

L2 accent and pronunciation research: acquisition, teaching, attitudes

Peter Paschke and David Newbold (Venice)

Abstract

This thematic issue brings together a selection of papers presented at the international conference *L2 accent and pronunciation research: acquisition, teaching, attitudes* held at the University of Venice Ca' Foscari in November 2023. Four articles are dedicated to the topic of phonological acquisition (both in perception and production) related to specific L2/L3 features (prominence in German, linking of contiguous vowels in Spanish, the labiovelar approximant, the alveolar trill and unreduced vowels in Polish). Three papers focus on attitudes, i.e. on the perception and evaluation of L2 Icelandic (with an English, Danish, Tagalog, Lithuanian or Polish accent), of L2 Spanish (produced by Italian university students), and of English as an international language (EIL) in the multicultural context of a secondary school in Tanzania. The final contribution deals with the teaching of L2 English pronunciation to very young Brazilian children. A common thread running through most of the contributions is the goal of intelligibility, rather than nativeness, in L2 pronunciation.

The papers presented in this special issue of *Linguistik online* grew out of a conference held at the University of Venice Ca' Foscari in November 2023. The conference itself provided a showcase for the results of a study conducted in the context of the departmental *Progetto di eccellenza* (2018–2022) which brought together researchers from the “big five” languages taught at Ca' Foscari: English, French, German, Russian and Spanish. The aim of the study was to monitor the attitudes of incoming students of languages towards accent and pronunciation in the languages they had chosen to study at university. It investigated, among other things, students' (unrealistic) desire to acquire a native speaker-like accent, the sensual pleasure they took in producing “foreign” sounds, and the greater importance given to pronunciation by female students when compared with their male counterparts (cf. Newbold/Paschke 2022).

The conference invited contributions on the theme of attitudes to accents, but opened up to a wider background of research into educational linguistics and L2 pronunciation acquisition. With the title “L2 accent and pronunciation research: acquisition, teaching, attitudes” (which has also been adopted for this special issue) it attracted responses from researchers in 14 countries in Europe, America, and Asia. The three-pronged approach – acquisition, teaching and attitudes – provoked a plethora of apparently quite disparate contributions, with a preference for acquisition and attitudes, which is confirmed in the eight articles published in this collection. They span learner attitudes to pronunciation, accent evaluation, folk linguistics and third

language acquisition, as well as perhaps more predictable topics such as acquisition of L2 sounds and prosody, materials production, and the use of English as a lingua franca. The three prongs intersect and overlap, with pronunciation to the fore.

But why a conference on pronunciation? Many commentators (including contributors to this special issue) have noted the neglect of pronunciation in teacher training courses, and consequently in language teaching and teaching materials, over the past decades. This was due at least in part to the development of the so-called “communicative approach”, and with it a rejection of the decontextualised “listen and repeat” approach characteristic of the audio-lingual method previously in vogue. It is significant that the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), published in 2001, and which can be seen as a child of the communicative revolution, offers only one, woefully inadequate, scale of phonology descriptors, in which levels are described more or less in terms of a perceived distance from native speaker accents (cf. Council of Europe 2021: 117).

With the new millennium, and the phenomena of globalisation and mass economic migration, this lack of attention to pronunciation began to look like a wasted educational opportunity. In particular, the massive linguistic variety generated by immigration, and concurrent emergent multilingualism, called into question the focus on native speaker accents advocated by the CEFR. This was particularly true for English, in its role of *lingua franca*, where most interactions taking place in the world were between non native speakers, and where participants had to jockey for intelligibility by experimenting with pronunciation.

In 2017 the *Companion Volume* to the CEFR (cf. Council of Europe 2017) was published to realign scales and descriptors to this changing context; there are now three scales for phonology (overall phonological control, sound articulation, and prosodic features); there are no references to “native speakers”, and intelligibility has become the benchmark for successful communication. Nor is the need for intelligibility restricted to English; as we read in the CEFR *Phonological scale revision process report*:

[...] a new sensibility has been emerging in the applied linguists’ scholarly community when it comes to re-evaluating the traditional idea of the ‘native speaker’ as a model or perception of the norm in pronunciation. This is especially visible in English considering the movement towards ‘global Englishes’ or ‘English as a Lingua Franca’ but similar considerations have been applied to all languages.

(Piccardo 2016: 6)

In this respect it seems appropriate that all but two of the contributions in this volume do **not** concern English, but learners of other European languages – Polish, German, Spanish, and Icelandic. The contents, as we have noted, span a wide range of themes, most of which can be seen to be connected by an underlying *leitmotif* of intelligibility. The first four articles are dedicated to the topic of pronunciation acquisition; the following three focus on attitudes, more precisely: the perception and evaluation of accented speech, while the last article deals with the teaching of L2 pronunciation.

Vincenzo Damiazz examines the perception of phonetic prominence by Italian L2 learners of German, which is known to be problematic because German native speakers rely more on pitch movements, while the perception of Italian learners is based more on duration and intensity.

The author compares the prominence perceptions of L2 learners and native speakers by means of excerpts from podcasts and then looks for correlations with different acoustic parameters. Although the perception of the most prominent word of the utterances coincides in many cases in both groups, there are still some differences. Based on selected examples, the author shows that in cases of conflict, native speakers tend to rely on pitch variations, while the perception of the L2 learners can be explained by the multidimensional parameter of “energy mass” of the syllable. Since phonetic prominence usually has a communicative function, e. g. the signalling of topic or focus, this study is relevant from the point of view of intelligibility, which is why the author also outlines how his findings (and the visualization of acoustic parameters) can be implemented in the classroom.

The contribution of **Erik W. Willis**, **D. Eric Holt** and **Carly Carver** looks at the productive side of L2 acquisition by comparing two groups of US American L2 Spanish students (intermediate and advanced level) with Mexican L1 speakers. The authors analyse how contiguous vowels across word boundaries as in *mi amigo* [mja.'mi.ɣo] are realized in a reading and a narrative retell task. The L1 speakers connect the two vowels in over 90% of cases either by means of synalepha (e. g. diphthong formation or vowel merging that reduces the number of syllables) or hiatus (that maintains different syllables). The intermediate learners, on the other hand, in most cases produce separated sequences (with glottal stops, pauses or creaky voice). Notably, linkings were more frequent in the retelling (49%) than in the reading experiment (30%), with possible pedagogical implications. The advanced learners, as expected, produced considerably more linkings, but without any major task variation (74% in reading, 68% in retelling). It is worth noting that the authors distinguish the different resolution patterns based on acoustic cues (sequence duration, formant values) that are well documented and illustrated.

While the first two contributions are devoted to prosody and phonological processes in the L2, **Jolanta Sypiańska** concentrates on the segmental level examining how young Ukrainian-Russian bilinguals (N=21, level A2-B1) realize the Polish labiovelar approximant [w] (represented by the grapheme ⟨ł⟩ as in the name Lech Wałęsa). Since this sound has no phonemic status in either of the two other languages, problems are to be expected. Building on Flege’s Speech Learning Model (SLM), the author suggests as possible substitutions a velarized lateral and a labiodental approximant. She also investigates whether the realization of [w] is conditioned by its position in the Polish word. Data were collected by the reading of 30 words with the labiovelar approximant in different positions and were analyzed based on auditory assessment and spectrogram consultation. The results show that in most cases (61%) [w] is pronounced on target, i. e. treated as a new sound. The major substitutions are the velarized lateral (25%), and a labiodental fricative (10%), but not the expected labiodental approximant. Finally, the author found a significant, even if small, effect of the position in the Polish word on the choice of one of the three main realizations.

The research presented by **Romana Kopečková**, **Zeyu Li** and **Ulrike Gut** acts as a bridge between the acquisitional studies presented so far and the following thematic block, because it examines the influence of attitudes (and language awareness) on the acquisition of L3 Polish, more specifically on the realization of the alveolar trill [r] and of unreduced vowels. The participants were 21 adolescent learners aged 12–13 (L1 = German, L2 = English), who were tested at the beginning and at the end of their first (school) year of Polish. Attitudes were collected

using a questionnaire, the metaphonological awareness was assessed by means of an accent mimicry task (telling a picture story in German with a strong Polish accent), and the pronunciation of target sounds was measured with a delayed repetition task. The results show that some attitudes, i. e. the feeling of one's own capability in the new language, but also of the challenging nature of Polish pronunciation, positively influence the acquisition of the rhotic, while a higher metaphonological awareness favours the correct realization of unreduced vowels, but not of the Polish [r], presumably due to its articulatory difficulty. Finally, the authors draw some important conclusions for the classroom.

The topic area "foreign accent and L2 pronunciation" can be linked to the study of attitudes in two ways: either the attitudes of the L2 learners themselves are collected (as in the previous article) or the way in which L2 pronunciation is viewed by other, mostly native, speakers is investigated, as in the following contributions. Based on qualitative methods rooted in perceptual dialectology and folk linguistics, **Stefanie Bade** adds a new facet to this established line of research by investigating how Icelanders associate L2 samples (verbal guises recorded by L1 speakers of American English, Danish, Tagalog, Lithuanian, and Polish) to a particular country or region of origin (voice-placing) and how factors such as perceived familiarity with a specific L2 accent, cultural stereotypes and phonological features are involved in this process. Only recently has there been a steady immigrant flow to Iceland, so that the native population is now coming into contact with accented Icelandic. The study shows, among other things, that the L1 raters reliably recognise an L2 accent as such but are rarely able to indicate the origin of the speakers. Interestingly, the L1 recording added to the verbal guises was incorrectly assigned only in 3 (out of 32) cases, including twice to Germany, because Germans are considered to be particularly diligent and effective when learning Icelandic. This example shows very well how stereotypes can influence the perception of (supposedly) foreign accents.

While in Bade's study the samples of accented speech represent the main groups of immigrants in Iceland, **Renzo Miotti** focuses on the perception of L2 language produced by Italian learners of Spanish as a foreign language, i. e. university students enrolled in a degree programme in their home country. Speech samples of 7 students (with L2 Spanish proficiency B2-C2) were evaluated by 10 Spanish L1 raters (experts and teachers of Spanish) by means of Likert scale questionnaires investigating four dimensions: comprehensibility, fluency, foreign accent, and irritability. With respect to the possible interactions between the dimensions, the author found a strong correlation between accentedness on the one hand and irritability and fluency on the other. However, accentedness seems to have little or no effect on comprehensibility. When it comes to the specific linguistic features that determine the perception of accentedness, the raters noted the realisation of final consonants (excessive intensity, lengthening, vocalic epithesis), the excessive closing or opening of middle vowels and the markedly ascending contour in continuative or assertive intonation, while other features such as the problematic pronunciation of /b/, /d/, and /g/ received little attention by the L1 raters. In conclusion, the author provides a number of suggestions for further investigations which could confirm and extend the findings emerging from this pilot study.

If the principle of nativeness in L2 acquisition is generally questioned today, then this applies all the more to English as an international language (EIL), which is the subject of the study by **Marta Nowacka** and **Antoni Nowacki**. They surveyed the attitudes of 40 students at an international secondary school (UWC) in Tanzania, i. e. in a highly diversified multicultural community, towards native and outgroup English accents with respect to comprehension, familiarity, and recognition. The findings suggest that, among the surveyed EIL users, intelligibility is valued over nativeness and English with a foreign accent is not equated with unintelligibility and incomprehensibility. Furthermore, immersion in a multi-accent community seems to have positive effects on comprehension, recognition, and familiarity with English accents. Contrary to other investigations, native English accents are judged as more comprehensible than outgroup ones, even though familiarity with accents is generally considered as helpful for their comprehension. The principle of intelligibility is also confirmed by the fact that more than 90% of the informants state that they use accommodation strategies when they have communication problems. Irrespective of this, however, 50% state that they strive for a native accent, while only 32,5% do not.

The final contribution to this special issue is also the only one that deals primarily with pronunciation teaching, in this case English. The authors, **Thaiza Barros** and **Sandra Madureira**, are guided by the well-established assumption that successful acquisition of L2 pronunciation requires sufficient input and the earliest possible start of learning. However, there is a lack of classroom studies, which the authors aim to remedy with an investigation into the teaching and acquisition of English pronunciation by 12 very young children (aged 3–4 years) in a bilingual Brazilian school. The authors describe the role of the teacher in pronunciation training and underscore the need for intentional work with sounds to avoid the assimilation with similar L1 sounds and to promote the creation of new phonological categories. To this end, they describe a series of playful activities which direct the children's attention to distinguish between difficult sounds, as in the minimal pair *ship* and *sheep*. The authors also refer to the beneficial effects of the teaching programme for the perceptual abilities of the children, as demonstrated by pre- and post-tests administered at the beginning and end of the school year.

References

- Council of Europe (ed.) (2001): *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Council of Europe (ed.) (2017): *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Companion volume with new descriptors*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.
- Newbold, David/Paschke, Peter (eds.) (2022): *Accents and Pronunciation. Attitudes of Italian University Students of Languages*. Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari. doi: 10.30687/978-88-6969-628-2.
- Piccardo, Enrica (2016): *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Phonological Scale Revision Process Report*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.