

ADVENTURES IN MISPRONUNCIATION: A REFLECTION ON MISPRONOUNCING WORDS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Whenever one endeavours to learn a foreign language one is bound to mispronounce words and make numerous mistakes. The results that occur when a learner mispronounces or makes mistakes when trying to communicate in a foreign language are various. A learner's reaction to their mispronunciations and mistakes are just as varied. In some instances, the learner can view the error as comical, and take it as a good learning lesson. In other instances, a learner can be humiliated or embarrassed by the mispronunciation or mistake, and want to stop learning that particular foreign language altogether. Since mispronunciations and mistakes can elicit nearly any emotion, it is imperative that both the learner and their audience exercise a level of patience and understanding in order to foster a positive learning environment. This paper examines some of the mispronunciations and mistakes that I made personally, or witnessed in my journey to learn French, Mohawk, and Seneca. In the end, if the goal of a learner is to communicate effectively in their particular foreign language of choice, then they must maintain their resolve to do so despite the results and emotions of their mispronunciations and mistakes.

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BACKGROUND

At the PSLLT conference there were many wonderful presentations delivered by smarties discussing the theory and methodology of pronunciation. This paper is not that! This paper is anecdotal, based on the experiences that I had or witnessed while learning or helping others to learn a new language. In learning new languages, I have been a learner and a teacher. Over the years I have made a multitude of mistakes in pronunciation. Here, I will provide you with some examples of these mistakes and deliver my thoughts on what learners and teachers can do to help improve pronunciation in a foreign language.

To begin, I will share some information about myself, to give a sense of how I encountered relevant experiences. I am currently an Assistant Professor in the Languages, Literatures, and Cultures Department at Toronto Metropolitan University where I teach Haudenosaunee history and culture, as well as Kanyen'kéha (Mohawk language). Teaching Kanyen'kéha at the university is one of the ways in which I still encounter pronunciation issues, since most students are beginners, without extensive knowledge of the language.

Prior to this I was a founder and Director of a Seneca language adult immersion group known as Deadiwënöhsnye's Gëjòhgwa'. This group was formed to develop new Seneca language speakers utilizing the root word method for learning Haudenosaunee languages. I worked for the Seneca

Nation as the Director of this group for five years, and during this time I made and witnessed numerous pronunciation mistakes made by those of us learning the language.

For two years before this I worked at Native American Community Services in Buffalo, N.Y. as the Program Administrator and Instructor for a group called Yonkhiyanatonnis Kentyohkwa, a Kanyen'kéha/Mohawk adult immersion program that also had a night class component for casual learners. Again, most of the learners in the program were beginner learners and so made many pronunciation mistakes.

Before all of this, I learned Kanyen'kéha myself, at Onkwawenna Kentyohkwa in my home community of Six Nations. Onkwawenna Kentyohkwa is a leading Kanyen'kéha adult immersion program which has proven the effectiveness of the root word method of teaching and learning Kanyen'kéha. I spent two years learning at Onkwawenna Kentyohkwa; during that time, I made thousands of mistakes, many of which involved pronunciation, especially at the beginning of the program. When I started the program, I knew fewer than 10 words of Kanyen'kéha, but after two years of study I could speak and understand the language at an intermediate level.

However, my first adventures in mispronunciation started with French. I started learning French in junior high school, continued in high school, and studied more in my undergraduate studies. Obviously when one is learning a language one makes mistakes all the time, especially with pronunciation, because the different sounds between one language and another can be quite dramatic. What makes language learning so frustrating, especially for an adult, is that one constantly makes mistakes, often in front of other people. Many individuals find that very hard to deal with, and some quit because of it. So, like any language learner, I made mistakes all the time, but the impact of those mistakes was only slight, because outside of the classroom I was not dependent upon the language I was learning as my primary form of spoken communication. That changed when I studied abroad at the Université de Caen in France, when my real adventures in mispronunciation began.

The Adventures Begin: France

The adventure began immediately upon arriving in France at the airport. I got off the plane, collected my luggage, which was substantial, and went outside to find my way to the university. I stepped outside into the sunshine, and then BAM, the questions hit me like a ton of bricks... What the hell do I do now? How do I get to the school from here? Where is the Eiffel tower? Do I take a taxi? These days we could just tap a few buttons on a smartphone and have the whole situation sorted in no time, but at that time smartphones did not exist! Imagine landing in a foreign country without a smartphone, or any phone at all for that matter! After the initial shock wore off, I decided to get on a bus and head into the city. I figured that once I was in Paris, I would find another mode of transportation to get me to the university, which was over 250 kilometers away. I got on the bus and along the way into the city I noticed a couple sitting close to me with a sombrero. I have no idea why, but I commented on the hat saying, "J'aime bien ton chapeau (I like your hat)". The lady thanked me and responded that they were returning from a trip to Mexico where they acquired the hat. Likely due to my less-than-stellar pronunciation, it did not take them long to deduce that I was not French. Fortunately, the couple also spoke some English, and in our conversation, they informed me that I needed to go to Gare Saint Lazare, which was where they were headed as well.

This was a stroke of luck because it saved me the headache of a) finding out where I needed to go, and b) navigating the foreign streets of Paris.

Once we arrived at the train station, I had another adventure in mispronunciation. I needed to purchase a ticket my destination, Caen. So, I went up to the counter and said something like, “J’ai besoin d’un billet a Caen. (I need a ticket to Caen)” The clerk had difficulty understanding me due to my poor pronunciation and wanted to send me to Cannes. Fortunately, the Gare Saint Lazare does not have trains heading to the south, otherwise I am sure that the clerk would have sold me a ticket to Cannes! After some explanation, and some discomfort on my part, the clerk and I came to an understanding, and she sold me a ticket to Caen. After purchasing the ticket, I sat down with my friends “from Mexico”, and the lady commented how we could relax now that we had our tickets, and we waited for our trains. I did enjoy that calm while we waited, but that calm ended, and the adventure resumed almost immediately!

After several adventures I eventually found my dormitory at the university and had another remarkable adventure in mispronunciation at the dorm’s general information desk. I went up to the desk and was greeted by an older lady. After exchanging greetings, I inquired about internet access. This should have been pretty straightforward, since there is a relatively minor difference in the word “internet” in English and French. It is mainly pronunciation and an article at the start, which yields the difference “l’internet” versus “internet”. No matter how hard I tried, or how much I explained, my pronunciation, explanation, and use of the French language was so bad that I just could not get the lady to understand what I wanted. After a painful exchange that seemed to last forever, I did acquire internet access, but all of these experiences had me feeling terrible about my ability in the French language.

Another adventure in mispronunciation occurred during one of the French courses I was taking at the Université de Caen. It was a Phonetics class with about forty students. My classmates were from all over, including Japan, Spain, Norway, and England. During this class the instructor was running a drill whereby he would flash a card with a letter from the phonetic alphabet and in turn we produced the corresponding sound. The instructor was making his way around the room, and soon it was going to be my turn. I sat there wondering what letter I would get. The instructor arrived and flashed a card, which was the dreaded “R”. I had to produce the French “R”, a sound that English speakers generally have a hard time with, mainly because it is not found in English. I did my best to produce the gravelly, throaty sound that the letter “R” requires in French (a voiced uvular trill [R]), but instead produced a sound more consistent with English, which was way off the mark. Whatever the sound I made, the class found it hysterical and the whole room erupted in laughter. I did not think it was that funny, but the rest of the class sure did! You can imagine my surprise when the instructor came to me a second time and flashed the same “R” card. I tried it again, and the class found my second attempt just as funny as the first. I still have not mastered the pronunciation of the French “R”, but I know that you can put me anywhere on the planet where they speak French, and I will be completely understood regardless of how I pronounce that “R”.

Toward the end of my stay in France I had another adventure in mispronunciation, but fortunately for my ego, it was someone else’s mispronunciation I noticed. Now, some twenty years later, I forget what the circumstances were at the time, but I was in Paris on a train going to the airport. I noticed an older couple some distance away fumbling with their luggage. They were having a bit

of trouble loading their luggage into the overhead compartment, so someone close by helped them. After receiving this assistance, the older gentleman politely replied, “merci, merci beaucoup”, meaning “thank you, thank you very much”, which was an appropriate response. The only problem was that he said it with a thick southern USA accent, which made “merci, merci beaucoup” sound like “MURsee, MURsee BOOcoo”. The older gentleman’s use of the language was spot on, but his pronunciation was far from French sounding. I gave the man credit for attempting to use the language, since it was fairly obvious that he was a tourist and a French speaking beginner at best. This occasion also made me reflect on my own accent. I know that I do not have a southern drawl, but I also know that my accent will likely always be there, making it evident that I am not a native speaker regardless of how at ease I am with the language. My conclusion is that so long as one is understood and is able to carry on a conversation, then it does not really matter what accent might remain. Effective communication is always the goal.

The Adventures Continue: Kanyen’kéha

After my time in France ended, I continued graduate studies; not until the end of my doctoral work some years later would I again have consistent adventures in mispronunciation. When I reached the ABD point in my doctoral studies, I enrolled in the adult immersion program in the Mohawk language called Onkwawenna Kentyohkwa at Six Nations, my home community. Growing up, I knew that both sides of my family were Mohawk, but no one on either side spoke the language. Even as a child I wondered why we did not speak Mohawk when our people had their own language. I had heard a few words here and there growing up, but I did not hear any conversations taking place in the language. It was not until much later in life that I learned about the residential school system, and governmental ethnocidal and genocidal policies aimed at eradicating Indigenous languages and cultures. I always wanted to learn Mohawk, but never had the opportunity to do so. Learning the language for me would fulfill a deep desire that I had all my life. At the same time, language study would inform my PhD work, which was Rotinohsyón:ni/Haudenosaunee history and culture. I passed Onkwawenna Kentyohkwa’s admission test, and earned a spot in their First Year immersion class that autumn.

I was about thirty years old at the time, so the odds were not in my favour for learning a new language, let alone one radically different from my first language of English. On the positive side, I had acquired some language learning skills from my time in France. I was already used to being wrong much of the time (not easy on an adult’s ego), so I no longer had that fear, which can significantly limit language learning processes. I was also accustomed to being laughed at for the spectacular mistakes that I made, and so whenever that happened, I saw it as a wonderful learning experience, rather than let it discourage me from trying. A saying that I kept in mind, and still use today, is that “we learn more from our failures than we ever do from our successes”. Armed with these skills, I started the program knowing fewer than 10 words in Mohawk.

My adventures in mispronunciation in Mohawk came right away. There are many sounds and combinations of sounds in Mohawk that are quite different from English, and as a first language English speaker, I struggled to make the appropriate sounds. Not only that, but many words in Mohawk are a lot longer than in English, so that, combined with different sound combinations, is a fine formula for beginner mispronunciations. One of the first words we learned that gave me trouble with pronunciation was *wakateryén:tare* (*wah kah dare YAWN dah ray*), which translates

as *I know* in English. Our class rolled through our conjugation drills with this verb, and every time it was my turn, I jumbled the sounds and struggled to get my tongue to pronounce it accurately. Once again, my class had some good laughs at my struggles with pronunciation. After several failed attempts, and a lot of practice, I got better at pronouncing this verb, as well as the language in general. A shorter word that I struggled with was *ì:kehre* (EEE geh ray), meaning *I think* or *I want* in English. A form of this verb that was even a little bit tougher to pronounce was *ì:rehre* (EEE reh ray) for *he thinks/wants* and *ronnehre* (RUNE eh ray) for *they think/want*. Even though these short verbs were tricky to pronounce, I was having a lot of fun conjugating and putting together the different sound combinations. I started to appreciate the cadence of the language.

Enjoying the process of conjugating verbs and making the sounds of Mohawk became really important when our class came to the unit on noun incorporation, which made the conjugated verbs much longer and harder to pronounce. Noun incorporation is quite simply taking a noun root and placing it between the personal pronoun prefix and the verb root in a conjugated verb. The initial conjugated verb that we worked with to incorporate nouns was *wákyen* (WUG yun) meaning *I have* in English. For example, the personal pronoun prefix in this instance is *wak* for *I* (the prefix for *I* can be *wake* but there are grammatical instances when the *e* is dropped, like before *y*), and the verb root is *-yen* for *to have*, which when conjugated gives us *wákyen* for *I have*. We then take a noun like *kanónhsa* meaning *a house*, and incorporate it into the verb. In Mohawk, nouns also can be considered conjugated because they usually put together the personal pronoun prefix for *it* and a noun root. In the example of *kánonhsa* the personal pronoun prefix for *it* is *ka*, and the noun root for *house* is *-nonhs-*, with the final *a* being added to complete the word, and often it is added in incorporated verbs as a joiner between the noun root and verb root. We can now incorporate our noun root of *-nonhs-* inside of our conjugated verb of *wákyen*, giving us *wakenónhsayen* (*wah gay NOON sah yun*) meaning *I have a house*, which completes the process of noun incorporation. Consider another example using the same conjugated verb *wákyen* for *I have*. This time the noun *kahyatónhsera* meaning *book* or *paper* is incorporated into *wákyen*. After taking away the prefix of *ka* for *it* from the noun, the noun root *-hyatonhser-* remains, which is then placed inside the verb *wákyen*, producing *wakhyatonhserá:yen* (*wok hya doon seh RYE yun*) meaning *I have a book*. The incorporated verbs can become much longer words with many syllables and several sounds being put together, making it very challenging as a beginner, but good practice for pronunciation. There are also instances where noun roots can have what a *sher* or *t'sher* joiner that is not seen in the stand-alone noun. In the example of *kahyatónhsera* for *book* or *paper*, the *sher* joiner is visible in the stand-alone noun. An example of a noun where the *sher* or *t'sher* joiner is not visible, and one of my personal favorites for pronunciation, is *anòn:warore* meaning *hat*. This example is a little bit different in that *anòn:warore* does not have an *it* personal pronoun prefix, and as mentioned it has a *t'sher* joiner not initially visible, so the noun root is *-anonwarore'tsher-*. When incorporated in the verb *wákyen* it becomes *wakanonwarore'tsherá:yen* (*wah gah noon wah row ret seh RYE yun*) meaning *I have a hat*. Say that five times fast! I do not know how many times I said this verb and its conjugated forms when learning them but it was A LOT!! I broke it down into syllables and said it slowly at first. As my ability to properly pronounce the Mohawk language developed, I was able speak more quickly and with greater ease. This unit was very fun to learn and really great for pronunciation practice as we moved through fifteen conjugations for this verb. Furthermore, it really helped me with pronunciation of the sounds in Mohawk, especially with longer words.

Study and practice at Onkwawenna Kentyohkwa enabled me to learn to converse in Mohawk, but I was still very much a beginner with a lot to learn. I still am. Eventually I revisited other Mohawk communities, like Akwesasne and Kahnawake, and was able to converse with other Mohawk speakers. These trips provided me with additional opportunities for adventures in mispronunciation because there are accent and dialectal differences in the Mohawk language across these communities. We are all familiar with different accents and dialects and know that even though the language may sound a bit different in another accent and/or dialect, it is still usually understandable. The previously mentioned southern drawl, or the way that the British speak English, are examples of accent and dialect with which most English speakers are familiar. The English used in these examples may sound a bit different, and the vocabulary used may be a bit different at times, but it is still understandable most of the time. In Mohawk the most noticeable difference in pronunciation to me was at Akwesasne, where the *R* sound gets pronounced as an *L* sound. The written form of Mohawk is still the same, so *Rs* do not get spelled as *Ls*, but when the language is spoken, this change in pronunciation occurs. For example, if we take the word *ronorónhkwa* meaning *he loves him*, a lot of Mohawk speakers would pronounce it as *row no RUNE qwa*, whereas someone from Akwesasne would typically pronounce it as *low no LUNE qwa*. The example *wakanonwarore'tsherá:yen* meaning *I have a hat from above*, would be pronounced as *wah gah noon wah low let seh LYE yun* in Akwesasne. Thus, when speaking Mohawk to someone from Akwesasne there is a noticeable difference in pronunciation, but conversation and understanding is unhindered.

In Mohawk there are words that are very similar in pronunciation, but which have very different meanings. Thus, one should be mindful of how these words are pronounced, otherwise one could say something quite different than intended. Without proper pronunciation, or sometimes even when pronounced properly, these words offer speakers the opportunity for laugh. Take the words *ohna* (*OH na*) with the noun root *-ihn-* meaning *skin* and *o'na* with the noun root *-i'n-* meaning *genitals* (*O na*) as an example. The words both mean different parts of the body, and the only difference between the two is that one has an H, as in *ohna* (*skin*), whereas the other has a glottal stop, as in *o'na* (*genitals*). Unless one intends to talk about genitals, one must be very deliberate about pronouncing the H between these words. For example, and to give a bit of context, let us put both of these words in the second person form, so *your skin*, which is *tsíhna* in Mohawk, and *your genitals*, which is *tsí'na*. One time a group of gentlemen and I were out to dinner and all of the gentlemen in the group happened to speak Mohawk. I ordered some chicken that came with the skin on, and because I did not want to eat the skin, I removed it. The gentleman sitting beside me noticed this, and asked “*Aonkyén:take ken tsíhna (Could I have your skin)?*” And while he pronounced the phrase perfectly, I could not resist the opportunity for a laugh, so I stood up and gestured toward my zipper as though he had asked for my genitals. The group laughed, and having achieved my aim I promptly sat back down, apologized to my neighbour for any offense that may have been taken, and then gave him the chicken skin that he had asked for. Another quick example like this is *rahnén:yes* meaning *he is tall*, versus *ranén:yes* meaning *he has long stones*, which is often taken to mean *he has long balls* or *he has big balls*. The only difference again in this example is when discussing height there is an H to be pronounced, whereas when discussing stones there is not. With all of this in mind it is important to remember that when using certain words, one should be mindful of pronunciation, as well as the subject matter being discussed, because a mistake can mean something completely different, or the audience can simply interpret mispronunciation as a crude joke.

Suggestions for Improving Pronunciation

I will end this paper with suggestions for improvement in pronunciation, regardless of the language being learned. Many of these suggestions are derived from all my adventures in mispronunciation, only a few of which were presented here. As a learner, one must develop and maintain a positive mindset. When learning a new language, it is easy to get discouraged because mistakes happen all the time. Moreover, mistakes can be humorous to native speakers, so a learner may be laughed at for those mistakes. Regardless, learners must find ways to maintain positivity in the face of adversity. Another saying that I use is, “every failure is an opportunity for success”. Learners must be able to identify their mistakes, and make the necessary adjustments to avoid making the same mistakes in the future. Oftentimes the more spectacular the mistake, the better the opportunity to learn from it, because it is easy to remember huge blunders and avoid them going forward. Also, the sooner one lets go of the fear of making mistakes, the more progress can be made in learning the target language. The sooner individuals change their perspectives on making mistakes, the better off they will be, and the faster results can be achieved. The best thing one can do for learning is to immerse oneself in the company of fluent speakers and absorb as much as possible. Lucky learners are those who can make friends with fluent speakers who have patience and compassion. Those friends are able to point out learner errors, helping them to improve. Furthermore, such individuals will learn the language as it is spoken by native speakers, including idioms that would not likely be found in textbooks.

It is up to instructors to develop and maintain a positive learning environment. Teachers should recall their own learning experiences that were discouraging, and seek ways to avoid those situations. Providing as much encouragement as possible is important because learning a new language is hard. Students will benefit from tips for improvement and feedback on their progress. It is important that learners be helped to see how much progress they are making, because the progress is hard for beginners to see amidst all the errors. Lastly, instructors should share their own experiences with learners, so that students might learn from those experiences as well. This way even if learners do have their own adventures in mispronunciation from time to time, being able to partake in conversation with someone else in the target language, and all the potential personal and cultural exchange those conversations can yield, make the whole process totally worthwhile.

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