

A Broader Concept of Minimal Pairs

By Jason B. Alter

When the language teacher hears the term "minimal-pair", he has a strong tendency to think of the use of this device to teach pronunciation, and pronunciation alone.

In this paper I would like to discuss a broader concept of minimal-pairs, namely in the "teaching" of intonation, stress, juncture, structure, and vocabulary.

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Let us agree at the outset that it is fallacious to expect to isolate these various language characteristics in an actual teaching situation. That is, they cannot be taught in a vacuum, nor should they be. Thus, the philosophy of "all the language all the time" is one that the teacher should observe. Moreover, it is fitting and proper to insert an intonation drill in a structure class and vice versa.

The following two sentences can be seen to differ minimally in intonation:

- A. Sam went to Harvard. (Statement, with falling intonation.)
- B. Sam went to Harvard? (Question, with rising intonation.)

The Same-Different approach that is common to the pronunciation drill can also be used here, as can other variations, such as having the student identify which, A. or B., the teacher is saying, etc.

Once the student perceives the contrast, admits that it exists, the teacher can proceed to drill the production of the intonation pattern.

A word of caution: in any type of minimal-pair exercise the teacher must require that the student respond

immediately. Any delay gives the student time to guess; then the teacher has no way of telling whether the student does indeed hear the contrast, or whether he merely luckily picked the right choice.

Minimal-pair intonation drills should best be set in natural contexts, to give the student meaningful practice.

To insure that parroting is not taking place, the teacher should engage in spontaneous probing. In the above example, the teacher might ask: (1) Sam who? (2) Where's Harvard? (3) What did he major in?

This technique enriches any language class. Rigidity and overzealous adherence to the textbook should be avoided. Pace is vital.

A Good Example

The next example is a multi-purpose one, and can be useful for demonstrating minimal-pair differences in (a) semantics, (b) structure, (c) vocabulary, (d) stress, (e) juncture, and (f) punctuation.

- A. The discussion was over whether Jim knew it or not.
- B. The discussion was over, whether Jim knew it or not.

(a) Semantics: In A. the discussion concerned Jim's knowing a particular bit of information (perhaps Alice's phone number).

In B. the discussion was finished whether Jim was aware of that fact or not.

Notice the very different meanings of "it" in the two sentences.

(b) Structure: In A. "over" is functioning as a preposition, and is followed by a noun clause as object.

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In B, "over" is functioning as an adverb, and the sentence could end right there.

(c) Vocabulary: In A, "over" means "about" or "concerning."

In B, "over" means "finished" or "concluded."

(d) Stress: In A, "knew" can be seen to bear the primary stress.

In B, the "o" in "over" bears it.

Far be it from me to prescribe stress or intonation. The language teacher's idiolect should be the criterion. Thus, one could just as well posit a primary stress on "Jim" in either of the above sentences.

(e) Juncture: A minimal-pair difference occurs between "over" and "whether", there being a perceptible pause after "over" in B.

(f) Punctuation: B. has a comma, while A. does not. The comma serves to allay the semantic ambiguity.

It is the responsibility of the teacher to select examples appropriate to the level of his class. The following is a somewhat less complicated example.

A. He's going to work.

B. He's gonna work.

In A, "work" is a noun (cf. "the office"); in B, "work" is a verb, in infinitive form. This is a powerful argument for the use of "gonna" since in this minimal-pair situation there is a definite and distinct difference in the two usages. ("Gonna" is so written to mark the contrast.) You could not use "gonna" in A.

The practicum should be the teacher's guiding light. The minimal-pair technique need not rely on elaborate linguistic terminology, nor should the teacher spend time discussing this.

Whether the teacher chooses in his own mind to regard a difference as one of vocabulary or structure, as stress or juncture, etc. is somewhat beside the point.

The technique can function as a teaching tool, to aid the student in his struggle to control the language he is learning.

The teacher should not belabor the student with analysis or expect him to cope with it.

Own Informant

Often the teacher neglects to regard himself as his own informant. While this can lead to self-bias, there are frequent items that can be used to enhance the language class. Or an item can stem from something that the teacher reads, or something that he hears as he is walking across campus. In a sense, eavesdropping can be a teaching aid.

I leave with you one more example, and again urge the teacher to compile his own inventory or gimmickry, the ultimate purpose being to give his students added insight into the language; at the same time, this technique may serve as an embellishment or a divertimento.

A. The ball was hit by SAM.

B. The ball was hit BY Sam.

In A, "Sam" bears the primary stress, to indicate that he is the doer of the action. In B, the primary stress is on "by", to indicate that the ball went past Sam.

Two-word Verbs

This brings up another matter of "two-word verbs", which could be the subject of a separate article, since they are the source of considerable student (and teacher) anguish.

We could go on and on with the above example. Suppose we changed Sam's name to By (short for Byron). Then: The ball was hit by By.

If you were talking to Sam: The ball was hit by By, Sam. Etc., etc., etc.

The intent of this whole paper is to awaken the language teacher to

the multifarious vagaries of minimal-pairing, to indicate avenues of insight and enlightenment, whereby teaching methods can be more efficacious, to the benefit of the student.

The minimal-pair technique has almost limitless ramifications. The teacher must choose among them, gauging them to the needs and capabilities of his students.