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Intelligibility in English: or how not to sound like a machine gun!

by Alan Matthews

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Very few of us speak a foreign language without an accent. These days we often hear non-native speakers from all walks of life being interviewed in English on TV and radio, and virtually all of them have instantly recognisable Spanish, French, German, Dutch or whatever accents. This is inevitable and normally has little importance. What is much more important than having a 'foreign accent' is to speak with maximum intelligibility.

In business meetings, negotiations or presentations Spanish speakers of English are quite often difficult to follow; they tend to speak English like a machine gun. Pop - pop - pop - pop - pop - pop... A whole series of syllables being fired at the audience like bullets! A good example is the typical announcement made on Iberia - listen next time you fly!

What's the cause of this machine-gun effect? And what can be done about it?

It's all to do with the natural rhythm of the two languages. Spanish has what's called syllable-timed rhythm whereas English has stress-timed rhythm. They are very different.

In Spanish, each syllable, whether stressed or not, lasts approximately the same amount of time when pronounced, hence being popularly known as 'machine-gun rhythm'. Each syllable pops out at you: pop - pop - pop - pop...

In English, there is considerable variation in syllable length, a very audible mix of longer, more prominent syllables - the stressed ones - and lots of shortened and weakened syllables - the unstressed ones. This has been called 'Morse code rhythm', a mixture of long and short elements: dot, dot, dash, dot, dot, dot, dash...

You can easily hear the difference in the pronunciation of words of two or more syllables. For example:

Spanish	English
Estratégico (es-tra-té-gi-co)	Strategic (stra-te-gic)
5 syllables	3 syllables
1 stressed syllable '-té-'	1 long stressed syllable '-te-'
Each approx. same length	2 shortened/weakened

