

The Markedness theories and the relationship between /n/ and /l/ in the English syllable of Cantonese speakers

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Abstract

The focus of this study is on the realization of the onset /n/ and /l/ in the syllable produced by Hong Kong Cantonese learners of English in order to identify the areas of difficulty and to give a full account of the phenomena characterizing the Hong Kong English in the light of Markedness theories. The results show that the onset /n/ is the problematic area in their L2 (English) learning, and that there is a very close relationship between /n/ and /l/ at the syllable-onset position in terms of modification.

Keywords: marked, replacement, insertion, syllable, onset, coda, alveolar nasal, lateral, modification.

1. Introduction

The Markedness Differential Hypothesis (MDH) formulated by Eckman (1977), makes the prediction that if language A has marked structure at a particular point and language B has at this point unmarked or less marked structure, then speakers of A should more quickly acquire the unmarked structure in B than speakers of B should acquire the marked structure in A. The Interlanguage Structural Conformity Hypothesis (ISCH) (Eckman, 1991) claims that the syllable structures of interlanguages are shaped by the same general principles that shape the structures of primary languages.

2. Results and Discussion

The findings are categorized according to the characteristics of the modification patterns produced by the participants.

- (i) replacement of onset /n→l/,
- (ii) insertion of onset [l], and insertion of onset [l] after moving [n],
- (iii) replacement of onset /n→l/ together with insertion of onset [l].

2.1 Replacement of onset /n→l/

The data shown in Table 1 clearly indicate that the Cantonese speakers of English experience great difficulty with the alveolar nasal /n/ in the syllable-onset position (but not in the coda) as /n/ is modified 100% in the majority of cases and the following are some of the examples.

Table 1 Onset /n/ replaced by [l]

words	RP + Replacement	% replaced
<u>n</u> ews	/n̩ju:s/ [ljus]	100% (45/45)
<u>n</u> ine	/n̩aɪn/ [laɪn]	100% (45/45)
<u>n</u> umber	/n̩ʌm. bə/ [lʌm. bə]	100% (45/45)
<u>s</u> now	/sn̩əʊ/ [sləʊ]	100% (34/34)
<u>co</u> mponent	/kəm. pəʊ. n̩ənt/ [kəm. pəʊ. lənt]	100% (4/4)
<u>oppo</u> rtunity -es	/ɒp. ə. tju:. n̩ə. ti/ [ɒp. ə. tju:. lə. ti]	100% (3/3)
<u>telecommu</u> -nication	/tel. ɪ. kə. mju:. n̩. keɪ. fən/ [tel. ɪ. kə. mju:. lɪ. keɪ. fən]	100% (1/1)

The replacement of /n/ by /l/ occurs in various syllable-onset positions (from single-syllable words, e.g. ‘news’, or first syllable of a word, e.g. ‘number’, to the fifth syllable, e.g. ‘telecommunication’), in different environments (i.e. onset /n/ is followed by a variety of vowels including short vowels, e.g. /ʌ/ in ‘number’, long vowel, diphthongs, e.g. /aɪ/ in ‘nine’, a schwa /ə/ and also a consonant, /j/), and also in a wide range of lexical items. At the segmental level, the alveolar /n/ replaced by /l/ adheres to the prediction of Markedness theories (Eckman, 1977 & 1991) as the nasal is more marked than the lateral. However, at the syllable level, the production of onset /n/ is difficult but not of coda nasal. This result goes

against the prediction made by Markedness theories since according to the implicational relationship, the onset /n/ is less marked than the coda, and onset /n/ is allowed in Cantonese (L1) but not coda; therefore the onset /n/ is not expected to cause difficulty to the learners. Nevertheless, the merging of syllable-onset /n/ and /l/ occurs in the learners' L1. Therefore, transfer could be the factor to account for this phenomenon, i.e. the replacement of English /n/ by /l/ could be attributable to the L1 merger.

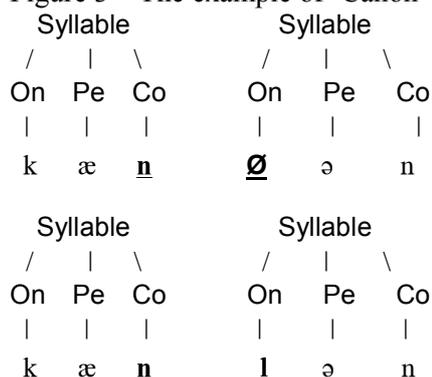
2.2 Insertion of onset [l] and insertion of onset [l] after moving [n]

Two examples of the insertion of lateral [l] are shown in Table 2. The most obvious characteristic in the data is that the lateral is inserted as an onset of a syllable which is preceded by a syllable with a coda nasal illustrated in Figure 3, the example of Canon. The second syllable of 'Canon', is modified from the marked VC syllable /∅ ə n/ to the less marked CVC syllable /l ə n/. The result seems to provide positive evidence in support of the Markedness theories.

Table 2 Insertion of onset [l]

words	RP + Rep	% replaced
Canon	/kæ <u>n</u> . ən/ [kæ <u>n</u> . lən]	100%(52/52)
dictionary	/dɪk. fə <u>n</u> . ər. i/ [dɪk. fə <u>n</u> . lər. i]	100%(38/38)

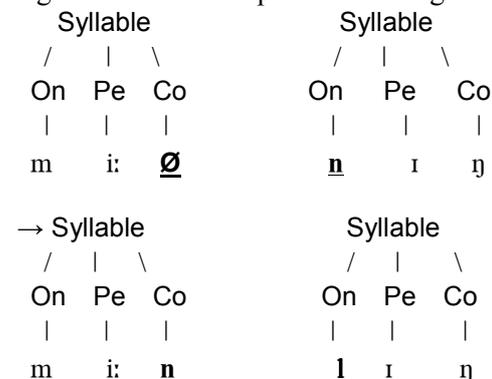
Figure 3 The example of 'Canon'



If such an environment (i.e. the first syllable with a coda nasal e.g. /k æ n/), does not arise, the participants shift the nasal /n/ from the onset to the coda position of the preceding syllable and then inserted the lateral as a new onset, and that is illustrated by the example of 'meaning' in Figure 4. The first syllable of 'meaning' changes from the less marked CV syllable, /m i: ∅ /, to the more marked CVC syllable, /m i: n/, after shifting the

onset /n/. The phenomenon could not be explicable in the light of Markedness theories since according to Tarone (1980), the CV syllable is the least marked syllable type.

Figure 4 The example of 'meaning'



3.3 Replacement of onset /n→l/ together with Insertion of onset [l]

Since the replacement of onset /n→l/ and the insertion of onset [l] are common in the participants' L2 speech production, it is not surprising that both phenomena occur at the same time in one lexical item shown in table 5.

Table 5 Replacement of onset /n→l/ together with Insertion of onset [l]

words	Rep + Insert	% modified
nano	/ <u>n</u> æn . əv / [<u>l</u> æn . ləv]	100% (12/12)
National	/ <u>n</u> æʃ . ə <u>n</u> . əl / [<u>l</u> æʃ . ə <u>n</u> . ləl]	100% (36/36)

3. Conclusion

The Markedness theories could explain the problematic onset /n/ at the segmental level but fails to account for the replacement of onset /n/ at the syllable level whereas the insertion of /l/ and the moving of the coda /n/ remain unexplained. The results also reveal the fact that there is a very close relationship between /n/ and /l/ at the syllable-onset position in the modification process.

References

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