

Linguistic Contrast, Instagram Filters for Your Ears

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1. **LESSON TITLE**

Linguistic Contrast, Instagram Filters for Your Ears

2. **CONCEPTS**

Primary Concepts	Encouching Topic
contrast	language acquisition
minimal pairs	language acquisition

3. **TARGET AGE**

12-16 y/o

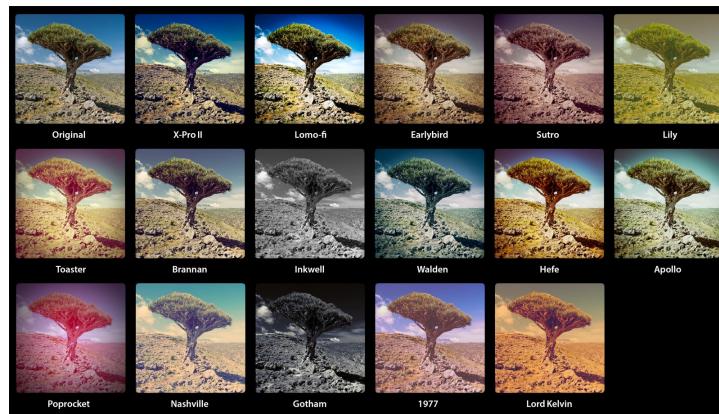
4. **SCRIPT**

a. **INTRODUCTION & HOOK**

Row-Low. Wrong-Long. Ramp-Lamp. For people who grew up speaking English, the difference between these rhyming pairs is very clear. They are the same except for the 'l' and 'r' sounds in them. But if you had grown up in Japan speaking only Japanese, the English words 'row' and 'low' would sound almost identical! Today, we are going to learn why some speakers have trouble with certain sounds in English and why you might have trouble learning sounds in another language... and it all has to do with CONTRAST.

b. **CONTRAST – “being different”**

If you've ever flipped through a bunch of Instagram filters on a picture you've taken, you've seen the colors in the image change in dramatic ways as you change the filter.



One of the image settings being changed when you use different filters is its CONTRAST. In photography, CONTRAST is the difference between lightness and darkness in an image.



high contrast



low contrast

Imagine taking a picture of a field of flowers on a bright sunny day. The image would have high contrast because all the colors stand out, all the shadows are dark, and all the highlights are bright! Now imagine taking the same picture when it's foggy outside. The image would have low contrast because the colors are cloudy, the shadows would be gray, and the highlights would be gray. Basically, in high contrast images, people will see differences clearly. In low contrast images, people will not see differences clearly.

English
'l' is CONTRASTIVE

Japanese
'l' is NON-CONTRASTIVE

In linguistics, if two sounds are CONTRASTIVE, speakers will HEAR the differences between sounds clearly. If sounds are NON-CONTRASTIVE, speakers will NOT HEAR the difference between sounds clearly. In English, 'l' and 'r' happen to be CONTRASTIVE. In Japanese, 'l' and 'r' are NON-CONTRASTIVE.

c. **MINIMAL PAIRS – “meaningfully different”**

Now you might be wondering ‘why?’. Why are ‘l’ and ‘r’ contrastive for English but not Japanese listeners. Well, it all has to do with the rhyming pairs we talked about earlier. Row-Low. Wrong-Long. Ramp-Lamp. These pairs are identical, except for one sound--- the ‘l’ and ‘r’. When pairs of words are different except for one sound, linguists call them MINIMAL PAIRS. Although the difference between these pairs of words might be small or minimal, they are very important to babies learning which CONTRASTS are important in a language.

When babies are first born, all the sounds they hear jump out at them as different. If a new born baby was dropped in the middle of a United Nations meeting, the ‘l’ and ‘r’ sounds in English, the ‘x’ sound in German and Russian, and the click sounds in Bantu languages would all be possible letters of the alphabet to them. Every sound would be contrastive! To figure out which sounds the baby NEEDS to know for their own language, their brain begins to pay more attention to some sounds and less attention to others. MINIMAL PAIRS are super helpful during this time. If a baby makes the connection that the thing in the room that gives off light is called a ‘lamp’, and the thing that its stroller goes up is called a ‘ramp’, then ‘l’ and ‘r’ must be CONTRASTIVE. They must be CONTRASTIVE because that one little change in sound is the difference between the thing giving light and the thing their stroller rolls on!

So the reason ‘l’ and ‘r’ are CONTRASTIVE in English is because speakers make a meaningful distinction between things using ‘l’ and ‘r’. In Japanese, the sounds speakers use to make meaningful differences don’t include ‘l’ and ‘r’. This makes ‘l’ and ‘r’ NON-CONTRASTIVE in Japanese. This does NOT mean Japanese speakers ears are broken or that English speakers have better hearing. It just happens to be that long

ago the speakers of these languages happened to use different sounds in naming the things around them.

d. SUMMARY

Today, we learned that speakers use MINIMAL PAIRS, pairs of words that differ by only one sound, to make meaningful distinctions when they talk. These MINIMAL PAIRS help speaker discover which sounds are CONTRASTIVE in their language. The sounds speakers find CONTRASTIVE helps us understand why some speakers might not be able to say or hear some sounds in our language, and why you might not be able hear or say sounds in another language without A LOT of practice. So the next time you see someone struggling with sounds in a new language, don't laugh at them, be patient with them. Their ear just needs more time to adjust.