

Non-question rises in L2 Spanish: Developmental patterns from the study abroad context

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What is the nature of the prosody-pragmatics interface in contexts of language acquisition? How are prosodic categories perceived and produced in bilingual grammars? To what extent do learners transfer sociolinguistically-encoded variables in their L2? In recent years there has been a substantial increase of research interest in the field of socioprosody that documents the form and function of non-question rises or ‘high rising terminals’ (also referred to as ‘uptalk’) across varieties of English (see Warren, 2016 for review). Guy et al. (1986) suggest that speakers use non-question rises to check for listener comprehension during narratives especially. To date, however, few empirical studies have examined the permeability of such contours in bilingual speech communities. Specifically, little attention has been paid to whether L1 speakers of English transfer non-question rises to an L2, or whether prolonged experience in a L2-dominant country modulates the use of non-question rises. In this presentation I report on two studies that examine the development of intonational patterns by English-speaking L2 learners of Spanish who participated in summer study abroad programs in northern Spain.

In Study 1 (Henriksen et al. 2010), we analyzed read speech data for four English-speaking L2 learners of Spanish (all female) who read aloud statements, yes/no-questions, and wh-questions at the beginning and end of a study abroad experience in León, Spain. Among the various developmental findings, two learners exhibited a developmental pattern in their production of statements whereby at Time 1 final rises (L+H*H%) were produced most commonly, but at Time 2 final falls (L*L%) were produced more commonly. Although this was one of the first studies to document the use (and subsequent suppression) of non-question rises in L2 Spanish, certain limitations in the research design (small sample size and the use of read speech) did not allow for further exploration of the sociopragmatic implications of these pitch movements. This was the impetus for the Study 2.

In Study 2 (in collaboration with Meghan Armstrong-Abrami and Lorenzo García-Amaya), we collected video retell narratives from 12 English-speaking L2 learners of Spanish (6 female, 6 male) at the beginning and end of their experience abroad in Salamanca, Spain. We also collected data from these learners in their L1 English, as well as data from 10 monolingual controls in L1 Spanish. All speakers saw clips from Simon Tofield’s ‘Simon’s Cat’ collection and retold the story without time limitations afterward. For the acoustic and pragmatic analyses, we followed protocols established in Armstrong et al. (2015). Preliminary analysis of our ongoing research reveals that learners’ frequency of use of non-question rises is greater in their L2 than their L1 at Time 1, possibly interpreted as linguistic insecurity in this pragmatic context. Although by Time 2 these rates decrease in their L2, the phonetic properties of the rises remain stable (i.e., they are not Spanish-like). We frame these results along the four intonation dimensions proposed in Mennen’s (2015) L2 Intonation Learning theory (LILt). Finally, an analysis of individual variation, complemented by a cross-dialectal comparison across monolingual varieties of English, grants us broader insight into issues related to gender-based variation in intonation and the prosody-pragmatics interface.

Selected references

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