

THE RELATION BETWEEN THE PHONOLOGICAL COMPETENCE AND ORTHOGRAPHY IN THE ACQUISITION OF SPANISH (L2) BY ROMANIAN STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

THIS PAPER LOOKS AT THE RELATION BETWEEN PHONOLOGY / PHONETICS, ON ONE HAND, AND ORTHOGRAPHY, ON THE OTHER HAND, IN THE PROCESS OF TEACHING / LEARNING SPANISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE. MORE PRECISELY, WE WILL ANALYSE THE ACQUISITION OF THE PHONOLOGICAL COMPETENCE AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN USING ACCURATE ORTHOGRAPHY. ALTHOUGH SPANISH IS GENERALLY CONSIDERED AN “EASY” LANGUAGE FROM THE ANGLE OF ORTHOGRAPHY, WE CLAIM THAT, DUE TO THE SPANISH DIATOPIC VARIETIES, SPREAD ALL OVER THE WORLD, AND THE PHONETIC PHENOMENA THEY PRESENT (SESEO, CECEO, YEÍSMO), STUDENTS OF SPANISH (L2) COULD ENCOUNTER SOME DIFFICULTIES IN ACQUIRING PRONUNCIATION AND SPELLING. IN LATIN AMERICA, THERE IS NO PHONOLOGICAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN /θ/ AND /s/, OR /j/ AND /x/. THESE DISTINCTIONS ARE PERTINENT, FOR INSTANCE, IN THE PENINSULAR SPANISH AND THEY CAN BE HELPFUL FOR THE ACQUISITION OF SPANISH ORTHOGRAPHY. NOT ONLY FOREIGN STUDENTS, BUT ALSO NATIVE SPEAKERS ENCOUNTER SOME SPELLING PROBLEMS (DIFFERENCE BETWEEN S/Z OR Y/LL). IN CONCLUSION, SPELLING AND PRONUNCIATION SHOULD BE TAUGHT AND LEARNT TOGETHER AND TEACHERS SHOULD INCLUDE IN THEIR SPANISH CLASSES A GREAT DEAL OF PRONUNCIATION AND SPELLING ACTIVITIES IN ORDER TO IMPROVE THESE TWO INTERRELATED ASPECTS.

KEY WORDS: SPANISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE, PHONOLOGICAL AND PHONETIC COMPETENCE, ORTHOGRAPHY, ROMANIAN STUDENTS

1. INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (hereinafter CEFRL) sets up a system of linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic and (inter)cultural competences to achieve in order to master a certain language level (ranging from A1 to C2). More precisely, the linguistic competences correspond to the main language domains: phonetics and phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicology and semantics, pragmatics, all of them being interwoven in the process of

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teaching, learning and using languages. Thus, one cannot consider these language competences as separate parts, because they are used all together while speaking or writing.

Given that pronunciation and orthography are two important aspects in the process of learning and using a foreign language, our paper aims at presenting these two related competences: the phonological and phonetic competence, on one hand, and the orthographic competence, on the other. Hereinafter, we will refer to the acquisition of these competences by Romanian students of Spanish (L2), the particularities of this process and the interlanguage errors.

This investigation is a result of our teaching experience and observations and the corpus investigated consist of a variety of texts written by Romanian students of Spanish as a second language, aged 18-21 years old. Their level of Spanish ranges from beginner and elementary to upper-intermediate (A1-B2, according to the CEFRL). Apart from the theoretical objectives, we also aim at improving the process of teaching / learning Spanish (L2), with special focus on pronunciation and orthography, by reflecting on the acquisition of these two important and interrelated aspects.

This paper is structured as follows: after presenting the phonological / phonetic competence in section 2, the following part is dedicated to the relationship between phonetics / phonology and orthography. Section 4 discusses the particularities of Spanish and its diatopic varieties from the angle of phonology, phonetics and orthography and emphasises the spelling / pronunciation errors that usually appear in Romanian students of Spanish (L2). The final parts of our paper look at the role played by interlanguage in the acquisition of Spanish and provide some solutions.

2. PHONOLOGICAL COMPETENCE

According to the CEFRL, the communicative language competence is a complex skill that comprises three components: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic. Moreover, the same document postulates that “linguistic competences include lexical, phonological, syntactical knowledge and skills and other dimensions of language as system, independently of the sociolinguistic value of its variations and the pragmatic functions of its realisations.”²

Generally speaking, the phonological and phonetic competence refers to the skills achieved by the language learners and users in the domain of pronunciation. Some authors (Morley³, 1994; Fraser⁴, 2000) define this skill as the way we communicate something about ourselves to the interlocutor and, interestingly, the same authors relate pronunciation to intelligibility, claiming that users with good skills in this area are more likely to be understood in spite of some errors in other areas. On the other hand, not mastering the pronunciation competence leads to a range of problems: social isolation, employment and further studies difficulties, as learners may avoid using language.

In 2003, William Labov⁵ proposed a more updated definition of pronunciation, described as the knowledge related to the different features of the target language phonological system, and the capacity for using them appropriately within the discourse. Authors agree that

² Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf, 13.

³ Joan Morley, *Pronunciation pedagogy and theory: New views, new directions* (Alexandria: VA. TESOL, 1994), *passim*.

⁴ Helen Fraser, *Coordinating improvements in pronunciation teaching for adult learners of English as a second language*, <https://helenfraser.com.au/wp-content/uploads/ANTA-REPORT-FINAL.pdf>, 25.

⁵ William Labov (2003), “Some Sociolinguistic Principles”, in Paulston, Christina Bratt; Tucker, G. Richard. *Sociolinguistics: the essential readings*, Wiley-Blackwell, 234–250.

pronunciation comprises a variety of segmental and suprasegmental aspects, namely phonemes, stress, rhythm and intonation, all of them playing an important part in the process of speaking.

In 2002, González Hermoso and Romero Dueñas claim that phonetics / phonology, on one hand, and the acquisition of the phonetic and phonological competence, on the other hand, have had a less important place among the interests of the teaching process: “uno de los aspectos menos tratados en el aprendizaje del español como lengua extranjera”, although students can encounter a great deal of difficulties: “muchos son los problemas que dificultan la buena pronunciación y comprensión del español”.⁶ Moreover, these phonetic/phonological elements affect not only the oral communication, but also the orthography, as we will explain in the following section.

3. GENERAL REMARKS ON THE RELATION BETWEEN PHONOLOGY AND ORTHOGRAPHY

In spite of the complexity of the human language, writing, orthography and punctuation try to reflect the way we pronounce different sounds (phonemes) and suprasegmental elements (stress, intonation), being as accurate as possible. When learning foreign languages, apart from the phonetic system, students must acquire the rules of orthography by internalising the so called pronunciation rules, namely the letters or the combinations of letters and the sounds they express.

This first level in studying languages depends on the linguistic specificity and differs from one system to another. Generally speaking, Spanish and Italian, for instance, are considered “easy” languages from the angle of orthography, while English or French, on the other hand, could be considered more complicated due to their etymological orthography. Thus, it is more likely that students will learn easier or faster Spanish spelling and use it correctly in comparison with English. Nevertheless, Spanish phonology and orthography could present some difficulties to Romanian students, in spite of the linguistic kinship of the two languages.

4. THE SPECIFICITY OF THE SPANISH LANGUAGE AND SOME ORTHOGRAPHIC ERRORS IN ROMANIAN STUDENTS

It is well known that Spanish presents a great deal of cultural and linguistic aspects due to two main factors: its territorial vastity and, consequently, its variety. Apart from Spain, nowadays Spanish is spoken in many countries in the Americas and has almost 400 millions of native speakers worldwide. As a result, this geographical extension has led to the second aspect that both teachers and students should take into account: the impressive cultural and linguistic variety⁷.

4.1. THE SPANISH PHONOLOGICAL SYSTEM

First of all, we will refer to the phonological system of the Spanish language and its particularities. As our study is based on a contrastive approach, we will also refer to the main differences between the Romanian and Spanish phonology in order to identify the difficulties that Romanian students might encounter when learning Spanish.

The Spanish system of vowels comprises five phonemes (/a, e, i, o, u/), less than the seven Romanian vowels, all of them considered oral and short. One empirical observation is that some

⁶ Alfredo González Hermoso, Carlos Romero Dueñas, *Fonética, entonación y ortografía* (Madrid: Edelsa, 2002), 3.

⁷ Daiana-Georgiana Dumbrăvescu, Susana Merino Mañueco, “Enseñanza / aprendizaje de ELE y la competencia fonológica para los alumnos rumanos”, in *Conference Proceedings. Diversity in Knowledge Society (Education, Education Leadership, Interdisciplinarity Studies, Language, Literature)* (Milano: Rediviva Edizioni, 2016).

beginner students, who have also previous knowledge of French, tend to pronounce some vowels with a prominent nasalisation, such as in, although in Spanish the nasal vowels are not considered phonemes:

(1) *canción* [kaŋ'θjõ], *en* [ãn], *interesante* [ãntere'sã] etc.

As to the consonants, the Spanish system includes a number of phonemes and allophones that there are not in Romanian, namely /θ/, /j/, /ʎ/, /ɲ/, /r/ and the allophones [β], [ð], [ɣ]. So these are the sounds that Romanian students could find difficult as to their pronunciation, especially the phonemes /ʎ/, /r/ and the allophones. Thus, when they pronounce them, they tend to apply different strategies, that lead to the following results (examples 1-5):

- (2) *cereza* [se'resa] or [se'reza] instead of [θe'reθa]
- (3) *llover* [lio'ver] instead of [ʎo'βer]
- (4) *niño* ['ninio] instead of ['niɲo]
- (5) *rumano* [ru'mano] instead of [ru'mano]
- (6) *perro* ['pero] instead of ['pero]

As one can see, Romanian students roughly approximate these sounds by comparing them to the their mother tongue consonant system and selecting the sound they consider more similar.

Other sounds that Romanians confuse are /z/ and /v/ as they tend to pronounce the letter *z* or an intervocalic *s* as /z/. The examples listed under (7-8) show such erroneous pronunciations:

- (7) *zapato* [za'pato] instead of [θa'pato]
- (8) *casa* ['kaza] instead of ['kaza].

In this case, too, interlanguage plays an important part, as students' pronunciation strategies reflect the comparison with other languages, such as Romanian (where /z/ is a phoneme) or French, Italian (where intervocalic *s* is pronounced as [z]).

Moreover, although Spanish does not have the sound /v/, it frequently appears when pronouncing words containing the letter *v*, as in the examples below:

- (9) *vino* ['vino] instead of ['βino]
- (10) *un vino* ['un 'vino] instead of ['um 'bino]
- (11) *una vaca* ['una 'vaka] instead of ['una 'βaka]
- (12) *invierno* [in'vjerno] [im'bjerno] etc.

All these incorrect pronunciations discussed above can affect the orthography of the Spanish words, due to the influence of the mother tongue and other foreign languages (Italian and French for intervowel *s*, Romanian for *z*, *v*, etc.).

The letter *h* is silent in Spanish, that is why sometimes students do not write it or hesitate to write it especially in an unfamiliar word they have heard pronounced: *ablar* or *ablar / hablar*, *ahogar* instead of *ahogar*, *veiculo* instead of *vehículo*.⁸

Another important aspect that can influence students' pronunciation as for the stressed syllable and the prosody are diphthongs and hiatus. In Spanish, any sequence of two vowels of which one is a close vowel (/i/ or /u/) is considered a diphthong, while hiatus result from the lack of the close vowel or when the close vowel is stressed: *lluvia* ['luβja] and, on the other hand, *toalla* [to'aʎa], *día* [d'ia]. Sometimes, Romanian students interpret these vocalic sequences as hiatus or diphthongs and pronounce, according to the Romanian phonology:

(13) *llu-vi-a* for *llu-via* (hiatus instead of diphthong)

(14) *toa-lla* for *to-a-lla* (diphthong instead of hiatus)

Moreover, in a series of words, such as *farmacia*, *academia*, *democracia*, *comedia*, *tragedia*, *nostalgia*, *alergia*, *terapia* it is difficult for Romanian students to identify the final vocalic sequence as a diphthong, because in Romanian these words are pronounced with a hiatus. This incorrect treatment of the diphthongs as hiatus and vice versa can lead not only to an incorrect pronunciation⁹, but also to an incorrect spelling of the words, concerning stress and graphic accent. These examples show how both spelling and pronunciation are affected:

(15) **farmacia*, **academia*, **democracia*, **comedia*, **tragedia*, **nostalgia*, **terapia*

4.2. THE DIATOPIC VARIETIES OF SPANISH

As already mentioned, Spanish is the second spoken language in the world and, due to this geographical extension, one should expect a great linguistic diversity, because it is quite difficult to have a centralised language in such a large space. Thus, apart from the phonological/phonetic particularities of the Spanish, discussed in section 4.1., compared to the Romanian language, in the process of learning / teaching Spanish, both students and teachers should take into account the diatopic varieties and their phonetic particularities. In addition, although teachers should not set as a rule one variety or another, because all of them are considered correct, it is inevitable that teachers preferentially and unconsciously use one variety. The teaching materials (textbooks, dictionaries, exercise books etc.) and documents (Plan Curricular del Instituto Cervantes¹⁰) also include diatopic elements in order to help students make themselves accustomed to these varieties.

We will mention a few phonetic phenomena that can influence the pronunciation and, consequently, the orthography in Spanish. Firstly, we will discuss the phenomena of *seseo* and *ceceo*¹¹. *Seseo* refers to the lack of distinction between the interdental /θ/ and the alveolar /s/, namely they are both pronounced /s/ as in the Latin American varieties, while the less common

⁸ Interestingly, some beginner students do not pronounce the letter *j* /χ/ due to the false comparison with the silent letter *h* and they pronounce, for instance, *jardín* [ar'din] for [χar'din] or *jugar* [u'gar] for [χu'gar].

⁹ Moreover, according to their pronunciation, some words can have different meaning, as stress has also a phonological function in Spanish: e.g. *hacia* ['aθja], 'towards' vs *hacía* [a'θia] 'he was doing'.

¹⁰ https://cvc.cervantes.es/ENSEÑANZA/biblioteca_ele/plan_curricular/default.htm.

¹¹ J. Halvor Clegg, Willis C. Fails, *Manual de fonética y fonología españolas* (London/New York: Routledge, 2018), 136.

ceceo refers to the presence of the sound /θ/ instead of the distinction /s/ vs /θ/. Students who pronounce indistinctly the sequences *za, zo, zu, ce, ci, sa, so, su, se, si* could misspell words such as *casa* 'house' / *caza* 'hunting', *casar* 'marry' / *cazar* 'hunt', *ceta* 'mushroom' / *zeta* '(the letter) zed', *cebra, cero, jueces* etc. The first three pairs of examples mark a semantic distinction as well, so the misspelling is not just an orthographic fail, but it can also lead to misinterpretations, impeding the communication and the intercomprehension. Latin Americans who are native speakers of Spanish also make these spelling errors, due to the phenomena of *seseo* and *ceceo*, so they have to work on their orthography as their pronunciation does not reflect the distinction between the phonemes /s/ and /θ/.

Another phenomenon specific to the Latin American varieties is the so called *yeísmo*, consisting of the loss of the distinction between the phoneme /ɲ/ (written Ñ) and the phoneme /j/ (written Y)¹². Consequently, the words *haya* and *halla*, for instance, are pronounced, in some dialects, [ˈaja] and [ˈaɲa] with a clear difference, while in other dialects they are both pronounced [ˈaja]. Native speakers may encounter some difficulties when spelling these words if their dialect is characterised by *yeísmo*, so this could be a problem for Romanian students as well. Moreover, as we explained in the section above, Romanian does not have these two phonemes so students find them difficult to pronounce by default.

Thus, Romanian students, who can also make interlanguage errors, are more likely to misspell a great deal of Spanish words. In our opinion, there would be another aspect that leads to such spelling errors, namely the contact with the American varieties of Spanish by means of soap operas (telenovelas) produced in Mexico, Argentina, Colombia etc. So Romanian students get accustomed to these varieties, their pronunciation, intonation and phonetic particularities (especially *seseo* and *yeísmo*).

5. INTERLANGUAGE

Interlanguage is another aspect that should be taken into account while acquiring pronunciation and orthography, especially in the case of beginner and elementary students. The errors that can occur are a result of comparing the target language with different languages students already master: mainly, their mother tongue, but also other second languages. Thus, correlating the particularities of the Spanish phonetic system, its variational phenomena and the interlanguage errors, students' orthography presents a great deal of fails and the most frequent of them are listed in the categories bellow:

- ✓ the confusion of the letters *v* and *b* (e.g. *barios* for *varios*, *benir* for *venir*);
- ✓ the confusion of the letters *s* and *z* or the group *c + e, i* (e.g. *sapato* for *zapato*, *empesar* for *empezar*, *muzeo* for *museo*);
- ✓ the lack of the letter *h* (e.g. *aondar* for *ahondar*).

Although these errors are specific to beginner and elementary students, we have noticed that some of them appear in advanced students' as well, both in written and oral communication. We refer especially to the pronunciation and spelling of the letters *v/b* and *s/z* and this is a clear case of fossilised interlanguage, which is difficult to correct.

¹² J. Halvor Clegg, Willis C. Fails, *Manual de fonética y fonología españolas*, 136

6. FINAL REMARKS AND CONCLUSIONS

The main purpose of our analysis was to prove that the study of phonology and phonetics is fundamental in order to understand, learn and use correctly the system of a particular language. We refer especially to the phonological and phonetic system, including here both the segmental (phonemes and allophones) and suprasegmental elements (intonation, stress). Apart from the inherent differences between languages (the mother tongue or any other second language, on one hand, and the target language), in the case of Spanish one should take into consideration the diatopic varieties and their particular phonetic phenomena that could affect the orthography of certain words. Interlanguage is another aspect that can influence pronunciation and spelling, especially in beginner and elementary students. Thus, we consider that, by mastering the rules of pronunciation, students will also be able to acquire the orthography of a language and spell correctly.

In order to achieve the improvement of both pronunciation and orthography, teachers should include in their class activities a great deal of exercises of listening and conversation, sounds discrimination and spelling correction, drilling and repetition, dictation and so on, focusing on diatopic variation, phonetic phenomena and critical listening.

To conclude, in our opinion, teaching and learning the correct pronunciation can make an important difference in students' ability to achieve accurate spelling, as the phonological / phonetic and the orthographic competences are highly interrelated.

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