The relevance of spoken features in English as a foreign language (EFL)

MANFRED MARKUS

An analysis of the need for attention to the spoken word and phonetics in the teaching of English world-wide

Introduction

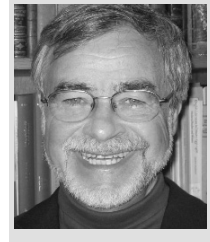
It is a truism that English is increasingly becoming a world language. Even in China a 'craze for English' has been noticed (Yajun 2003:3), in view of the fact that over 200 million children (about 20% of all children in the world) now[1] learn English in Chinese schools. McArthur (2003:21) has estimated that c.250 million Indians use English every day. All these speakers of English use it their own way. This localisation of English has been variously detected, for example in Hong Kong (Pang 2003:13). It is also well known from versions of African English and, in fact, from most English varieties that have been attributed to the 'Outer' or 'Extended Circle' (cf Kachru 1988; Chevillet 1992:27).

However, as early as 1983 Kachru (1983:39) voiced a caveat:

> A large majority of the non-native speakers of institutionalised varieties of English use a local variety of English, but when told so, they are hesitant to accept the fact.

In many countries of the world where English is taught and used as a foreign or second language, the main focus is on competence in reading and writing, irrespective of the fact that today English plays an increasing role as a medium of spoken communication.[2] This role of English as the world's *lingua franca* has not made it a homogeneous language. The outcome is rather a great many varieties of English, which, as systems of spoken languages, often deviate so much from one another and from the British or American 'standard' that even native speakers do not understand them.

While political correctness and common sense should prevent us from looking down upon any English variety which deviates from the standard, too great a tolerance of any markedly deviant example of such Englishes seems out of place in the context of language teaching. Teaching English, not unlike education in general, presupposes the teacher's sense of a norm, i.e. a sense of the English language system and of the usage rules. This seems particularly true of the spoken language.[3]



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In practical language teaching this need for a standard norm in various countries is not only a problem of individual teaching methods, but also of the political and educational conditions. Many countries seem to be unable or unwilling to hire a sufficient number of native speakers of English, or of near-native speakers, so that all the characteristics of what might be called French, African or Japanese English – to mention only three examples – are perpetuated. Moreover, there may be historical, political or social obstacles on the part of EFL learners, as they may have a strong sense of identity as adolescents, as immigrants or members of another solidarity group, which causes them to have an aversion to the standard.

Such personal reasons[4] for the reaction against the British or American standard are quite understandable in postcolonial countries with English as a second language (such as India and Nigeria): an English pidgin or creole is often seen as a 'brandmark' of non-British or non-American identity. It is, of course, open to every group of speakers of English to be steered more by some sense of solidarity than by the established European or Europe-based standards (cf. Eckert and Barry [2002:2], on accommodation language). The wish to acquire a non-local kind of English, perhaps in addition to the pidginised or creolised version of it, can be found in many parts of the world. This paper, however, assumes that most speakers of English as a foreign language do not want their English to sound as foreign as possible but as native as possible.[5] This norm is not only more prestigious worldwide (an irrelevant point for some people, perhaps), but the general pursuit of a standard norm of English also helps improve international communication and understanding.

It is therefore preferable for teachers of English worldwide to keep their own dialect (e.g. Scottish English) in the background of their teaching – they may code-switch to it in exceptional situations when speaking in class or in private communication – and should be aware, and make the students aware, of the language-specific norms of English on the different levels of the language system. This paper will try to make these norms transparent from a typological point of view, with a particular emphasis on the norms of spoken English. It will also demonstrate the repercussions of interference, i.e. the intervention of language parameters from the mother tongue.

The importance of the spoken word

The study of spoken English by applied linguists has never been a mainstream concern, but a marginal one. In 1969, Kelly still called pronunciation the 'Cinderella' area of foreign language teaching, and the various methods practised in EFL teaching after 1970, from 'The Silent Way' of the 1970s to the 'Communicative Approach' since the 1980s[6], only reveal the degree to which the teaching of pronunciation has remained a controversial topic. It is true, there was a strong tendency in the 1990s to focus in didactic studies on suprasegmental features (Celce-Murcia et al. 1997:10), and since then the pronunciation curriculum has been seeking 'to identify the most important aspects of both the segmentals and suprasegmentals, and integrate them appropriately in courses that meet the needs of any given group of learners' (Celce-Murcia 1997:10). However, the mainly practical aim of pedagogical publications on pronunciation has generally kept such investigations clear of fundamental linguistic parameters and also of a scholarly method[7]. Moreover, some of the publications naturally refer to American, rather than British, English (which makes quite a difference in the study of intonation as well as the vowel system). They vary in the phonetic transcription and notation of prosodic features and are, in some cases, just too elementary to be of much help for a linguistic approach[8]. All in all, the main aspects concerning English pronunciation from a contrastive and typologically linguistic point of view are in most cases too much covered by the discussion of psychological learning problems and exercise material (e.g. Laroy 1995).

The predominance of the study of the written language, in linguistics as in foreign language teaching, was no doubt due to the relative lack of spoken international communication until half a century ago. Senior citizens will remember that even in the 1950s long distance calls abroad were most exceptional in everyday life. Flying abroad was restricted to a lucky few. Spending holidays abroad, not to mention long-distance destinations, was far from a common habit. It is commonplace that business, too, has been subject to globalisation over the last decades. Television and the cinema emerged widely in the nineteen fifties, but both were then far more limited in their international scope.

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Only two generations ago, then, spoken communication with foreigners was much more restricted to special situations/people than today, in line with the general circumstances and means of most people. Even politicians practised a different, generally more impersonal and 'written' style of diplomacy. Only in the 1980s did it become normal for many leading politicians to hold markedly personal relationships, even friendships, with one another (like Kohl and Gorbatschev, or Clinton and Jelzin). We are so used to this tête-à-tête style of politics nowadays (see Figure 1) that we may well forget its relatively short history.

No doubt this new style in politics has been encouraged by the general increase in personal, global and spoken communication. And it is in line with the ensuing need for foreign language competence that Angela Merkel has a good command of both Russian and English and that Putin can address the Germans on German TV in their mother tongue.

There are other reasons why a good command of a spoken foreign language is quite an advantage. One of them is based on the support of spoken language by situation. Whether in politics, business or in the private sphere, a letter or diplomatic note can always be second-hand: it is subject to possible loss of authenticity. For example, it may have been written or revised by a secretary or an assistant. While politicians generally have to use interpreters, even in 'personal' talks, sharing a language with their discourse partners no doubt increases their chances of diplomatic success and is, thus, 'half the battle'.

Another reason for the great value of spoken communication and for claiming its due share in the teaching of English is the fact that speaking can be pragmatically more precise than writing. The subtler types of interaction, such as allusion, suggestiveness, use of illocutionary potential of speech acts, personal involvement, irony, etc., can be more flexibly expressed in speech than in writing. These functions of spoken utterances are based on prosodic features (stress, pitch, speed of utterance) and supported by concomitant paralinguistic features (face expressions, body language, gestures).

The voice of a speaker, moreover, expresses co-textuality, i.e. the way words and phrases function topically in a clause, and the way clauses are connected within sentences and utterances.

Both these aspects of speech, its pragmatic potential and the marked syntagmatic structure, play a lesser role in written text. We should also remember at this point that many cultures are still based on the oral tradition only, whereas cultures that are purely written have never existed.



Figure 1: Merkel with Sarkozy (October 2007)
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Given this priority of speaking over writing, it seems strange that the rules and norms of a clear, cooperative and subtle mode of speaking have played a minor or sometimes almost non-existent role in our curricula, perhaps because oral traditions tend to be somewhat disregarded and because only the written tradition and its conventions have achieved the scholarly status deemed worthy of educational institutions.

Phonological rules and norms of spoken English (the learners' point of view)

It is clear that the rules of spoken English begin with the correct articulatory realisation of the phonemes. The list of typical mistakes of German-speaking learners of English on this basic level include the following:

/æ/ articulated too closely as an open [e]: *fat*, *hat* etc.
levelling of light and dark /l/: *ball* and *low* wrongly have the same [l]
plosives /b,d,g/ devoiced in final position, and by Austrian speakers even in other positions of the word: /big/ pronounced as [bik] or even [pik]

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/v/ and /w/ are mixed up: *very well* [verɪ vel] or [werɪ wel]
/ɔɪ/ of *boy* sounds like the diphthong in Germ. *heute*
mispronunciation of *th* as *s* (voiceless) or *d* (voiced)

By the same token, French native speakers are prone to pronounce vowels in an unduly articulate and – within the English vowel chart – too high a way: for them *position* does not have a schwa in the first syllable and the *i* of the second is like the long /iː/ of *sheep*. Similarly, Japanese speakers of English tend to mispronounce a clear /l/ as an /r/ in such words as *eventually* or *actually* (my source is repeated experience).[9] In the case of light /l/, one can also hear substitution based on hypercorrection: *a hand of lice* (instead of *rice*). But the more common cause of mispronunciation in the three languages just mentioned is simple interference: the French high /i/ in *midi* is carried over into words such as *silly*.

Phonotactics

The 'mispronunciation' (or variant realisations) of phonemes may be considered to be relatively harmless to understanding and is definitely not the only or the main source of misunderstandings and of having a 'strong accent'. On the phonotactic level, i.e. that of syllables, interference plays a more persistent role. The reason is that speakers of different languages have different concepts of what the structure of a syllable is. In Italian and Japanese, syllables are almost always open, i.e. there is no consonantal 'tail' after the vocalic nucleus. In both languages there is also a tendency to keep the onset of syllables simple, so that clusters at the beginning of a syllable are rare in Italian and practically non-existent in Japanese. A random listing of Italian or Japanese place names or car brands give sufficient evidence of this principle: *Roma, Venezia, Kyoto, Nagoya, Toyota*.

What is the result of this concept of syllables? That native speakers of these languages tend to fall into the trap of what can be called the CV-fallacy (C = consonant, V = vowel). Since syllables are so clearly and regularly structured, there is no inclination to modify them in other languages according to the position in the word or sentence, the more so since syllables in both Italian and Japanese often have a morphological or syntactic function.

On the other hand, one of the main rules concerning English syllables is that only the stressed syllables are fully articulated, whereas the unstressed ones are very much subject to reduction. This is particularly true of the British English standard. Words such as *secondary, library* and *Edinburgh* are, due to reduction by a syllable, practically disyllabic, at least in fast speech.[10] But even when reduction has not led to the total elision of syllables, the reduction of vowels in unstressed syllables to a schwa[11] or to zero is still all-pervasive, as in the word *grammatical* [grəˈmætɪk(ə)l] rather than [græˈmætikæl]. This rule is difficult to follow by people who are used to interpreting syllables as a given, unchangeable entity. In language typology such languages are often called syllable-timed languages: every syllable gets a tendentially equal share of time and of the speaker's articulatory attention. English, on the other hand, is a stress-timed language, which means that there is a tendency towards regularity of equal spans of time from one stressed syllable to the next (so-called isochronicity) so that the unstressed syllables have to share the span of time left for them in a 'foot'.[12] The concrete articulation of an unstressed syllable, therefore, depends on the number of unstressed syllables between two stressed ones.[13]

In some English words this tendentious reduction has been lexicalised, as in *topsail* or *Worcester*. Here the reduction took place in the history of English long ago and led to the pronunciations [ˈtɒpsəl] and [ˈwʊstə] now to be found in these forms in any standard dictionary.[14]

All this is well-known from introductions to English phonetics, yet has not sufficiently found its way into our methods of teaching. Emphasis should be laid on the principle that in English the manifestation of sounds, and of the letters representing them, depends very much on their positions in words and utterances. In a free borrowing from Orwell, we could say that all sounds may be equal, yet some are more equal than others.

Their factual inequality is not only due to their role in the stress pattern of a word or clause and within the immanent metrical rhythm of speech, but also depends on their phonetic features. The consonants, for example, are not equally consonantal (i.e. obstructive), but have been defined to be of different 'strength' in the following order: plosives, affricates, fricatives, nasals, liquids, semi-

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vowels. The 'stronger' a consonant is, the less it is subject to historical change or dialectal variation. This has been seen both in historical English linguistics (cf. Lutz 1991) and in English dialect studies (cf. Markus 2008 forthc.).

But there are also conclusions to be drawn for the theory of language learning: the 'weaker' consonants are also those where dialects and languages tend to differ and where, therefore, even advanced learners are liable to make mistakes. Depending on the different inventory of 'weak' consonants in the mother tongue and the target language, interference will automatically lead to well-known mistakes: substitution of [l] by [r] in Chinese and Japanese English, the pronunciation of English /r/ as a fricative rather than as a frictionless continuant, also the confusion of [v] and [w] or of the two types of [l] in German English, the substitution of [ŋ], as in *talking*, by [ng] in Italian English, etc. Teachers of English should be aware of these traps caused by the respective native tongues, and alert learners to them and to the features which the mother tongue and the target language have. It will thus be easier for the learner not only to acquire the correct pronunciation, but also to be knowledgeable about the expectable deviations. For example, if one has understood the phonetic difference between a clear and a dark [l], the variant [ʊ] for the dark /l/, as in [fʊʊ] for *full*, in some dialectal and pidgin varieties of English will come as no surprise (see Figure 2).

Interference on the prosodic level

It has been shown so far that the phonemes of English as a foreign language are different from those of the learners' mother tongues and depend on their phonotactic and rhythmical/metrical surroundings. But there is a third important level of how speech manifests itself: the prosodic level of stress and intonation. The former is primarily, though not only, based on the relative loudness of the voice (or, in physical terms, amplitude), the latter primarily on pitch (or, in physical terms, varying frequency). As prosodic features of the voice both can, from a syntactic or syntagmatic point of view, be called 'suprasegmental', since their causes lie at least partly in discourse units outside the scope of the sentence.

Intonation/pitch is a marker of the spoken language that has been discussed in an extremely controversial way. There are two main reasons for this: (1) it varies strikingly between native English varieties (and speakers), not least between (Southern) British and American English (speakers); (2) to get one's intonation right is an aim difficult to achieve (similar to style in the spoken code) and often neglected by native speakers themselves, since it presupposes a great deal of awareness of

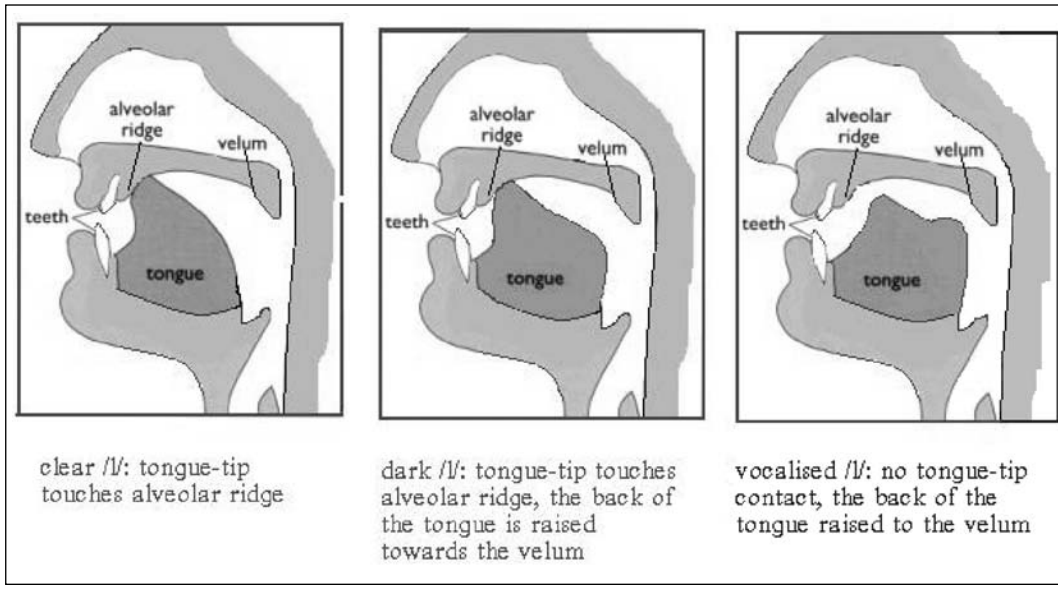


Figure 2: Clear, dark and vocalised /l/

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what one is saying. Professional reciters and actors are usually more advanced in this, but the average native and foreign speakers seem to be more or less indifferent to reaching what may be defined as a 'good' intonation.

Beginning with stress, we should come back to the statement above that English is a stress-timed rather than a syllable-timed language. This phonological attribute can be correlated with the morphological one of English as a tendentially analytic language. This double classification simply means that English words have relatively few morphologically functional syllables (= grammatical morphemes) so that there has been no need to stress all syllables alike and to keep them unreduced. In syllable-timed and synthetic languages, such as French, Italian, Spanish and Japanese, all syllables of a word are fairly equally stressed, since they all equally carry morphological meaning.[15] Confronted with English words such as *preferably* or the noun *delegate*, where the word accent on the first syllable has led to the well-known reduction of the unstressed syllables (as discussed above), Romance language and Japanese speakers tend to practise a 'spelling pronunciation' with unduly full vowels or diphthongs in the unstressed positions, misguided by the principle of equal stress in their own languages and also, in the case of *preferably*, by the cognate verb *to prefer* (/prɪ'fəː(r)/).

English word stress attribution is perhaps seen by many foreign learners as a negligible matter since there is quite a lot of flexibility in the rules. While the now authoritative *ODP* (Upton, Kretschmar, Konopka 2001) shows no tolerance in the case of *preferably* (/'prɛf(r)əbli/), the comparable entry *transferable* has a pronunciation analogous to that of the verb *to transfer* as the first option (/trans'fəːrəbl/, but in a second option also allows the word stress on the Latin prefix *trans*.

This inconsistency of word stress attribution from a synchronic point of view seems to be caused by analogy in the one case (*transférable*) and the lack of it in the other (*préferably*), with the analogy mainly conditioned by a low degree of frequency (cf Mańczak 1980). The relatively high frequency of the adverb *preferably*[16] has probably saved it from being adapted to the stress pattern in the verb *prefer*. However, English **is** consistent when it comes to the reduction of the non-stressed syllables in a word. The rule in English pronunciation of distributing the stress of syllables in a word unequally and of reducing unstressed syllables both in quantity and quality (to schwa or zero) can hardly be overemphasised in the teaching of English to speakers of syllable-timed languages.

As regards sentence stress, this is a totally different matter. Sentence stress can be defined as the prominence of the most important word or words in an utterance. Which words are most important? There may be different reasons for the importance of lexical units: implicit contrast, stylistic emphasis, word class differences, with function words being generally less important than content words. But the main and most general reason is that utterances – in the terminology of the Prague School – contain a 'communicative dynamism', i.e. there is a polarity between the 'given' and the 'new' units, the latter usually expressed towards the end of the utterance.[17] There has been much controversial discussion on the 'given' part of this pattern, the 'theme' or topic. Focussing now on the 'new' part of utterances, on the 'rheme' or 'comment', it seems fair to say that in many Indo-European languages and definitely in English there is sentence stress on the rheme, on what is the point in an utterance. This stress correlates with prominence by pitch/intonation; it is, in fact, part of intonation. In order to keep things simple, we will limit our discussion to the spotlighting of this prominent element of an utterance and exclude the issue that this prominence is part of a whole intonational pattern, often called 'tone unit'.[18] Suffice it to say that to be prominent the rheme in an utterance (usually a sentence) has to be marked by loudness and raised pitch.

This rule, which allows us to disentangle the linear sequence of the units of an utterance as to their (thematic and) rhematic value, is unduly violated by many native speakers and even more by non-native speakers. Instead of being functional in this way, the stress pattern/intonation is often used mechanically, even by professional newsreaders on television and on the radio, or by audioguide speakers in museums. The speakers involved frequently seem unaware of the coherent content of their texts and apply stress patterns as if the sentences were isolated. Such discourse texts, then, are not spoken naturally, but are intoned absent-mindedly and/or as read in short segments on the monitor. Here are two examples:

President Bush went on a short visit to **Israel** last night.

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He had talks to politicians and military leaders in **Israel**.
After the split of the Gaza strip, he discussed the new role of the West Bank in **Israel**. (English news in ORF broadcasting 2007)

This is a painting by **Picasso**.
It demonstrates typical features of the early phase of **Picasso** etc. (from an audioguide in a museum in Tokyo 2007)

The boldfaced words are the stressed ones. But their prominence is only justified when the keywords *Israel* and *Picasso* are mentioned for the first time, or if it were part of a contrastive pattern. As it is, their stress makes sense only in the first sentences. The speakers have obviously been misguided by the clause-final position of the two words.[19] But in English, with its rigorous word order rules, the theme does not reliably have final position, so that a speaker has to make it clear by his voice where the 'new' part of a sentence begins and ends. In the *Israel* example, our interest in new information focusses on the *politicians and military leaders*; in the second example the stress should be on *early (phase)* and not again on *Picasso*.

This kind of bad, i.e. non-functional reading is not language-specific and can also be observed with newsreaders and presenters in the Austrian and German media. This is not surprising, since reading from a monitor, with a pretended look at the spectators, may mislead a speaker of a text into becoming a mere imitator, rather than interpreter, of sensibly coherent speech.

Just like such 'professionals', foreign learners of English, under the influence of their mother tongue, may be particularly tempted to ignore or neglect the rules of sensible reading of texts or uttering of discourse. In Japanese, for example, the theme of a sentence is not expressed by intonation but by a particle *–wa* affixed to one or more words defined as topic.[20] Thus, *eki* means 'the station', but if the station is meant to be the topic of an utterance, one has to say *ekiwa*. Similarly, the (non-topical) subject of a sentence is marked by the suffix *–ga*. In the face of this kind of morphological marking of both the topical and the grammatical 'subject' (in the double sense of the word), the rhematic weight lies on the rest of the clause. There is little need of a stress marker for the constituents expressing what is 'new'.

Given such a system of topicalisation, which is so different from the English one, it is not surprising that Japanese speakers of English hardly show a sense of marking rheme by stress. Instead, just like some thoughtless native speakers, they tend to articulate English in line with the default case of clause-final stress: rather than highlighting the new information in a clause they tend to stress the phrase or word that happens to be clause-final. This is an authentic example from a conference:

Welcome to my **presentation**.
I have three parts in my **presentation**.
Phonetics is the first part of my **presentation**.
Morphology is the second part of my **presentation**. etc.

The misleading sentence stress on the final unit (*presentation*) distracts the listeners' attention from focussing on the rhematic parts (here in non-final position). Japanese speakers are not the only ones who tend to do this. As mentioned, the lack of function in intonation is quite a widespread phenomenon, even among native speakers. The usual mistake consists in the overgeneralisation of the clause-final stress for all cases, irrespective of sense and coherence. Some newsreaders seem to have realised that regular clause-final prominence is often unjustified, i.e. that many intonational nuclei have an unstressed 'tail'. So some of these speakers end up in an equally non-functional penultimate stress pattern.

There is no mechanical way out of this. Unless we sharpen our own and the learners' senses to pay attention to topical coherence and the topical/rhematic structure of utterances, we shall be neither good speakers nor good recital readers. The topical structure of a given utterance is not fully predictable and is, thus, subject to the speaker's (correct) interpretation.

Conclusion

Of the five parts of speech in ancient rhetoric, the fourth one refers to *pronuntiatio* (or *actio*). Seen in this classical light, the English term *pronunciation* means much more than the correct articulation of English sounds – it includes 'the arsenal of techniques to be used in proclaiming, narrating, or in effect acting' (McArthur 1992:864). After more than 1,000 years of a predominantly written culture, as citizens of the 21st century we can learn a lesson from the Greeks: the spoken word needs *pronuntiatio* to be efficient. This seems particularly important in the frequent cases of media texts that are not the speaker's own. And in a

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world of increasing international, mainly spoken, communication, teachers of EFL, like their learners, should pay special attention to features of speech. ■

Notes

1 Yajun's figures are about five years old, but present-day figures would doubtless be even more supportive of the trend to English.
2 This becomes evident at international conferences, where the spoken competence of speakers is often clearly inadequate.
3 In a similar way Chevillet (1992:29) speaks of a yardstick that a teacher of EFL has to have, suggesting RP and General American as the only present options.
4 For a seminal list of the possible factors involved see Laroy (1995:6–8).
5 C/f the statistics given by Brown (1991:1) for learners of English from Singapore, India and Thailand.
6 For a short survey of the history and scope of pronunciation teaching see Celce-Murcia et al. (1996:2–11).
7 Most of the publications on language teaching are student and teacher-oriented, but not at all research-oriented so that there are often no transparent references to previous literature and sources. For a general assessment of the research on pronunciation see also Brown (1991:1–5).
8 This observation must, for example, be applied to Fitzpatrick (1995) and to Underhill (1994: e.g. 194–201), on intonation.
9 This point is also made by Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994:22).
10 The phonetic transcription of these words for British English – according to the authoritative *Oxford Dictionary of Pronunciation* (*ODP*; Upton, Kretschmar Jr. and Konopka 2001) – is ['sek(ə)nd(ə)ri/, /'laɪb(rə)ri/ and /'ɛd(ɪ)nb(ə)rə(r)].
11 The *ODP* (2001:xviii) gives other variants that are close to schwa.
12 Cf. Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994:41): 'It is as if the unstressed syllables have to be reduced somehow in order to be able to be "squeezed in" between one stress-beat and the next.' cf also 105–110 about the 'mystery of stress-time'.
13 The 'equal' span of time between stressed syllables is more a tendency than a rigorous principle. There is, therefore, no point in measuring the physical length of time between two stressed syllables – cf Dalton and Seidlhofer's critical comment on 'rhythm' (1994:108).
14 The *ODP*, however, gives the spelling pronunciation ['tɒpseɪl] as the first option. In Jones/Gimson (1977) this variant was not even mentioned.
15 Reduction in these languages is limited to colloquial and fast speech.
16 In a random check of *The Times* (January 1997) I found *preferably* 27 times, *transferable* only four times.
17 In line with later variants of the Prague School theory of theme and rheme, I would like to add that 'given' and 'new' must be seen as poles on a scale of informative value – cf Sgall (1975).
18 For a more detailed examination of these features see Markus (2006).
19 In a short article, Stewart (2003) has traced mannerisms of unfunctional stress on function words in radio and television newsreading. He critically concludes (58): 'With this mode of speech, the audience is less likely to realize what is happening ... some of Orwell's predictions have come true.'
20 For such basic information on Japanese, I have used Funatsu-Böhler (2006:77).

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