a shift in viewpoint and functions as a disguise for the process of finding the idea, in which the speaker's mind is engaged. That hesitational '*euh*' is a sort of incidental lexeme which functions as a link to the subsequent utterance. Word *repetition*, extensively used in French, allows the marking of the syntactic class of the subsequent lexeme and ensures an adequate discourse continuity. In French, as in many other languages, oral communication is the privileged meeting place of *incidental words* whose discursive status is hard to define. Some control the message (*tu vois, écoute, hein, quoi*), others modulate the qualification of the referent (*disons, enfin, je sais pas*); some impose a restriction to the referential field into which the subject of discourse falls (*pour, sur, question, point de vue*, *genre*), while others emphasise the argumentation (*donc, alors*, *et puis, et*). Some of these elements organise into correlative or opposite couples, marking either agreement or disagreement on the part of the speaker. Several considerations with regard to *pronunciation* problems are further made to complete the image of speaking difficulties in teaching French to non-philology students. It is a fact that, most often, French spelling is based upon etymology, but this cannot serve as a rule (cf. the different pronunciation of *x* in words like: *six* [s], *exact* [gz], *sixième* [z], texte [ks], etc.). We are not discussing here French pronunciation according to the regions where it is spoken, nor the various tendencies of native speakers to cut down on their speech effort. On the contrary, we believe that one of the major goals in teaching a foreign language is that of getting the student to acquire the correct, standard language. Therefore, we consider that regular exercises of pronunciation are always welcome at any level of language knowledge.

The French consonant system is steady and, for this reason, pronunciation does not raise any difficulties. But care should be taken with double consonants: contrary to current beliefs, they are pronounced as a single consonant: *pomme, terrible, essentiel, etc.* However, the double consonant is pronounced in the following situations: when it occurs by virtue of prefixation: *immense, irradier, surréalisme*; when with the same verb the double consonant distinguishes between the French tenses *imparfait* and *conditionnel présent*: *courait* vs. *courrait*; when two identical consonants are pronounced together as a result of a silent *e* coming between them: *tu me mens* vs. *tu mens*, *tu le lui as dit* vs. *tu lui as dit*. The problem of letter *h* has to be taken into account, as it is never pronounced in French, whether aspirate or not. In the former case, however, there will be no link or elision in front of it. Silent *e* also raises some pronunciation difficulties. It is easily recognisable by spelling, occurring with a frequency of 10.06% in written French, as compared with 4.9% in spoken French. Its pronunciation is either compulsory (e.g. with interrogative pronoun *que*, or within a word, when preceded by more than one pronounced consonant: *de belles cr**e**vettes*) or optional (e.g. at the end of a word: *Elle est blach**e***, or within a word, when preceded by one pronounced consonant: *un ch**e**val de course*) (Léon, 1986, 74). Oral

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links between words, specific to those languages which did not adopt a phonetic spelling, represent another prerequisite for the teaching process. The link is made by pronouncing the final consonant of a word – usually a silent one – when this particular word merges into a phrase and its final consonant meets the vowel (or silent *h*) with which the subsequent word starts. Thus, we can distinguish, in terms of pronunciation, between *Il est un enfant charmant* and *Il est un charmant enfant.* Sometimes, it is difficult to specify every linking situation, but it should be noted that it represents an additional sign of cohesion between adjacent language units, and it can only occur within a stressed phrase. Certain linked consonants, however, do not correspond to their written form (e.g. *s* and *x* which are pronounced *z*: *grands enfants, beaux habits*; *d* which is pronounced *t*: *grand ami*; *f* which is pronounced *v*: *neuf ans*).

The problem of paronymy in French language is very important, the more so as it is interrelated to other lexical and semantic categories, such as: synonymy (*marin/ maritime*), antonymy (*émerger/ immerger; émigrer/ immigrer*), or homonymy (*abbaye/ abeille*). Its functionality, materialized in speech, its capacity to attract and formally associate two words (paronyms), shows that the paronymic attraction conditions the occurrence of paronymic pairs (Grădinaru A., 151). Being an asymmetric construction, the paronymic attraction is a deviation from the linguistic norms. Another characteristic of paronymy – which is worth teaching the students – is that of conditioning the occurrence of semantic ambiguities. The formal quasi-identity of the paronyms may lead to several interpretations. This phenomenon highlights the interrelation between form and meaning. In practice, the students will be asked to choose the right word according to context. Any form that can take several meanings is virtually ambiguous, and some paronyms preserve their ambiguity even placed in a context. It is precisely this property that can be used to create puns, aphorisms, repeated discourse and proverbs.

The vocabulary of any language is subject to a continuous evolution and changes in various ways: either borrows new words from other languages, or, under their influence, attaches a new meaning to those already in use and thus replaces them. The new words, borrowed or recently created, make it possible the similarity between them and some pre-existing words in the language. Thus, apart from adding up to the expressiveness of communication, they become a source of errors. Since in Romanian a lot of paronymic pairs are neologisms of French origin, the problems are mutual. For example, the French paronymic pair *interpoler/ interpeller* corresponds to the Romanian *a interpola/ a interpela*.

In both languages, the substitution of the two verbs is conditioned by their apparently identical forms. These paronyms, apart from a great degree of formal likeness, also suppose a difference in meaning: *interpoler* (Fr) – *a interpola* (Ro) – 1. To add something in the middle of a piece of writing. 2. to calculate a number or quantity between two other numbers or quantities; *interpeller* (Fr) – a *interpela* (Ro) – To question someone formally concerning official or government policy or business.

Thus, in defining paronymy, not only the criterion of formal quasi-identity, but also the functional criterion should be taken into consideration in order to avoid linguistic shocks.

The concept of 'paronymic attraction' derives from a heterogeneous combination of terms in Romanian and French linguistics. It resides in the fact that one word in a paronymic pair, more frequent

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and better known to the speakers, 'attracts' and replaces the other less known word. Initially an 'alteration phenomenon', it occurs especially with cultured speakers. Thus, its mechanism consists in the fact that the word most familiar to the speaker substitutes, during communication, the less known word. Most often, this sort of attractions take place due to the speaker's insufficient knowledge of the right meaning of the paronyms. In teaching technical vocabulary, however, this situation is hardly encountered.

In learning French, a major part is played by the Romanian vocabulary which, starting with the mid-19th century, borrowed a large number of French words. The similarity between the two languages of Latin origin is, undoubtedly, of great help to the Romanian learner/ speaker of French. But, paradoxically, this similarity also has its drawbacks. In this brief presentation, another speaking difficulty is noteworthy, which derives from the fact that French vocabulary, as compared to ours, displays numerous instances of parophony and homophony. Certain associations may lead to the complete change of meaning in a sentence. It is the case of those words which in French have a very similar form – both graphically and phonetically – to the Romanian ones (for example: *un apéritif* means in French 'an alcoholic drink that is drunk before a meal', while *un aperitiv* means in Romanian 'a snack that is eaten before a meal').

5. Conclusion

All things considered, we believe that, in the teaching process, it is very important to pay special attention to the extent to which our students are familiar with the spoken patterns of a particular foreign language. The above-mentioned speaking difficulties are necessary guidelines on teaching/ learning French effectively.

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