

## EXPLORING PRONUNCIATION THROUGH THE POEM 'THE ROAD NOT TAKEN'

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### Abstract

*This research paper attempts to understand why after many years of learning English, students of Punjab and particularly Patiala find it difficult to speak intelligible English. Mushrooming English-speaking schools everywhere in the city are a reminder that many efforts are being made to teach English as a second language then why do students, who have also studied English till class 12, find themselves lacking in learning the target language. What factors are responsible for this lapse? Did their school teachers not train them well or were the teachers themselves not trained enough to teach their students? Were they not motivated to learn the language? Was learning a second language a burden for them or the cultural baggage of learning English hinder their learning? Did their English pronunciation suffer from mother tongue influence? This paper also attempts to analyze the role of society in second language learning.*

**Key words:** *Second language learning, English pronunciation, mother-tongue influence, phonemic inventory, social influence*

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### Introduction

**L**inguistics can be defined as the scientific study of the structure of language. Linguists analyze the form, sound and meaning of language. Since the first linguistic analysis of language (Sanskrit) by Pāṇini in the 6th century, the field has grown exponentially.

Linguistics can be studied at various levels – Morphology (studying how words are made), Syntax (forming sentences), Semantics (meaning), Pragmatics (meaning in context), Semiotics (symbols) and so on. However, Phonetics acts as the foundation of linguistic study. Phonetics is the study of human speech sounds; it is the raw material out of which the final product (language) is formed. To study Phonemes, the linguist studies the position of tongue, teeth and vocal cords. These sounds are recorded and analyzed. The result of a phonemic study can help us in phonetic transcribing, language teaching, speech therapy and communications engineering.

Phonetics itself has three branches – Articulatory Phonetics (study of movement of speech organs), Acoustic Phonetics (study of speech sounds such as the sound's frequency, transmission and amplitude) and Auditory Phonetics (study of hearing and how speech sounds are perceived by the listener).

Sociolinguistics is a branch of linguistics that studies language in conjunction with society. This can be done using phonemes thus making it a Sociophonetic study. The idea that language can be studied in relation to society is a relatively new one.

Traditionally, linguistics and sociolinguistics have been understood to be independent disciplines. Linguists studied the workings of a language and then sociolinguists determined how

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the workings of that language were related to their society. However, as the importance of sociolinguistics grew, this view has changed. It is now believed that since language is a social behaviour, studying it in relation to the society in which it is spoken is inevitable.

Here are some fascinating examples of the inextricable link that languages have with the cultures in which they are spoken.

The language of the Pirahã people of the Amazon... (has) no words for specific numbers at all... (In their language) hóí means “a small size or amount,” while hoí means “a large size or amount”; a third phrase, bá à gí sò is used to mean “many” or “lots.” But as for specific numbers, there aren’t any in Pirahã—making it possibly the only language in the world with no concept of counting. (Jones)

Pirahã speakers have words for “light” and “dark” but not individual colours, and instead are left to use their imagination to form unstandardized metaphorical comparisons. So something red might be called “blood-like,” something green “grass-like,” something blue “sky-like,” and so on. Pirahã speakers can certainly recognize colours, but their language doesn’t give them simple words to describe them. (Jones)

The Irish language has no direct translations of “yes” and “no,” and instead gives affirmative and negative answers simply by reiterating the verb in the question. “Did you go out last night?” “Did.” “Are you hungry?” “Am not.” The same is true of other Celtic languages, including Scots Gaelic and Welsh. This method of answering questions is known as “echo response.” (Jones)

These examples are proof that studying languages through a sociolinguistic lens gives us access to the unique sociocultural similarities and varieties in languages across the globe.

#### Need of the study

After careful consideration of the previous research that has been carried out in the field of Phonetics, it was found that a significant topic remained unexplored.

Sociolinguistics is an under-researched topic in India. India is not a native English speaking country. Yet, due to socio-historical reasons, English is one of the official languages in India. Today, English speaking skills are a prerequisite for employment opportunities. A large section of India, despite having studied English since junior classes, are poor at spoken English. Often,

students don't have anyone to speak in English with and hence English remains a subject confined to the four walls of their classroom. Understanding this gap in their education is crucial and must be fixed.

English is not a preferred language in Punjab. The environment of Punjabi homes does not encourage speaking in English at home. In many rural schools, learning English starts from class six. In many urban schools, English language teaching begins from nursery but it remains restricted to the classrooms as no one speaks English at home. Interaction with Punjabi students reveals that they do not pronounce phonemes correctly. They make several errors such as pronouncing plosives as affricates or fricatives. IELTS centers are a booming business in Punjab and even these capsule courses can't help them 'un-learn' what they've learnt over the years. In my personal experience of 22 years as a teacher, batch after batch, I see students speak unintelligible English. This not only gives them low self-confidence, but also hampers their employment opportunities. At an undergraduate level, a teacher cannot teach them from the ABCs. Hence, this is a valid and pressing gap in English education that must be studied and remedied.

There has been some phonetic research on undergraduate students of Punjab. However, no such studies have been conducted on undergraduate students of Patiala district. The study of language through a sociolinguistic lens is under-studied. It is a goldmine for teachers to determine how to better teach English as a second language especially in the local context of Patiala. It is imperative to understand how local students learn and interact in English so we can make their English pronunciation impeccable. Therefore, an intensive study on the correlation of the pronunciation of undergraduate students of Patiala district in conjunction with their social background is the need of the hour.

- **Research Question**

In this study, an attempt has been made to analyze why after so many years of studying English, students find it difficult to speak intelligible English? What factors are responsible for this lack?

Choice of the poem

To collect data and to analyze the pronunciation variation, I selected the poem *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost. The reason for this choice is that this poem is a part of the syllabus of the majority of Indian schools. It is also a popular poem and is often quoted in popular culture. The

words in the poem are simple enough for it to be taught at middle school level. Hence, familiarity with the poem and its relative ease were the factors because of which this poem was considered appropriate for this research.

- **Sample Size**

The study recruited 30 male and female college students who had lived in Patiala since their birth and who self-identified as native speakers of Punjabi language and were learning English since their nursery class. Thirty undergraduate students of Khalsa College, Patiala were at random selected for this study. They were interviewed and were asked to respond verbally to a set of questions about their city, their involvement in various activities. They were also asked about their opinion on their city and towards the second language that they were learning. The interview also resulted in knowing that they were familiar with the poem *The Road not Taken* written by Robert Frost. The recitation of the poem was recorded and saved in separate text files for each of 30 speakers.

- **Methodology**

The students were first interviewed and a note was made about the school they studied in and whether they came from an urban or a rural background. They were then asked to recite the poem and their speech was recorded in a recorder. Then each recording was played back and transcribed. This transcription was compared to the correct phonetic transcription of the poem. The discrepancies were noted down and analyzed. This methodology is based on William Labov's model of stratification of /r/ sound.

#### William Labov's Model

One of the most famous experiments conducted in the field of sociolinguistics was William Labov's stratification of the /r/ sound. This study will be based on the same model as that of Labov. (Labov)

In 1966, he experimented on the presence of rhoticity (pronunciation of the /r/ sound before pauses and consonants) in the speech of the residents of New York City. From his earlier observations, he had concluded that the /r/ sound in postvocalic position (such as in car, four) is subject to social stratification. He began to study this phenomenon. He chose three stores in New



York – Saks, Macy's and S. Klein. These stores sell products of varying price ranges and hence, are visited by people of various social classes. The staff at these stores is expected to match up to their customers' way of speaking and hence, try to emulate their accent. Labov conducted this experiment using the "rapid anonymous survey" method. He asked the salespersons at all these stores a question that would elicit the response – "fourth floor". For e.g., "Excuse me, where are the women's shoes?" or "Excuse me, what floor is this?" he would also ask them to repeat their answer in order to observe any changes in rhoticity. The idea was to not let the staff know that a linguistic experiment was in progress. Labov wanted to observe their original, raw responses in the context of a regular customer-salesman interaction.

Labov observed that the staff at Saks (a higher class store) was more likely to pronounce /r/. Whereas, the staff of the other stores was more likely to omit the /r/ sound. When he asked them to repeat their response, they often pronounced the same word with a /r/ sound. He also observed that younger people preferred the /r/ sound and the older ones preferred speaking without the /r/ sound. Various linguists have since tried to recreate Labov's experiment and have arrived at different results. Thus making a timeline of how rhoticity has changed over the years.

Thus, this research will too attempt to understand the socio-cultural reasons which hinder English language learning amongst Punjabi undergraduate students.

The road not taken by Robert Frost

Here is the RP English transcription of the poem:

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Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, And  
sorry I could not travel both

And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could To  
where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair, And  
having perhaps the better claim, Because  
it was grassy and wanted wear;

Though as for that the passing there Had  
worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay In  
leaves no step had trodden black. Oh, I  
kept the first for another day! Yet  
knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence: Two  
roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

tu: rəʊdz daɪvɜːdʒd ɪn ə 'jeləʊ wʊd,  
ænd 'sɒri aɪ kʊd nɒt 'trævl bæʊθ ænd  
bi: wʌn 'trævlə, lɒŋ aɪ stʊd  
ænd lʊkt daʊn wʌn æz fɑːr æz aɪ kʊd tu:  
weər ɪt bent ɪn ði 'ʌndəgrəʊθ;

ðen tʊk ði 'lðə, æz dʒʌst æz feə, ænd  
'hævɪŋ pə'hæps ðə 'betə kleɪm,  
bi'kɒz ɪt wəz 'grɑːsi ænd 'wɒntɪd weə;

ðəʊ æz fɔː ðæt ðə 'pɑːsɪŋ ðeə  
hæd wɔːn ðeɪm 'riəli ə'baʊt ðə seɪm,  
ænd bæʊθ ðæt 'mɔːnɪŋ 'iːkwəli lei ɪn  
li:vz nəʊ stɛp hæd 'trɒdn blæk. əʊ, aɪ  
kept ðə fɜːst fɔːr ə'nʌðə deɪ! jet 'nəʊɪŋ  
haʊ weɪ liːdz ɒn tuː weɪ,  
aɪ 'daʊtɪd ɪf aɪ ʃʊd 'evə kʌm bæk.

aɪ fæl bi: 'telɪŋ ðɪs wɪð ə saɪ  
'sʌmweər 'eɪdʒɪz ænd 'eɪdʒɪz hɛns: tuː  
rəʊdz daɪ'vɜːdʒd ɪn ə wʊd, ænd

**Transcription of students' responses**

While assessing the responses, it was observed that there were fourteen words commonly mispronounced by the respondents - *diverged, yellow, sorry, looked, undergrowth, fair, grassy, wear, though, worn, trodden, doubted, sigh* and *travelled*. Here are the results gathered after analyzing the utterances of the thirty respondents.

Word List	Number of respondents who mispronounced out of 30
<b>Diverged</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Yellow</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Sorry</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Looked</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Undergrowth</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Fair</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Grassy</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Wear</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Though</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Worn</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Trodden</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Doubted</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Sigh</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Travelled</b>	<b>5</b>

- Findings**

While assessing the responses, it was observed that there were fourteen words commonly mispronounced by the respondents - *diverged, yellow, sorry, looked,*



*undergrowth, fair, grassy, wear, though, worn, trodden, doubted, sigh and travelled.* The acoustic perception of these responses can be interpreted in the following way.

The word *Diverged* has its RP transcription as /daɪvɜːdʒd/ but 8 respondents pronounced the long vowel /ɜː/ with the short vowel /ə/. Hence they mispronounced it as /daɪvədʒd/.

The word *Yellow* has its RP transcription as /jeləʊ/. All 30 respondents could not speak the diphthong /əʊ/ at the end of the word *Yellow*. All Punjabi speakers replaced the last diphthong of

/əʊ/ with /ɔː/ sound and mispronounced it as /jelɔː/.

4 respondents did not open their mouth well enough to pronounce the word – sorry /sɒri/ since they had the perception that it is an English word and the English do not open their mouth big enough. So they pronounced it as /sɔːri/ Same perception marred their intelligible pronunciation in the word *Trodden* /trɒdn/ as /trɔːdn/.

All 30 respondents pronounced the word *Looked* /lʊkt/ wrongly. They spoke the word as it is spelt ending with a /d/ sound as in /lʊkd/. It is commonly taught in India that words should be pronounced as they are spelt. Hence, they all missed the /t/ sound at the end.

The word *undergrowth* was pronounced incorrectly in three different ways. The RP pronunciation of *undergrowth* is /ʌndəgrəʊθ/. The initial sound /ʌ/ of the word was mispronounced as /ə/. The word also has a diphthong /əʊ/ which they did not pronounce. They replaced the diphthong with the short vowel /ɔː/. Hence they incorrectly verbalized *Undergrowth* as /əndəgrɔːθ/.

Two words *Fair* /feə/ and *Wear* /weə/ have similar pronunciation but the Punjabi respondents verbalized with the /r/ sound at the end. They also had difficulty in pronouncing the diphthong /eə/.

In the pronunciation of the word *Grassy* /grɑːsi/, the cultural baggage of Punjabi speakers played a big role. They replaced the /ɑː/ sound with more English sounding /æ/ sound.

Twenty respondents pronounced the word *Though* /ðəʊ/ incorrectly. The initial sound /ð/ was replaced by /θ/ sound. The diphthong /əʊ/ was again mispronounced as /ɔː/.

The word *Worn* /wɔːn/ was spoken with a heavy /r/ sound. The emphasis on /r/ sound is a result of not having been taught the target language phonetically

The diphthong in the word *Doubted* /daʊtɪd/ was spoken correctly by fifteen respondents, but the other fifteen verbalized the silent sound 'b' in the word.

Eight respondents read the word *Sigh* /saɪ/ wrongly and confused the diphthong /aɪ/ with an 'n' and read it like *Sign*. A few also confused the word *Sigh* with *Singh*, a word of common usage in Patiala, Punjab.

The word *Travelled* /trævld/ was spoken incorrectly by five respondents who replaced the sound /v/ with /b/. These sounds are commonly used in place of each by other by students of Punjabi heritage.

### • Conclusion

After analyzing the poem as recited by thirty respondents and then bringing into focus 14 words that were most difficult to pronounce, the following conclusion has been drawn:

The students of Patiala are scared of the English language, truly as it is not their mother tongue, but the fact that they have been learning this language since nursery class and are familiar with the language since the times their mothers crooned ABCD to them, they still find it difficult to recite a poem. They were supposed to read a poem which was a typed text and was very clear with a good font size, their hands shook, their minds wavered and they asked if they were supposed to read the entire poem. They have made their relationship with this language 'foreign' despite learning with it for the last 14 years. At their schools, they had read the poem. They were confident that they were familiar with the poem and that it was an easy one but when they were asked to read the poem loudly, they were apprehensive and felt shy of doing so. After a great deal of coaxing, they recited the poem. The result proved that though they have been reading the poem since their schooling but they had not been taught how to pronounce words. Thrust on correct pronunciation is lacking. Schools should teach proper pronunciation to the students. What they have learnt in their school is difficult for them to unlearn so the incorrect pronunciation remains in their daily usage

The teachers might not have undergone adequate training in pronunciation that is why the students could not be trained properly. Govt. should strive to train the teachers to be

proficient in proper pronunciation for them to impart correct pronunciation to the students.

The students had not been motivated enough to learn how to appreciate reading with good pronunciation. Fun activities while learning the second language should be an integral part of the class.

Almost all respondents tried to speak as fast they could as if they wanted to be relieved of the ordeal of reading the poem. They might have mispronounced certain words due to their inadequate concentration.

The respondents were also conscious of the fact that their voice was being recorded. Hence a feeling of apprehension might have hindered intelligible pronunciation. They experienced anxiety while reading the poem.

Almost all respondents carried a cultural baggage with them regarding the English language so they tend to replace /ɑ:/ sound with /æ/ since they feel that /ɑ:/ is too simple for English speakers so they tried to pronounce it differently.

When diphthongs occur at the end of the word, they almost always mispronounce it. Since English is a second language for students here and it is not taught phonetically, they tend to pronounce all letters in a word, hence the mispronunciation. Focus should be on the scientific teaching of the language.

While the respondents were being interviewed along with the recording, it was found that the ones who had siblings and who spoke some English at home, did better than other students. So if the second language is taught in an interesting way and they carry the fun home and bring it into practice at home, they will find it easy to learn the second language. All stakeholders and society should encourage the use of the target language as it is the language of opportunities.

- **Suggestions**

Students should be taught to learn second language phonetically so that they don't pronounce words according to how it is spelt but concentrate on the sounds in a word

The teachers who are going to teach students proficiency in learning second language should be trained in a proper way.

Students should be motivated to learn the target language by the trainers.

They should be advised to speak the language slowly and not rush into speaking it as they will fumble a lot if they go fast in its usage.

Thrust should be on practice of pronunciation.

The psychological fear associated with the English language should be done away with. It is but a language!

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