

The Peculiarities of Affective Syllabics in the American Diatopic Variant of the English Language

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This paper deals with one of the most intricate questions of English speechology – the peculiarities of affective syllabics in the American diatopic variant of the English language as opposed to its British English counterpart. The idea is that by affective syllabics we mean numerous instances of word-play based on an unusual treatment of separate syllables. Otherwise stated, it is the art of bringing out or, on the contrary, suppressing syllables in the flow of speech which best English orators and public speakers make special use of. It is aimed at conveying one's expressive-emotional-evaluative connotations and thus producing a certain aesthetic impact on the audience.

It should be mentioned here that this phenomenon, although analysed and described earlier, still remains to be vital for the students of English Philology because it enables us to rise at a higher level of 'Global English' when different diatopic variants interface, interact and are even played upon by the anglophones for different purposes. In other words, affective syllabics appears to be a methodological goldmine because it reveals the fundamental properties (or speech dynamics) of the two major diatopic variants of modern English to the full and pave the way to one of the most urgent and crucial issues of the English language acquisition at a time of overall 'globalization' of communication, which requires completely new skills on the part of the learner. To be more exact, foreign anglicists are to master the so-called 'code-switching', or the speaker's ability to manipulate syllables as the main articulatory units of speech, so that they could change their speaking voice consciously in proper time and proper place and pass on from one diatopic variant to another in strict accordance with the basic requirements of the new, 'global English' rhetoric.

Very briefly and generally the idea behind boils down to the following: in contrast with sounds and phonemes which are relatively static and properly defined entities, the syllables are dynamic and subject to change – they are fuzzy and unstable structurally and are, therefore, described as 'real' units of speech because all the prosodic modifications which take place in human communication are immediately attached to them and should be analysed through the prism of their phonetic properties. Otherwise stated, we come from the premise that without a properly fixed and learned syllabic background it is impossible to achieve even 'minimum general intelligibility', let alone 'a performance of high acceptability', which philologists, by definition, are always after. It follows that our awareness of both British and American syllable stereotypes as well as the peculiarities of their speaking voice is indispensable if in our linguistic pursuits we are to produce clear and intelligible as well as rhetorically acceptable speech.

In view of this, we have to raise quite a few questions and analyse them in syllabic terms to see what direction British-American phonetic studies are to go in the years to come. Thus, bearing in mind the basic features of American syllables as a peculiar combination of the three main prosodic parameters (duration, tone and intensity), we try to learn what lies behind the ability of the American speaker (or writer) to bring out syllables in the flow of speech – whether it is always attitudinal (and / or endowed with different overtones) or it is just one of the manifestations of the 'semiologically relevant' and unmarked American phonation. To be more exact, we are to get a deeper insight into the timbral characteristics of American English with respect to the well-established timbral dichotomy of 'serious', or 'factive' Timbre I and 'paradoxical', or 'fictive' Timbre II.

The previous research in the field which was carried out by the phoneticians of this Department about 25 years ago has shown that in British English the phenomenon in question is realized against the background of timbre suprasyntactics (or the specific realization of Timbre II). The question which is bound to arise here is whether it is also true of American

English. To answer it we turn to American works of verbal art (the novel «One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest» by Ken Kesey). This material has proved that any mechanical application of the results which the analysis of affective syllabics in British English yielded is hardly ever possible here. Otherwise stated, the global vertical context of the novel as well as the author's idea, or intention will remain unclear to the initially British-oriented reader (or Russian anglicist) unless he tries and passes on from what is typical of the British diatopic variant to the characteristics of American English proper.

On the whole, all the numerous cases of affective syllabics here are pronounced with a rather peculiar timbre which seems to be in-between the established dichotomy of Timbre I and Timbre II. On the one hand, it is clearly 'attitudinal' and 'fictive' (certainly not 'factive' or 'serious'). On the other, it is limited (or restricted) by a very careful choice of prosodic means which never go far beyond typically American voice properties, i.e. the dwelling on the vocal component, the substitution laxity for tension and weakness for strength of articulation, the general levelling out of all the syllables (both stressed and unstressed) in the flow of speech, etc. To be more exact, something which for American English is 'semiologically relevant' is enhanced and made even more pronounced here.

These results appear to be of great help to us when we pass on to the analysis of American political oratory. Here we deal with a peculiar blend of two timbres or functional styles – the informative one and that of aesthetic impact. In other words, the register in question is somewhere in-between the two, and more often than not it is extremely difficult (if at all possible) to keep them clearly apart and say which of them actually prevails or takes the upper hand. In contrast with works of verbal art where it is always Timbre II (or its modifications), the timbre of political discourse seems to be both 'factive' and 'fictive' at a time. Therefore, we can't but reach the conclusion that the linear opposition of the two timbres, which we have used so far, must now be reshaped and supplemented by the so far undescribed voice quality typical of the American diatopic variant and hardly ever encountered in British English.