Linguistics at the Library – Episode 5

PhD placement students, Andrew Booth and Rowan Campbell write: This week is a bumper episode because Andrew and Rowan are joined by Rosy Hall, who completed her PhD placement at the British Library in 2017! We discuss island communities and why these are linguistically interesting, before hearing about Rosy's own…

Recording of the week: South African gumboot guitar

This week's selection comes from Dr Janet Topp Fargion, Lead Curator of World and Traditional Music. I was studying Zulu street guitarists in Durban in 1984 when I met Blanket Mkhize, a guitarist from Glebelands male hostel in Umlazi township on the outskirts of the city. Blanket had a fascinating…

Linguistics at the Library – Episode 4

PhD placement students, Andrew Booth & Rowan Campbell, write: What happens when lots of languages and dialects come into contact with each other? This week, Andrew and Rowan discuss contact effects in super-diverse cities like London, and what happens to English as more and more people speak it around the…

Glottal stops and fluency in non-native English speakers

PhD placement student, Rowan Campbell, writes:

If you've been listening to our podcast (Shameless Plug #378902), you just might have noticed that I, the Scottish one, love glottal stops. This is the sound that's often written as an apostrophe where you would usually see a /t/

– for example, *wa'er* instead of *water*. But it actually has its own super-cool symbol in the International Phonetic Alphabet, and looks a bit like a question mark: ʔ

That's the first of many fun things I could write about the glottal stop, but rather than descending into a clickbait listicle (You Won't BELIEVE These Seven Facts About Glottals!), I'm going to focus on something interesting that I've noticed in the Evolving English VoiceBank: non-native English speakers using glottal stops. Have a listen to these three clips – the first recording is of a young RP speaker, the second is a speaker from Cardiff, and the third is a woman whose native language is Czech.

C1442 uncatalogued female speaker

C1442X5884 Cardiff female (b.1982)

C1442X5843 Czech female (b.1986)

As you can hear, all three speakers use glottal stops, but the main difference is that the RP speaker only uses them before consonants and pauses, where they often go unnoticed:

… opened the biscuiʔ tin, took out a biscuiʔ, brought iʔ back upstairs …

Compare this with the Cardiff and Czech speakers, who replace every word-final /t/ with a glottal stop:

… opened the biscuiʔ tin, took ouʔ a biscuiʔ, broughʔ iʔ back upstairs …

This is something that is now quite common among young British speakers, but we might not expect to hear it from a non-native speaker – the glottal stop is a stigmatised and often-criticised variant of /t/when it occurs between vowels, and as such is not generally taught to language learners. Presumably, this Czech speaker has noticed the people around her using the glottal stop and has incorporated it into her own linguistic repertoire. But why has she picked up on this feature in particular?

Some recent research on sociolinguistic variation amongst Polish-born teens in Edinburgh suggests that t-glottaling may be a relatively easy native-like feature to acquire. In *Sociolinguistics in Scotland* (2014), Miriam Meyerhoff and Erik Schleef examine two features that can vary phonologically and sociolinguistically:

- T-glottaling, or using the glottal stop /ʔ/ instead of /t/
- Apical (ing), commonly referred to as 'g-dropping' – for example, pronouncing the last syllable of 'walking' as 'kin' rather than 'king'. These are represented phonetically as /kɪn/ and /kɪŋ/ respectively, as the 'ng' sound has its own (also super-cool) phonetic symbol: ŋ

Without wanting to overload you with new terminology, you might notice that these features also vary in linguistic complexity. T-glottaling is only phonological, in that it just requires knowledge of the phonological variants /t/ and /ʔ/. Both of these sounds can easily be substituted for the other at

the end of any word. However, to ‘g-drop’ in a native-like manner requires additional knowledge, as not all ‘ings’ are created equal – compare the ‘ing’ in ‘king’ versus ‘walking’. We can pronounce the last syllable of ‘walking’ as either /kɪn/ or /kɪŋ/, but we can’t pronounce /kɪŋ/ as /kɪn/ without changing the meaning of the word. Learning where we can and cannot ‘drop the g’ requires knowledge of both the phonological variants and the grammatical difference between these two types of ‘ing’.

As such, it’s harder to learn the relevant linguistic constraints for ‘g-dropping’ than t-glottaling, making the glottal stop a great candidate for non-native speakers to pick up – and that could be partly why the Czech speaker’s English sounds very fluent and native-like!

Recording of the week: A singing rat

This week's selection comes from Richard Ranft, Head of Sound and Vision.

Even among wildlife sound recordists accustomed to capturing unusual sounds, it is a surprise to hear the sound of a rat, and one which literally sings, with a change in pitch and rhythm.

Amazon bamboo rats are a family of large tree rats found in the jungles of south America. While recording forests sounds on an expedition in south-east Peru in 1985, I often heard this sound at night, but didn’t believe locals who claimed it was made by a rat.

I had heard rare recordings in the British Library’s unique sound collections of high-pitched sounds made by the laboratory rat and the widely distributed Brown Rat. But this sound seemed, well, so unrat-like. It was also frustratingly hard for me to record, as whatever creature was making it only vocalised rarely, for a few seconds before going silent, at night in the pitch blackness of the tropical forests, from within dense clumps of bamboo near where I was encamped.

When I finally got this recording after many failed attempts, I was determined to identify the source. So I crept nearer and nearer over a period of about 15 minutes, expecting to see a large frog. Luckily it called again, and I was ready to switch on my torch. There in the light-beam, partly hidden by bamboo stems and leaves, was indeed a furry bamboo rat. Mystery solved! The call is used as a territorial signal to its own kind, much as a bird sings a song in its territory.

THE LAST

Drawing of an Amazon bamboo rat (illustration by Asohn19262 / CC-BY-SA)

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