

Prosody in Turkish learners of German as a Foreign Language

Sabine Zerbian¹, Jane Kühn², Christoph Schroeder², Svenja Schuermann²

¹ Institute of Linguistics: English, University of Stuttgart, Germany

² SFB 632 “Information Structure”, University of Potsdam, Germany

sabine.zerbian@ifla.uni-stuttgart.de, {jkuehn,schroedc}@uni-potsdam.de

Abstract

Results of a pilot study are presented which investigates the prosodic realization of information structure by six learners of German as a Foreign Language (GFL) with Turkish as first language. Question-answer pairs were read out loud, which systematically varied the position of narrow focus in the response by means of a preceding *wh*-question.

A qualitative analysis of the results shows deaccentuation of postfocal constituents in the case of subject focus for 4/6 GFL-speakers but no consistent pitch increase on focused constituents. Two speakers did not change prosody due to information structure.

The results are discussed in connection with the acquisition of prosody as a marker of information structure. Deaccentuation has been reported to cause problems in L2 prosody. In Turkish, deaccentuation occurs postfocally. The claim will be motivated that the occurrence of deaccentuation in the L1 is a necessary but not sufficient condition for early acquisition of deaccentuation in a foreign language.

Index Terms: L2 prosody, German, Turkish, focus, deaccentuation, production

1. Introduction

The acquisition of L2 prosody, i.e. linguistically relevant changes of fundamental frequency (F0), intensity and/or duration over the course of an utterance, has received comparatively limited attention in the literature on Second or Foreign Language Acquisition. According to [1:57] and referring back to the intonational typology in [2], phonological influences in L2 prosody must be differentiated from phonetic influences. Phonological influences on L2 prosody result from differences in the inventory of phonological tunes, their form, and in the meanings assigned to the tunes. Phonetic influences result from a difference in the phonetic realization of an identical phonological tune.

Previous studies on L2 of non-related languages have shown that the target-like placement of sentence accent (phonological level) as well as the target-like realization of pitch accents (phonetic level) cause difficulties in foreign language acquisition. One of the particular difficult features reported in studies like e.g. [3-7] lies in the function of prosody in languages like English and German, where sentence-level prosody indicates information structural notions such as topic, focus and givenness. For L2 prosody, a non-target-like reaccentuation of constituents that are given through the preceding discourse has repeatedly been reported in the studies cited above.

The article reports the results of a pilot study into the prosody of Turkish learners of German as a foreign language. The functional use of prosody as marking focused and given constituents will be central. The German-Turkish language pairing is interesting, because German, just like English, shows both prosodic focus marking through an increase in

fundamental frequency (F0) and duration, as well as deaccentuation of given constituents. For English, prosodic focus marking and deaccentuation have been considered “opposite sides of the same coin” [8:67]. Turkish is not related to German. However, it can be considered to have a similar prosodic representation, being a stress language which also uses prosody at the sentence level. However, it shows less systematic prosodic focus marking (see discussion in section 2.2) but has postfocal deaccentuation¹.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 gives the relevant background on the prosody of the two languages involved. Section 3 presents the experiment with a summary of the results in section 3.5. Section 4 provides a discussion.

2. Focus prosody in German and Turkish

2.1. German

German has been classified as an intonation-only language (cf. [9]) which has lexical stress. Postlexically, it uses different types of pitch accents together with boundary tones in order to express pragmatic contrasts (see [10]). The interaction of information structure and intonation is uncontroversial for German.

Default sentence accent (in all-new sentences) is assigned on the basis of syntactic structure: every argument of the verb is accented, and the verb might also be accented if there is phrasal integration of the verb and its immediately preceding argument. Perceptually, the last accent in a sentence is perceived to be the most prominent. In terms of phonetic implementation of the accents, downstepping of high-toned accents has been reported to occur, i.e. realization of a high tone at a lower phonetic level relative to a preceding high tone [11].

Under narrow focus, the most prominent accent occurs on the focused constituent. As experimental work by [11] for German confirms, pitch is raised under focus when compared to a baseline of all-new sentences. Givenness leads to a lowering of pitch, whereby the position of the given constituent with respect to the focus is relevant. If the given constituent occurs preceding the focus of the sentence (prenuclear position), the constituent will have a pitch accent with a comparatively low pitch. If the given constituent occurs following the focus of the sentence (postfocal position), it has been said to be deaccented. This overall pattern was confirmed by German native speaker controls, participating in the same experimental task as reported in the current article.

¹ The difference between deaccentuation and postfocal compression is not always clear-cut in actual data. The former refers to the deletion of a pitch accent whereas the latter refers to the compression of the pitch range of a pitch accent. Here, the term deaccentuation is used, bearing in mind that this issue requires further investigation.