



# UNINTENTIONAL IMPOLITE INTONATION IN L2 SPANISH REQUESTS PRODUCED BY CHINESE WORKERS LIVING IN MADRID

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## Abstract

Intonation is already known to directly affect politeness judgements in L1 Spanish [18,4,1]. However, the pragmatic effect of L1 prosodic transfer into L2 Spanish has not been studied in detail yet. This study investigates how L1 Spanish speakers perceive L2 Spanish requests produced by L1 Mandarin speakers and what melodic patterns characterize requests produced with a clearly polite intention by L1 Mandarin speakers but perceived as clearly impolite by L1 Spanish speakers living in Madrid. We conducted a perceptual study with 100 Spanish requests produced by 20 L1 Mandarin speakers living in Spain. After 30 L1 speakers rated the degree of politeness of the stimuli, we conducted the Melodic Analysis of Speech of those requests that had been perceived as clearly impolite. Results showed that the melodic characteristics of the requests perceived as impolite by L1 Spanish speakers lack the melodic features previously described as melodic strategies characterizing mitigating politeness in Spanish [7].

## 1. Introduction

Knowledge about how to convey politeness is key to avoid misunderstandings in intercultural communication [19]. At the same time, it is well known that prosody plays a crucial role when conveying politeness in several languages, but each language seems to use different prosodic cues for it. While Spanish L1 speakers seem to rely mainly on intonation for expressing and perceiving politeness, Mandarin L1 speakers seem to rely more on other cues such as duration than F0 [11].

Several researchers have shown that intonation by itself is, to a great extent, able to mitigate utterances that could otherwise be perceived as impolite [18, 15, 4]. Devís [7] conducted several experiments in order to find out the intonational features that characterize mitigating politeness in peninsular Spanish. According to the results of her studies, the melodic features that, by themselves, can make that a statement with some degree of lexical-grammatical aggressiveness be perceived as polite are the final inflections circumflexes, internal inflections and prominence in unstressed vowels.

In the case of Chinese other cues such as speech rate seem to have a more significant effect on polite judgments than features related to the F0, such as the average F0 or F0 range speech [14, 12]. According to a recent study [12] tonal range does not affect politeness judgments and average F0 is only able to slightly neutralize the (im)polite speech when the F0 is low. This leads us to think that L1 Mandarin speakers of L2

Spanish may not rely, at least in early stages of acquisition, on intonation contours when trying to convey politeness.

The effects of L1 prosodic transfer on L2 pragmatic competence is increasingly attracting researcher's attention. Astruc and Vanrell [2] conducted what is claimed to be the first study on the phono-pragmatic acquisition of L2 Spanish. They compared the prosodic politeness strategies used in the L2 Spanish spoken by British beginner-level learners and Mexican L1 Spanish speakers and concluded that beginner-level learners still frequently transfer the intonational patterns of their L1, as they use descending intonational patterns typical of polite English, but not polite Spanish, when trying to be polite.

The Melodic Analysis of Speech, a model developed by the Laboratory of Applied Phonetics of the University of Barcelona [6], is being used to describe the intonation patterns used by L2 Spanish learners. Several researchers have used this model to describe intonation patterns of L2 Spanish spoken by learners of Spanish. This model has been used, for example, by Liu [14] to describe the melodic characteristics of Taiwanese learners' L2 Spanish, by Devís [9] to describe Italian learners' L2 Spanish, by Fonseca de Oliveira [12], to research Brazilian learners' L2 Spanish and by Baditzné Pálvölgy [3] to describe Hungarian learners' L2 Spanish.

Although the pragmatic effects of the use of these patterns has not been studied in detail and systematically yet and most studies on L2 pragmatic development still focus on lexical-grammatical strategies and oversee the importance of prosodic strategies for expressing politeness, recently some scholars started focusing on the possible misunderstandings that might be caused by melodic transfer from L1 to L2 Spanish. Devís, Cantero and Fonseca [11] found out that the melodic characteristics of the L2 Spanish spoken by Brazilian speakers are very similar to the melodic strategies used by L1 Spanish speakers to convey politeness, as described by Devís [7], such as the absence of the first peak, very flat melodies with a lot of internal inflections and the prominence in unstressed vowels. This, according to the authors, might be the reason why Brazilians are perceived as polite, amiable and friendly people in Spanish society [8]. However, this study focused solely on describing and comparing the melodic patterns used by L2 Spanish learners with those used by L1 Spanish speakers to convey politeness and no perceptual experiment was conducted to check whether this melodic transfer affects the way the L1 speakers perceive L2 speakers when they try to convey politeness.

The present study addresses this call by investigating how L2 Spanish requests produced by L1 Mandarin speakers are

perceived by L1 Spanish speakers and what are the melodic characteristics of the requests produced with a polite intention but perceived as clearly impolite by Spanish L1 speakers.

## 2. Speech data

Since according to Brown and Levinson's [5] politeness theory, requesting is an intrinsic face threatening act (FTA), which needs to be mitigated when realized in order to minimize threat and imposition, and melodic strategies are key in realizing nonthreatening requests in Spanish [7], we decided to focus on the Speech act of request for this study.

A corpus of 400 requests produced by 20 Chinese speakers was built for the perceptual experiment. In order to collect the audio data for the perception test, 20 Chinese speakers of L2 Spanish were asked to produce requests in 10 different role-play situations designed to elicit requests.

### 2.1. Role-play situations

In order to build the corpus of semi-spontaneous requests, 20 different role-play situations were designed based on previous literature [10] and daily life situations, in which informants could be involved in Spain. The role-play situations included making requests in private and public spaces. In all the situations, requests were to be made with a high degree of politeness. Some of the proposed situations included:

1. Asking the clients of a restaurant to wait for a minute, until you get a free table for them.
2. Asking a person to change the seat at the airplane.
3. Asking the flatmate to clean the house.
4. Asking for the way to the nearest hospital in the street.
5. Asking the flatmate to lend 100 Euro in order to buy a new computer.
6. Asking at the coffee shop to change the coffee.
7. Asking for information at the airport.
8. Asking someone who is calling not to call again.
9. Asking for a bag at the supermarket.
10. Asking to pay with credit card to a taxi driver.

### 2.2. Informants

L1 Mandarin informants included 20 Chinese immigrants who had been working and living in Spain for at least 2 years by the time the recordings took place. Chinese participants (Mage 37,5 years, range 24–55) were taking part in a A2/B1 level Spanish language course specifically designed by Universidad Nebrija for Chinese immigrants working in Madrid (Comunicate A2/B1).

### 2.3. Recording

Participants were asked to be as polite as possible when taking part in the role-play situations. Recordings were conducted during the class and Chinese speakers interacted with their classmates and L1 Spanish speakers in order to make it more realistic.

The recording took place in a classroom at Universidad Nebrija, in Madrid. The participants' responses were digitally recorded using a handheld Olympus WS-852 digital recorder. Out of the 400 utterances recorded, 100 were selected for the

perceptive test. Sentences which sounded less polite were selected by the authors in a first perceptive test.

## 3. Perception test

For the perception test 100 stimuli were selected by the researchers. The stimuli were divided into 3 sets of 34 items each, so that the perception test was not very time-consuming and exhausting for the participants. Taking part in the experiment took each participant around 10 minutes.

The perception test was distributed online and was conducted using the platform Surveygizmo, which allows participants to take the perception test whenever and wherever they want.

Each perception test was composed of 33 requests which had to be rated by the listeners in a 6-point Likert scale according to their degree of politeness, being 0 the most impolite and 5 the most polite request. Participants first gave written consent followed by instructions. Listeners were asked to imagine the speaker was talking to them, that is to say that they were the intended addressees while listening to the audios and rating the degree of politeness of the commands and requests. In order to contextualize the stimuli, informants were asked to read each situation and imagine themselves in such situation before listening to the audio recording. The contexts were identical to the contexts presented to the Chinese speakers, but from the opposite perspective. Here are some examples of situations that were presented to the listeners:

1. Imagine you are going to a restaurant and the waiter asks you to wait until he looks for a free seat for you.
2. Imagine the person seating next to you in the airplane wants to exchange seats with you, so that she is closer to her partner.
3. Imagine your flatmate wants you to clean the house and she asks you so.
4. Imagine you are walking in the street and somebody asks you for the way to the hospital, which is nearby.

90 listeners took part in the experiment (30 per set) which means each item was perceptually validated by 30 listeners. Listeners were all L1 Spanish speakers who had been living in Madrid for at least 1 year.

Before rating the utterances, listeners were trained with one practice trial recording. Stimuli were presented in different randomized orders for every participant.

## 4. Melodic Analysis of Speech

Only 16 stimuli were rated by L1 Spanish speakers as clearly impolite, that is to say, they received a politeness mark below 2. Consequently, we analyzed the melodic characteristics of the items perceived as impolite.

In order to conduct the Melodic Analysis of Speech we followed the protocol described by Font and Cantero (2009). First of all, we took the relevant F0 values (mainly vowels) along the utterance and calculated the percentage of the variation of each absolute value with regard to the previous value. In order to draw the graphic representation of these melodies, we converted the percentages obtained into standard

values. This method allows us to get a graphic representation of the melodic contours of the utterances independent of the speaker's characteristics.

In the following graphs each point on the curve is a representative vowel value, since the most important sound of the discourse seems to be the vowel. In the first horizontal line we have the orthographic transcription of the utterance in Spanish. For filling the second horizontal line, we took the Herz absolute values from the vowels using Praat. On the third line we can find the percentages of rise and fall.

After analyzing the 16 utterances perceived as impolite by the L1 Spanish listeners who took part in the study, we found out that the melodic characteristics of those utterances were what had been described by literature as melodic features of impoliteness in Spanish. The following examples are some of the utterances analyzed and show some melodic characteristics of L2 Spanish unintentionally impolite requests produced by L1 Mandarin speakers:

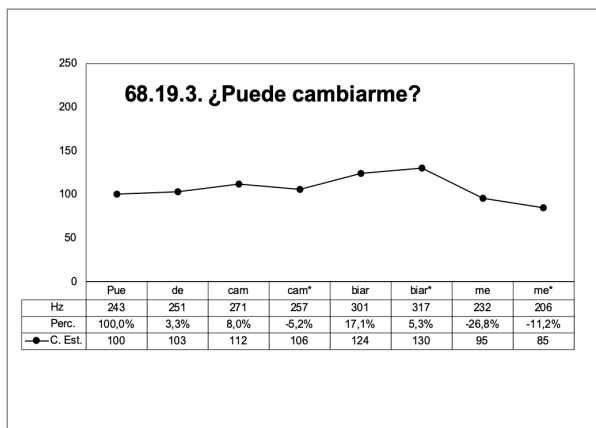


Figure 1: Standardized melody of the utterance: *¿Puede cambiarme? (Could you change it for me?)*

As we can see in Figure 1, the speaker makes a prominence in the stressed syllable and, despite being an interrogative sentence, makes a final falling inflection initiated from the stressed vowel.

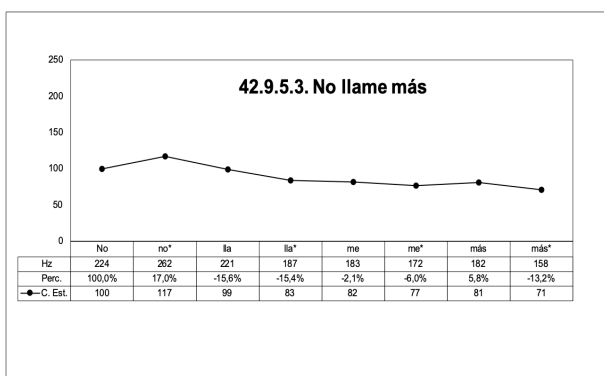


Figure 2: Standardized melody of the utterance: *No llame más. (Don't call again)*

In figure 2 we can see a clear example of a falling contour and a clear first peak making and emphasis on “no”.

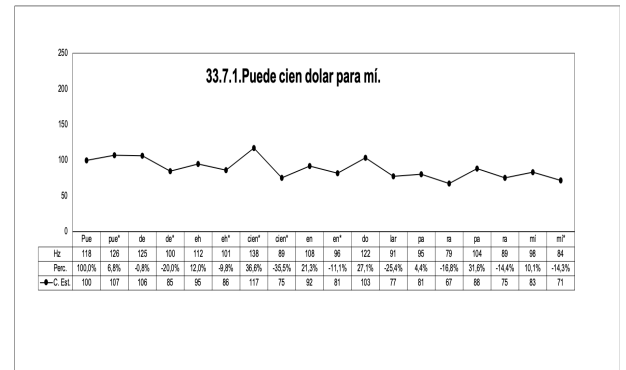


Figure 3: Standardized melody of the utterance: *Puede cien dolar para mí. (Could you me 100 dollars?)*

Figure 3 shows a zig zag melodic pattern and an emphasis of over 30% on the word “cien” (hundred). Moreover, instead of using an interrogative contour, the speaker decided to make a final falling inflection which might sound like an impolite command to the listener. Also, the speaker makes always and emphasis on the stressed and not the unstressed syllables.

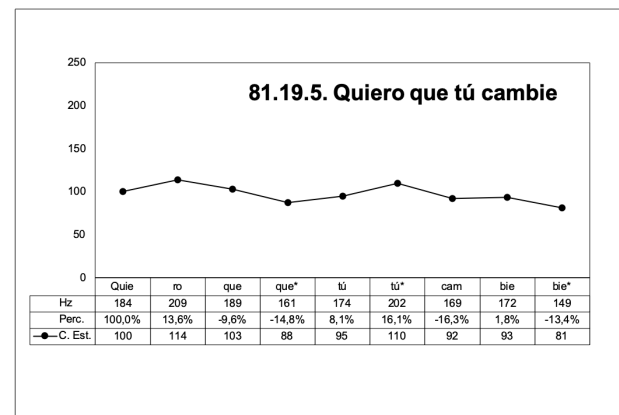


Figure 4: Standardized melody of the utterance: *Quiero que tú cambie (I want you to change.)*

Figure 4 shows a first peak and a zig zag falling contour with a final falling inflection. Tonal emphasis has been made on “tú” (you), thus making an emphasis on the person who is requested to change, something that may, for sure, sound threatening.

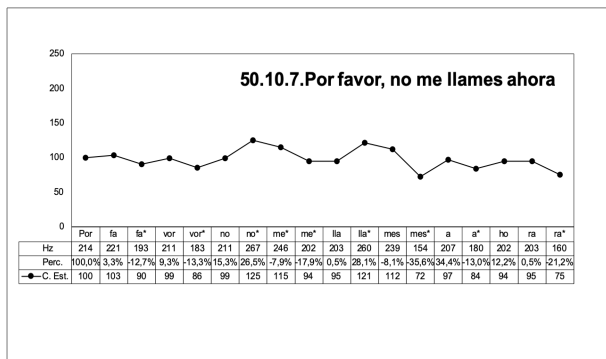


Figure 5: Standardized melody of the utterance: *Por favor, no me llames ahora.* (Please, don't call me now.)

Figure 5 shows again a zig zag contour and tonal emphasis on stressed syllables. The tonal emphasis is made again on the word “no”, thus emphasizing the fact that the speaker does not want the listener to call again.

## 5. Results

The standardized melodies of the aforementioned examples show clearly the melodic patterns described in the literature as impolite melodic patterns in Spanish [7], such as:

- Tonal emphasis on stressed and not unstressed syllables.
- Zig zag patterns.
- Falling contours.

None of the analyzed utterances show what, according to literature can make a statement with some degree of lexical-grammatical aggressiveness be perceived as more polite, such as final inflections circumflexes, prominence in unstressed vowels, final ascending interrogative inflections and suspended finals. It seems like not all L1 Mandarin speakers are aware of the fact that these melodic patterns could mitigate statements with some degree of aggressiveness from the lexical-grammatical point of view, or they are not able to produce it in semi-spontaneous speech.

As we have seen, despite using other pragmatic strategies used to mitigate impoliteness or threat in requests, such as the word “gracias” (“thank you”), these examples have been perceived as clearly impolite, thus suggesting that intonation may affect even more than the lexical features when perceiving politeness.

## 6. Conclusion

The aim of the study was to investigate how L1 Spanish speakers perceive L2 Spanish requests produced by L1 Mandarin speakers and what melodic features are present in Spanish requests produced with a clearly polite intention by L1 Mandarin speakers but perceived as clearly impolite by L1 Spanish speakers living in Madrid. After conducting a perceptual study with 100 Spanish requests produced by 20 L1 Mandarin speakers living in Spain, we analyzed the melodic characteristics of the L2 Spanish requests perceived as impolite, in order to check whether intonation might be, at least partially responsible for that intercultural misunderstanding. As the standardized melodies of the

requests perceived as clearly impolite by the L1 Spanish speakers have shown, some speakers, when trying to be as polite as possible in making requests still do not use melodic strategies to sound polite to L1 speakers. This study provides thus insights into how Chinese migrant workers living in Spain produce L2 Spanish requests and how they are perceived by L1 Spanish speakers, as well as the role intonation plays when conveying politeness in a second language, regardless the words we use.

However, further research needs to be conducted to check whether intonation alone might be able to convey politeness in otherwise impolite requests in Spanish. Only after manipulating the melodic patterns of these stimuli, in order to see whether by introducing the melodic characteristics of mitigating politeness, these same requests sound polite to L1 Spanish speakers, we could conclude whether intonation by itself is able to change the pragmatic effect of L2 requests produced with a polite intention. This future study will shed some light on the effect of melodic strategies when trying to be perceived as polite in a second language, even when L2 speakers are at a beginner level or do not find the correct words to express politeness as they wish.

The didactic implications of such studies are clear, since still intonation is not a linguistic content that is generally taught in beginner and intermediate level courses. However, the consequences of such lack of knowledge might cause intercultural misunderstandings with obvious social consequences, especially when migrant workers living in a new country such as Chinese workers in Spain are involved.

## 7. Acknowledgements

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