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Glossomimesis

The Swedish Chef is a gibberish-spouting hand puppet from Jim Henson's *The Muppet Show* who speaks a nonsense language. As his name suggests, he is supposed to be Swedish, and Jim Henson intended his "language" to resemble the perceived lilting, sing-song quality of Swedish. Ask a Swede, however, and he or she will claim it sounds like Norwegian, but that does not stop many from asking Swedes to try and "translate" some of the Chef's gibberish (Stahl, 2012). Yet that would be impossible for the most fluent Swede or Norwegian, since most of the wacky cook's discourse are improvised neologisms that conform to what the actor believes is how the Swedish language sounds.

Language imitation is a pervasive element of human speech. All humans with the capacity for speech do it out of spite, for the sake of laughter, or to demonstrate their perception of a language's phonetic character. As a testament to this pervasiveness, the word "barbarian," though accepted as onomatopoeic, was coined by the Ancient Greeks to mimic the phonetic nature of other languages, which they also believed resembled the bleating of sheep (Bredin, 1996). Thus, "barbarian" is actually a conflation of language mimicry and onomatopoeia.

English has worldwide cultural dominance, and many people, yet not everyone in non-anglophone countries, can speak it. With the ubiquity and popularity of English media, the English language itself is often the subject of imitation. One variety the French call *yaourter* literally means "to yogurt" or "to attempt to speak or sing in a foreign language that they don't know very well...often...mishear[ing] and misinterpret[ing] the word or lyrics and substitut[ing] them with familiar words." A further description is "an imitation of a very nasal language, kind of like a baby crying...mostly imitating the 'cowboy' accent" (Liberman, 2009). I find the "nasal" description odd, given French's phonemic possession of nasals and English's phonemic lack thereof.

Yaourter does not satisfy the definition, however, since it refers to something more akin to malapropism. English has words that describe certain facets of nonsensical foreign language imitation, such as *glossolalia* (which I will treat later on) and even *onomatopoeia*, but not a portmanteau referring to the whole spectrum of language imitation. I wish to posit a term for it: *glossomimesis*. The word consists of two compounded parts--*glossa*, which is Greek for "language," and *mimesis*, Greek for "imitation" (and *-mimetic* is the adjective derived therefrom) (DeMoss, 2001; *Oxford Greek Dictionary*).

Usage

In English, glossomimesis often figures into some improvisational comedy. It is the theme of some skits titled *foreign film dub*, which were often figured into the American television show *Whose Line is it Anyway?* (12Medbe, 2008). British comedian Catherine Tate has a hilarious, and rather illuminating, skit called *Catherine Tate Translator*,

whereby she "translates" a coworker's words during a meeting into six "languages"--French, Swahili, Castilian Spanish, Italian, and Chinese--all of which are stereotyped imitations (golocalise, 2009).

Purpose

That leads to the premise of this study--what phonemes do speakers use to comprise their glossomimetic speech? In the case of the Swedish Chef, not only do individual segments contribute to the accuracy of the utterances, but the prosody as well, since in the case of Swedish and Norwegian, prosody constitutes the primary differences between the two languages. Every language has its own phonetic peculiarities, and practitioners of glossomimesis will focus on the phonetic features that are the most salient to them. For that reason, one could not expect for two glossomimetic impressions of a particular language to sound completely alike or possess the same segment inventory.

The scope of this essay will be limited to the segmental phonology of glossomimetic Chinese, since it is my own observation that most people can mimic Chinese in some form with very little exposure to it. Though prosody in Chinese is of paramount communicative importance to Chinese since tonal distinctions between words serve to differentiate lexica and it is important to glossomimetic Chinese production (Comrie, 1990), I will exclude it for the purposes of this essay and narrow my focus to segmental and phonotactic consistency.

There are numerous dialects of "Chinese," and most share phonological features. Chinese is a collective term for a number of dialects spoken in China and is actually part of a larger East Asian sprachbund. Membership in this grouping makes most of the mainland Southeast Asian languages (such as Vietnamese, Lao, and Thai, among others) sound quite similar since all of the languages possess simple syllable structure, are tonal, and most words are monosyllabic (Comrie, 1990). Therefore, a speaker could base his or her glossomimetic "Chinese" on any number of Southeast Asian languages and attribute it to Chinese proper. I will narrow the focus to one dialect, Mandarin, also known as Standard Chinese (Duanmu, 2000).

I would like to make a brief note on nomenclature used in this paper. I will use *Chinese* when referring to the speakers' generalized concept of the target language. I will use the phrase *glossomimetic Chinese* when referring to the speakers' imitations. And I will use *Mandarin* to refer to the spoken language itself.

Pre-existing Literature

Little treatment of glossomimesis exists in scholarly literature. Samarin mentions it as a subset of glossolalia, from which glossomimesis differs by having a ludic function, mentioning Charlie Chaplin's impression of Hitler (Samarin, quoted in Mueller, 1981). Motley mentions how some glossolalia sounds like Spanish or Russian, though the utterances had no target impersonation.

Despite the paucity of academic literature regarding glossomimesis, it is the subject of various internet blogs and discussions. One such blog is the University of Pennsylvania's *Languagelog*, where I came across *yaourter* detailed above. Most Internet sites that discuss glossomimesis try and assign it a name, but usually only succeed in describing it to some degree. The discussions will either begin with or move into how speakers of one language perceive other languages.

Comparison of Glossomimesis and Glossolalia

I rely on phonological descriptions of glossolalia to inform my analysis because glossomimetic behavior is very similar to glossolalia, except glossomimesis has a deliberate, targeted phonology comprising the characteristics of the target language folded into the glossomimetic performance, whereas the phones of any given glossolalic utterance are seemingly random and generated from a subset of the speaker's native inventory. Glossomimesis and glossolalia also differ in their usage. Glossolalia is a religious and trance-induced linguistic act (Goodman, 1969), and though the literature does not mention a target audience, one could assume a glossolalist's only "audience" would be his or her God and those around him or her. The audience for glossomimesis are individuals from whom the speaker is trying to draw a reaction.

Another major difference between glossolalia and glossomimesis is the use of a speaker's pre-existing familiarity or exposure to other languages. Glossolalia does not require any such knowledge. As stated before, a speaker must identify salient features of a given language, particularly those that are absent from his or her own language, and make productive mimetic use of that to achieve his or her intent. For instance, an utterance containing [x] or extensive nasalization - the former absent entirely from English and the latter a marginal allophonic result - would figure prominently into glossomimetic representations of Arabic and French, respectively. An utterance such as [bukalakabadawada] would not come across as Arabic, French, or even Mandarin. Thus, without prior exposure to the target language, a glossomimesist would have a difficult time producing interpretable glossomimetic speech. As I discuss further on in the sections describing individual utterances, more general glossomimetic renditions of Chinese (that is, renditions where there is little phonological resemblance to spoken Chinese varieties), as well as more nuanced representations, betray the speakers' knowledge or exposure to the language.

Mandarin Phonology

In order to evaluate the phonological accuracy of the glossomimetic Chinese data to the spoken target language, a brief overview of Chinese phonology and phonotactics is required. My primary reference is Standard Chinese, also known as Mandarin (Duanmu, 2000), but I also include quick notes on other languages of Southeast Asia, including Thai, Vietnamese, and Burmese but only where their mention is germane to the discussion. I do this because of the close similarities between the languages and the fact that not many people outside of the Southeast Asian speaking area can distinguish them. I do not include Japanese, Korean, or any Austronesian languages such as languages of

the Philippines or Indonesia.

Mandarin Chinese possesses the following consonant phonemes (Campbell & King, 2011; Duanmu, 2000):

stops: p pʰ t tʰ k kʰ
affricates: t͡s t͡sʰ t͡ɕ t͡ɕʰ t͡ʂ t͡ʂʰ
fricatives: f s ɕ ʂ ʐ x
nasals: m n ŋ
lateral: l
approximates: j ɻ w ɥ

Mandarin also possesses the following vowels (Campbell & King 2011[1]):

i|y ɨ u
ɛ ə o
a

The presence of the retroflex consonants gives Mandarin a rhotic quality akin to some varieties of English.

Very strict syllable structure characterizes Mandarin phonotactics. No dialect of Chinese allows consonant clusters (Comrie, 1990), and only vowels, diphthongs, triphthongs, and /n/ and /ŋ/ are permitted in coda position. The nasals are further restricted as to the vowels and diphthongs with which they may occur (Campbell & King, 2011). Thus, the maximum Mandarin syllable would be CVVV or CVVN. Other dialects, such as Cantonese, permit other consonant codas, as do Thai and Vietnamese (Comrie, 1990).

Another attribute of Mandarin, and the whole Southeast Asian linguistic group discussed above, with the sole exception of Khmer, is the propensity for single syllable words with distinctive tones. Mandarin has four tones and is the simplest of all the Chinese varieties (Cantonese has nine, and the Chaozhou dialect has eight basic tones, plus many more contour tones) (Comrie, 1990).

Data

I derived my glossomimetic data from open source media exclusively from *youtube.com.* On the website, I searched "imitation Chinese" and transcribed the speech of ten different speakers (which I will refer to as S1-S10) which were all recorded on video. All of the speakers' linguistic backgrounds, and all but S1's (Catherine Tate, who is British) nationality are unknown, since native language may have some effect. The context of some of the samples is unknown, though they appear to be reacting to elicitation by the person recording. S9 is trying to teach his audience "how to copy an Asian," and he provides imitations of not only Mandarin, but also other Southeast Asian languages.

[1] Duanmu claims there are only five vowels, [i u y ə a], with [o, e, ɤ] being allophones of the middle vowel (2000, p 45).

Rosie O'Donnell is imagining what a Chinese spokesperson would have to say about an incident on her television show *The View*.

Below, I transcribe the glossomimetic Chinese of S1-S9. As stated above, I exclude prosodic notation. However, as a convention, I will parse the samples into "words" when they appear to belong to a stress group to give a cursory indication of prosody and to break up the sound stream. In the sample transcriptions below, I briefly describe prime characteristics of each.

Here, S1, Catherin Tate, is part of a television comedy sketch acting as a translator: [niɔːŋː t͡ʃɔː aː i no ma jaː t͡ʃin to waː t͡ʃi kɔ wa jɑ mɔːŋ i toŋ bɑ wɑ jɔː]. All of these words contain phonemes that occur in English. /t͡ʃ/ does not occur in Mandarin. All of the words are phonotactically congruent with English and Chinese syllable structures; however the long vowels are not present phonemically in Mandarin or English.

S2's words were "...this is what Mandarin sounds like to me.": [ʂɚ wɑ ʂɪŋ hɚ hɚ hɑ ʂɪŋ hiɻ kwɑːŋ ɪɻ ʃɪŋ iɻ wɑ ʂɪ dɑ hɚŋ go hiɻ wɑ ɑɻ hɪŋ wɑ ʂɪ ɻ ɻ o jaʊ mɪŋ ʂɚ ɖɛ ʂɪɛ ɪn bi ɛi wɑ ʈʂɪɻ gɪŋ ɪɻ ɖʐɑɔ wɔɑ tʰɪŋ hɚ hɑ hɚ tʰɪŋ pʰɑŋ mɪŋ hɔː wɑ ʈʂɪɻ]. Once again, the linguistic background of the individual speakers is unknown, but I would surmise this man had either studied Mandarin or has had considerable exposure to it. The rhoticity of the entire statement was likely intended to imitate a feature of some Mandarin subdialects called *erhua*, which I will discuss below (Zhang, 2005).

S3 is from a short film called *Babble*, in which people are recorded speaking various glossomimetic languages: [dɑs duː ti ʃãː pũ/puŋ tãː jɑɔ ti ʃə fə tʌŋ tɔ jʌː ɑːː ʃi tau θi si tum ʃistə θãũ θãũ di ʒau]. First and foremost, the /s/ coda in the first word is immediately apparent, which violates Mandarin in that Mandarin does not possess a /s/ and, if it did, it would not allow it to occupy coda position. Another feature of this sample is the interdental fricative, present in Burmese, but not Mandarin (Campbell & King, 2011).

S4 is from the same film as above: [bɔŋ t͡ʃɔŋ pãuːŋ daŋːː kikaɪɔŋ]. All words have a velar nasal, which is present in every Southeast Asian language. Note, however, the final word is comprised of three syllables.

S5 is from the same film as above: [ɑkɑtɑkɑtɑːtaːtɑtukud͡ʒo ʁu t͡ʃau]. This particular sample was difficult to parse, and the first word looks to be an example of generalized glossolalia. Note the voiced uvular fricative, which is not present in Mandarin.

S6 is from the same film as above: [hɪntəntənfʊnt͡ʃajoː]. This sample was very brief but continuous, thus making any comments on syllable structure tenuous. However, individual syllables are simple and [t͡ʃ] is lacking in Mandarin. The reduced vowels could be the result of the speaker's native language habits.

S7 is from the same film as above: [mɪ nɔ wɑɲa naː]...the remainder was unintelligible. [ɲ] does not occur phonemically in Mandarin.

S8 is from the same film as above: [nalala dalala haŋ hadza zoa wɔːŋə nadə daː]. It is impossible to tell if the [d] and [z] are in contact as a result of adjacent syllables, or [dz] is an onset. Either way, Mandarin does not possess [z], and [dz] only would only occur in an unstressed syllable, according to Duanmu (2000).

S9 is from a short film called "How to Speak a Fake Asian Language," in which the speaker mimics various Southeast Asian languages; the transcribed Mandarin section follows: [niː wɔɻ ʃɔɻ hɔɻ wə̀ tɔɻ ʃɔɻ wɔwɔwɔɻʃɔ wɔɻ]. This is another rhotic version whereby almost all the words contain [ɻ]. However, the [ɔɻ] rhyme does not occur in Mandarin (Duanmu, 2011).

S10 is Rosie O'Donnell's imagined Chinese newscast of Danny Devito's drunken appearance on *The View* (DannyRebus, 2013): [t͡ʃɪŋ dɔŋ hu ga t͡ʃi d͡ʒɔŋ tɔŋ t͡ʃɪŋ t͡ʃɔŋ (Danny Devito) t͡ʃɪŋ t͡ʃɔŋ t͡ʃɔŋ t͡ʃɔŋ t͡ʃɔŋ (drunk *The View*) t͡ʃɪŋ t͡ʃɔŋ]. Rosie relies heavily on the word [t͡ʃɔŋ] and the phrase [t͡ʃɪŋ t͡ʃɔŋ]. Almost all the words end with the velar nasal.

Analysis

I will discuss briefly the segment inventory of the samples above and compare it with Mandarin, then I will move on to describe the samples' phonotactics and compare that as well with actual Mandarin. When describing the sounds, I will refer to them as *phones*, following a convention used by Michael Motley (Motley, 1981) to refer to the individual sounds comprising glossolalia. This I do since glossomimesis, like glossolalia, is a non-communicative pseudo-language and individual sounds do not carry the same functional load as a phoneme. They do bear a particular functional load, however, and I will discuss that later.

Consonant Inventory

Below is the condensed phone inventory of glossomimetic Chinese based on ten samples:

stops: p b pʰ t d tʰ ɖ k g
affricates: t͡ʃ t͡ʂ d͡ʐ
fricatives: f θ s z ʒ ʂ ʁ h
nasals: m n ɲ ŋ
lateral: l
approximates: j ɻ w

Some of the phones are English, and some are Mandarin. /ɲ/ and /ʁ/ occur in neither. Note that [ʁ], [f], [ʒ], [ɲ], and [z] occur only once throughout all of the samples. The full retroflex series occurs only in S2, and the interdentals only occur in S3. Otherwise, the most widespread and repeated consonant sounds are [t͡ʃ], [w], [h], and [ŋ]. S2 and S9 used [ɻ] heavily. As stated above in the commentaries following the individual samples, [t͡ʃ] does not occur in Mandarin (though it does occur in many other Southeast Asian

languages), nor does [h]. In Mandarin, there is an affricate series consisting of three lenis affricates--[t͡s], [t͡ɕ], and [t͡ʂ]--and three aspirated--[t͡sʰ], [t͡ɕʰ], and [t͡ʂʰ]--each of these occurs exclusively as an onset and is of relatively high frequency (Duanmu, 2011), which minimal exposure would immediately demonstrate. Thus, some of the segments that find their way into glossomimetic speech are those which possess the highest frequency in the target language. Assuming all of the speakers in the samples were either English speakers or had knowledge of English, these affricates would have been interpreted as [t͡ʃ], explaining its frequency as the nearest familiar sound available.

The most common coda in the glossomimetic samples is [ŋ], and it occurs in the majority of the samples. This is likely due to similar factors as the affricate--its sheer frequency in Mandarin, which is second only to [n] as coda (Duanmu, 2011). However, English speakers are familiar with the Chinese borrowings or adaptations yin yang, kung fu, ping pong, Hong Kong, Beijing, and names such as Mao Zedong and Yao Ming. All of these examples share the velar nasal and are often the first and only exposure to Chinese many people have.

A perceptive individual or somebody who has studied Mandarin or phonology may notice the rhotic nature of northern Mandarin. This is particularly evident in Beijing and other dialects. As stated in the commentaries, this phenomenon is known as *erhua* (Zhang, 2005). The retroflex approximant occurs as a coda in very few words, but this frequency increases when the influence of *erhua* is introduced. The repetitive usage of the retroflex approximant in two of the samples above illustrates segment choice by what could be termed as a "differential trait," or some segment that is or seems utterly alien to the mimicking speaker, even if that segment is present in the speaker's own phonology and only differs in its frequency or distribution. For example, although the alveolar flap is present as an allophone in English, thus severely restricting its distribution to the point that most English speakers are unaware of its existence in their language, when a word begins with [ɾ], it is almost instantaneously regarded as non-English. As another example, in the same *youtube* video where Catherine Tate "translates" English into different languages, she also mimics Castilian Spanish, which possesses an interdental fricative (spelled <c> or <z>) (Campbell & King, 2011). The extent of her imitation of Castilian Spanish consisted of repeated production exclusively of the syllable [ɛθ] (golocalise, 2009). English, of course, has this consonant, and it is one of the language's distinctive features, but either its distribution or frequency was peculiar enough to Catherine Tate that is became the staple of her imitation.

Vowel Inventory

Below is the condensed vowel inventory glossomimetic Chinese based on ten samples, all of which could be English vowels:

i	ɪ		ʊ/u
			o
ɛ		ə	ʌ/ɔ
	a		ɑ

The vowel inventory is a near reflection of English with the tense-lax high vowel distinctions, and in that regard the vowel list is fairly unremarkable. The samples universally lack the mid-high front vowel. The following vowels occurred only once: [ʊ], [ʌ], and [ɛ]. I adhered to the standard convention of transcribing the high lax front vowel with the velar nasal, which was the most frequent position of the high lax front vowel, but it did occur in a word final position in S2 and S7. S2 was also the only sample containing [ɛ]. The vowel occurring in the most samples was [a], which is consistent with its dispersal across normal human languages and Mandarin itself (Duanmu, 2011), though it only occurred as part of a diphthong in some of the samples.

Syllable Structure

I took the liberty to base my analysis regarding glossomimetic syllable structure around my prosodic convention that stress designates a word boundary and words branch from left to right with the stress on the first syllable. I do this purely to extract phonotactic information, since without established word boundaries one cannot draw any conclusions regarding syllable structure.

Based on my parsing convention, the glossomimetic examples above exhibited a preference for CV syllable structure. CV syllables comprised roughly 54% of all the syllable types in the samples, CVC syllables 37%, V 6%, and VC 3%. Although Mandarin statistically prefers CVC (Duanmu, 2011), glossomimetic Chinese does not possess an irregular array of syllable–type frequency. According to the *World Atlas of Language Structures,* glossomimetic Chinese falls within the range of moderately complex syllables and is in line with the majority of the languages of the world (Maddieson, 2011).

Conclusions

I would like to pursue further research and refine my analysis by accounting for some major variables. A speaker's preexisting knowledge of a targeted language is important, and further study would require a speaker to disclose his or her knowledge of the target language. A speaker's native language would also need to be accounted for since that would serve as a basis of comparison against the target language, and it would also establish some prosodic habits that could aid in parsing what would otherwise be a continuous utterance. Additionally, I would seek longer speech samples to establish if glossomimesis possesses language-like inventories and ratios as defined in Maddieson (1988).

This was a preliminary survey of the phonology of glossomimesis. I wished to analyze the means by which an individual mimicked, without actually communicating in, a foreign language. Glossomimesis' non-communicative nature is congruent with glossolalia, though its practice has one notable difference--glossomimesis has a target set of segments that the speaker must use to accurately mimic a language. The inventory of segments the speaker chooses to use will approach that of the target language. The

individual segments the speaker will choose depends on the perceived frequency of the approximated segments in the target language and the segments the speaker identifies as alien to his or her own sound inventory. In conclusion, I refer to glossomimesis as exceptional language behavior, although its phonology is not.

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