SALT and the teaching of African languages

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It is well known that, within the broad theory of Suggestopedia, music is used in a specific manner so as to facilitate, *inter alia*, long-term memory. In this article attention is drawn to the use of music in the teaching of a tone language where variations in pitch levels within words may give rise to variations in meaning. The question is posed whether music, whilst enhancing reception and long-term memory may, at the same time, not be distorting the natural and even essential suprasegmental qualities of these languages which may be necessary for correct reception and semantic interpretation.

Dit is algemeen bekend dat daar—binne die breë terrein van die Suggestopedagogiek—musiek op 'n spesifieke manier gebruik word om, onder andere, die langtermyngeheue van die leerder te stimuleer en aan te help. In hierdie artikel val die klem op die gebruik van musiek in die onderrig van 'n toontaal waar variasies in toonhoogtes tot verskil in betekenis van 'n woord lei. Die vraag word gestel of musiek, terwyl dit die ontvangs en langtermyngeheue versterk, nie terselfdertyd die natuurlike en selfs noodsaaklike suprasegmentele kwaliteite van so 'n taal (wat nodig is vir korrekte ontvangs en betekenis) verwring nie.

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The application of SALT principles in the formal teaching of Xhosa at the University of Stellenbosch is, to the best of our knowledge, the first ever attempt of its kind at the teaching of African languages in Southern Africa. Apart from the obvious merits of these principles in general, and apart from successes already obtained in Xhosa classes, we would like to focus on a problem of a fundamental nature which may have implications for, *inter alia*, the teaching of tone languages.

The problem in general mainly centres around the actual purpose and use of the so-called Concert One in the traditional suggestopedic teaching/learning cycle. It is well known and appreciated that the use of music in the concert sessions forms an integral part of the learning process. Music clearly has the function of activating the right hemisphere of the brain and, conversely, relaxing the left hemisphere, thereby facilitating reception of a specific linguistic message. Furthermore, there is ample evidence in the literature that the retention and recall rate for material acquired in this manner is considerably better than for that acquired under other circumstances (Racle 1979:145). According to Schmid (1982:5) the specific purpose of the first concert is, *inter alia*,

- "to familiarize listeners with pronunciation rules;
- to help them savour the sounds of the language or words;
- to direct the language to the students' inner microphone for better retention and recall."

In order to achieve these purposes the teacher delivers the new material "in a specially intoned, dramatic function *guided by the music* [Schmid's emphasis] (tempo, dynamics, color, phrasing), integrating him/herself as a special instrument with the other musical voices. The diction should be pure and distinct, every word coming out clearly and well-moulded" (Schmid 1982:23 and also Racle 1979:139). The basic idea thus is that the voice of the teacher should "surf" along with the

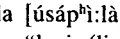
music, i.e. be varied in pitch, loudness, tempo stretched, shortened, etc.

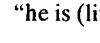
It is general knowledge that linguistic messages comprise at least two components, i.e. a semantic and a phonetic one. Whereas there may be languages where the phonetic component may be of some lesser importance, i.e. the semantic message may be conceived through minimum phonetic detail, most languages place a high premium on phonetic detail. It is therefore conceivable that Schmid (1982) rates the goal " – to familiarize listeners with pronunciation rules" quite highly. However, traditional phonetic approaches have in the past unjustly tended to separate (very often for "practical" reasons) segmental and supra-segmental qualities in the speech signal. While it may be of prime importance to pronounce a string of phonetic segments correctly so as to convey a specific linguistic message, it is equally important to acquire the correct intonation pattern as soon as possible as this is part and parcel of the linguistic message. Consider the following example where the sentences not only contain "exotic" segments, such as aspirated lateral clicks (orthographically represented by *xh*) which need to be pronounced correctly, but also significant suprasegmental tonal patterns:

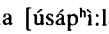
úm̀Xhósà úbónà íthàngà	"The Xhosa sees a pumpkin"
úm̀Xhósà úbónà íthàngá	"The Xhosa sees a thigh"
úm̀Xhósà úbónà íthângà	"The Xhosa sees an outpost"

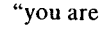
Where ´ represents a high tone, ` a low tone, and ^ a falling (glide) tone.

When looking at the way in which linguistic messages are conveyed in Xhosa, one becomes aware of the structured interplay between segmental and suprasegmental phenomena. Xhosa, while being a tone language as most of the Bantu languages, not only utilizes basic intonation contours (as for example English where a final rise in the contour may indicate a question and a final drop a statement), but also makes use of distinctive variations in pitch levels, while length phenomena also play a significant role. Consider the following examples:

usaphila [úsápʰì:là] []
"he is (living) well" S

usaphila [úsápʰì:là] []
"you are (living) well" S

usaphila [úsápʰì:là] []
"is he living well?" Q

usaphila [úsápʰì:là] []
"are you (living) well?" Q

Where S = statement and Q = question

The point to be made is that, while on the one hand music is being used in a specific manner so as to enhance reception and long-term memory, it may at the same time be distorting the natural and even essential suprasegmental qualities of the language which may be necessary for correct reception. When we say that we are using Concert One, *inter alia*, "to familiarize listeners with pronunciation rules", and that during the actual presentation we endeavour to articulate every word "clear-cut and phonetically well-moulded", we are in fact only addressing a part of the issue—in any case as far as tone languages are concerned. Furthermore, owing to the phonetic structure of Xhosa, and owing to the fact that the organs of speech are tensed during articulation, this language is relatively "loud" in nature (as are most of the other Bantu languages). Presentations of Xhosa material in a subdued tone and with predominantly soft music may also do injustice to this idiosyncracy of the language.

It seems to be quite clear that some kind of compromise is necessary; although, it is not yet clear what the nature of this compromise should be. Well defined experimental phonetic investigations could perhaps shed some light on this issue.

Bibliography

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Errata

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usaphila [ùsáp^{h}ì:là] [——~] S

"you are (living) well"

usaphila [úsáp^{h}ì.là] [—~] Q

"is he living well?"

usaphila [ùsáp^{h}ì.là] [—~] Q

"are you (living) well?"