

Articulation of Approximant Sounds of Maithili and English : Challenges and Solutions



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ABSTRACT

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The research paper explores differences between approximant sounds (AS) of Maithili (L1) and English (L2). The study tends to discover whether the native speakers of L1 use the AS of L2 when they pronounce the words of L2 or use AS of their language, i.e., L1 and vice versa. An initial survey is carried out on forty-native speakers of Maithili, who can also speak L2 but not with perfection. Twenty students (only students of B.Tech.) and twenty people who are in their middle adulthood and have not gone through any phonetic training of any of the languages have participated in the survey. The result of the survey supports the hypothesis that the standard pronunciation of any language does not come naturally. Phonetic training is essential for standard pronunciation.

Keywords : Phonetics, articulatory phonetics, phonetic training, experimental phonetics, approximant, affricate, and consonant speech sounds.

I. INTRODUCTION

Maithili is an Indo-Aryan language primarily written in Brahmi-based script “known ... by the names of Mithlakshara and Tirhuta, the script is the traditional writing system for the Maithili language” (Pandey1). Now, Maithili is usually written in Devanagari. Maithili is a language of 13,583,464 people in India (2011 census) and 3,092,530 people in Nepal (2011 census). “Demographically, Maithili is the second most widely spoken language of Nepal, and, according to the

International P.E.N. ... and Sahitya Akademi ... the 16th largest language of India” (Yadav 71).

Maithili enjoys the status of being a recognized Indian language after the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution’2003. In India, It is a native language of North Bihar and Jharkhand. Maithili is mainly spoken in Madhubani, Darbhanga, Samastipur, Muzaffarpur, Saharsa, Sitamarhi, Begusarai, Munger, Khagaria, Purnia, Katihar, Kishanganj, Sheohar, Bhagalpur, Madhepura, Araria, Supaul, and Vaishali districts of Bihar. Madhubani and Darbhanga are the cultural

centres of Maithili in Bihar. Maithili is the second official language of Jharkhand and is spoken in Ranchi, Bokaro, Jamshepur, Dhanbad, and Deoghar districts of Jharkhand. In Nepal, Maithili is mainly spoken in the southeastern plains, also known as Tarai, which comprises Sarlahi, Kapilavastu, Manhattari, Rupandehi, Dhanusa, Nawalparasi, Siraha, Sunsari, Parsa, Bara, Rautahat, Saptari, Moranga, and Jhapa. Janakpur, a sub-metropolitan city in Dhanusa district, is the cultural centre of Maithili in Nepal.

English is the language of twenty per cent of people in the world. It is a language that can open a limitless sky for the users. But, learning English, especially Standard English, is not an easy undertaking for non-native speakers of English. One of the major problems is the distinct speech sounds of both languages. It is a general approach to avoid learning the science of pronunciation. A learner of L2 is more interested in learning the meaning of the words than their pronunciation. Learning pronunciation gets a little respect. Generally, the learners of L2 use their prior knowledge of L2 to form the pronunciation of any new words they come across. Consequently, a word gets a variety of articulations. The learners of L2 often use the speech sounds of L1 to pronounce the words of L2 and, thus, form a new pronunciation.

Maithili learners of English are not exceptional. They have also formed many new pronunciations of L2 words, such as the word ticket is pronounced as /ti:ks/. The study attempts to help Maithili learners of English

reduce the L1 speech sounds' impact on L2 to speak both languages with fluency and accuracy. The study has its limitations. The research focuses on the articulation of both languages' approximant sounds only rather than dealing with all consonant and vowel sounds. Experimental phonetics and survey research methods are deployed for collecting information related to the objective of the research. The analytical method has been used to study collected data through exploratory surveys and offer the research conclusion. The study's nature is descriptive. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches are used to tabulate and analyze the data, respectively. So here, percentage is used as a statistical technique.

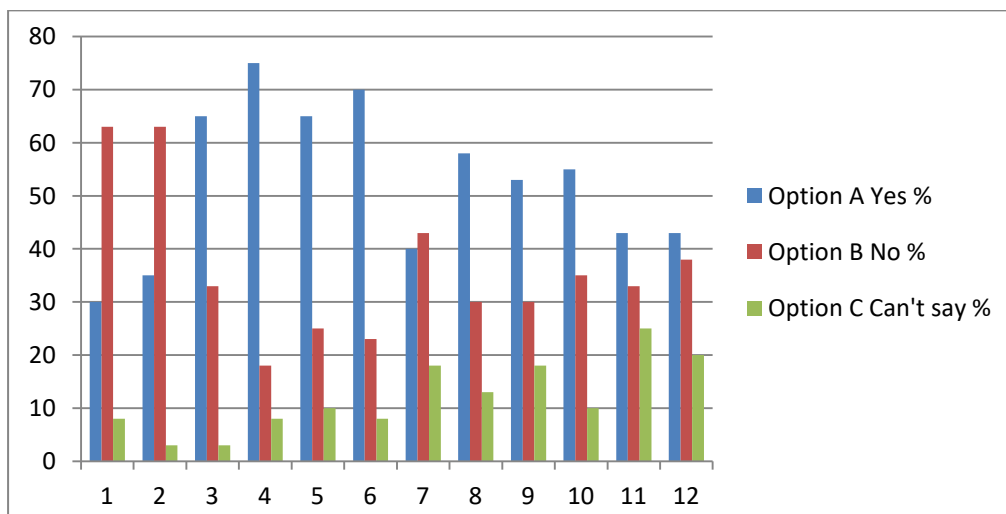
Awareness of the science of pronunciation has been investigated utilizing a questionnaire, which the researcher has developed. The questionnaire has face validity. The questionnaire presented eight general questions and fourteen specific questions, and the responses are recorded through Google Form.

The study sample is selected from the responses of the native speakers of Maithili who reside in the villages, towns, and cities of Madhubani, Darbhanga, Sitamarhi, Samastipur, and Patna. Forty people of different age group and qualification have participated in the survey. The minimum age of the participants registered is 18, and the maximum is 63. The minimum qualification registered is intermediate, and the highest is Ph.D.

Table 1. Data Representation

QNS No.	Option A Yes		Option B No		Option C Can't say	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	12	30%	25	63%	3	8%
2	14	35%	25	63%	1	3%
3	26	65%	13	33%	1	3%
4	30	75%	7	18%	3	8%
5	26	65%	10	25%	4	10%
6	23	58%	17	43%	0	0%
7	16	40%	17	43%	7	18%
8	23	58%	12	30%	5	13%
9	21	53%	12	30%	7	18%
10	22	55%	14	35%	4	10%
11	17	43%	13	33%	10	25%
12	17	43%	15	38%	8	20%

Table 2



II. Results

1. Sixty-three percent (25 out of 40) of people have admitted that they have not received any training to learn the science of pronunciation. In contrast,

thirty percent (12 out of 40) of participants claim that they have received phonetic training. However, their responses to the other questions show that they hardly have any knowledge of articulatory phonetics.

2. Sixty-three percent (25 out of 40) of participants dare to admit that they have not learned the science of pronunciation of their native language. On the other hand, thirty-five percent states that they have been trained to articulate their language's speech sounds. Those who claim they can pronounce their language sounds with perfection seemed to struggle with the questions based on their native language sounds.
3. Sixty-five percent (26 out of 40) of participants assert that they have learned the science of English pronunciation. Their responses to the questions based on articulatory phonetics foreground the contrary. Only thirteen percent of the participants accept that they do not have any knowledge of articulatory phonetics.
4. Seventy-five percent (30 out of 40) of the participants admit that they have learned their native Language pronunciation by listening. Natural ability to pronounce sounds of any language needs training for perfection.
5. Sixty-five percent (26 out of 40) of participants affirm that they use their prior knowledge to pronounce the English words they have not seen before. The faulty pronunciation leads practitioners to a high-risk zone of being misunderstood.
6. Fifty-eight percent (23 out of 40) of respondents believe that they are familiar with the approximant speech sounds of Maithili. Whereas forty-three percent accept that they do not have any idea about the terms.
7. Question no. seven fetches the participants' actual knowledge of articulatory phonetics. Forty percent of respondents think that the Maithili letter “य” starts with इ sound. On the opposite, forty-three percent believe that the Maithili “य” does not begin with इ sound. It can be said here that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.
8. Question no. eight underlines a significant difference between the speech sounds of Maithili and English. All the consonant sounds of Maithili end with a vowel sound as the Maithili य ends with अ sound. Fifty-eight percent of participants' answers match with this theory.
9. Fifty-three percent of the respondents believe that Maithili व starts with उ vowel sound. In contrast, thirty percent of participants hold the opinion that the Maithili व does not start with any vowel sounds. Learning articulatory phonetics can resolve the issue.
10. The participants' responses to question no. ten affirm the result of question no. eight. Fifty-five percent of respondents think that the Maithili व ends with अ sound.
11. It contains one of the bewildering percentages of responses. It seems that the participants are not sure about the pronunciation of the Maithili ल . To overcome such problems, one must learn articulatory phonetics.
12. The responses recorded for question no. twelve affirm the previous statement.

There are four approximant speech sounds in Maithili and also in English. Approximants have “stricture of open approximation. The space between the articulators is wide enough to allow the airstream through with no audible friction” (Collins 52). The English approximants are /l/, /r/, /w/ and /j/. Like the other languages of the world, the Maithili language also has approximant speech sounds. Sunil Kumar Jha states: “there are four phonologically distinctive approximant consonants in Maithili: /w/, /y/, /r/ and /l/” (43), in Devanagari script: /व /, /य/, /र/, and / ल / . There is one

important difference between the English and the Maithili approximant sounds. All the Maithili approximant sounds end with the vowel /ə/. In contrast, none of the English approximants have any vowel sound in the end. The two Maithili approximants, /व / and /य/, create a lot of problems for Maithili people. Maithili people believe that the English /w/ and the Maithili /व / and the English /j/ and the Maithili /य/ are the same. They are completely unaware of the fact that there is hardly any resemblance among these sounds. If there is any Maithili sound that resembles the English /w/, it is the Maithili vowel /उ/, and the Maithili vowel /इ/ resembles the English /j/. Subsequently, Maithili people erroneously pronounce almost all the English words with the letter “W” in their spelling. For instance, the word “win” is pronounced as /win/ in English; a Maithili person will pronounce it as /विन/. The nearest sound of Maithili, which can transcribe the pronunciation of “win” is /उइन/. However, this transcription does not denote the exact pronunciation of the word, but it is similar to the English pronunciation. The same problem Maithili people face with the English approximant /j/. The Maithili people think that the Maithili /य/ and the English /j/ are the same. Therefore, they use /य/ rather than /j/ to pronounce “Yes”. In English, the word is articulated as /jes/, but a Maithili person pronounces it as /यस/, which is incorrect. The English /j/ is an approximant whose articulation “is practically the same as that of a front close vowel such as /i/, but is very short” (Roach 50). It means that the possible transcription of the word “Yes” in Maithili is /इएस/ in which /इ/ should be short.

The analysis of the survey data underlines the general approach of Maithili people towards learning articulatory phonetics. They use their prior knowledge to pronounce the English word they have never seen

before. It is also sprung up from the study that Maithili people hardly make efforts to improve their pronunciation. Consequently, they struggle to articulate the speech sounds of their native language also. It negatively affects the pronunciation of L2. Maithili people use the sounds of their L1 to pronounce the words of L2, which they have not seen before. This habit often generates a different pronunciation for that word of L2. Knowing the speech sounds and their articulations is a positive and effective method to rescue Maithili people from falling into a situation where the risk of being misunderstood due to faulty pronunciation is high.

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