

Why Prosody Awareness Training is Necessary in Training Future Interpreters

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Abstract

Establishing a comprehensive rules and guidelines for speech production and teaching of prosody is difficult compared with the specific second language learner problem in pronunciation which can be easily corrected in second language learning classrooms. The nature of prosodic features is inherently complicated and because of the complexity of prosodic feature errors, no specific teaching methodology deals with them appropriately and most of the teaching methods are focused on segmental aspects in second language learner's pronunciation problems. Despite the helpfulness of computer-aided analysis of voice characteristics, there should be cooperation with experts in voice and signal processing in getting conclusions about these aspects. The teaching of prosody should be of the utmost importance in the interpreter training curriculum. Also, in this respect, appropriate materials and data should be chosen carefully according to the mother tongue of the learners and the analysis of the data should be done by professionals to see the gaps in the teaching and students' learning processes. The choice of methodology in the teaching of prosody can be important aspect as well. It should target individual differences between learners in different contexts. This study concluded that the curriculum of interpreting needs modification and – depending on the different types of languages involved – prosodic feature awareness training should be included in the curriculum of the training of future interpreters. So, it demands that instructors, who are the models in most cases for the interpreter trainees, be conscious and proficient enough in the perception and production of prosodic features of the language(s) that they are working with.

Keywords: Prosody, awareness training, curriculum, interpreting, Farsi sound system

1. Introduction²

Van Heuven (1994), among others, pointed out that all the features of speech which cannot be understood through direct linear sequence of segments is referred to as prosody. The linguistic function of prosody are: (i) to show the domains in time in paragraphs, sentences and phrases, (ii) to present information in a domain in statement/terminal boundary or question/non-terminal boundary, and (iii) to mark off certain constituents within these domains (accentuation). Prosody literally means 'accompaniment'. This perspective illustrates that segmental structure categorize the verbal content of the message (the words), on the other hand prosody gives the music to the utterances, e.g. the melody and rhythm (Van Heuven 1994). Gussenhoven (2015) suggests an alternative formulation, i.e. that prosody comprises all features of speech which are not directly related to the articulation of the vowels and consonants in an expression, a negative definition which is echoed by traditional term suprasegmentals. Ahrens (2004) claims that prosody is the fundamental aspect of speech. First, prosody is used to mark off the acoustic continuum of the utterance and second, it is used to accentuate certain aspects in speech which the speaker emphasizes. Therefore, prosodic features are the necessary points for the listener to process the incoming speech (cf. Cutler 1983).

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Prosody can be a representative of mental-cognitive processes of the speaker when he produces speech (cf. Goldman-Eisler 1958). Mary & Yegnanarayana (2008) also asserted the identity of speech which is presented by prosodic features such as rhythm, stress and intonation can provide important information about the utterance. On the basis of perception studies on human language identification we can perceive that prosodic information such as pitch and intensity, are used for language identification on conditions that sound units and phonotactics degrades (Mori et al. 1999, Kometsu et al. 2001). Gut et al. (2006) paying attention to the teaching of prosody claimed that the goal of instructors in different academic settings is to make second language learners perceive and produce the prosodic features of second language adequately. Considering the needs of the second language learners, it can be targeted to comprehensible communicative abilities or near-native like language competence. Instructors take advantage of different methodologies such as teaching theoretical aspects of prosody, consciousness raising of language structure, production exercises and perceptual training. Considering the needs of the students in different academic settings and expectations of them, different methodologies can be employed. Instructors have acquired different theoretical aspects and methodologies in their training courses and through experience they always try to modify their methodologies. Gut et al. (2006: 5) refer to the very important current problem in prosody awareness training in practice and what goes on in theories by researchers. They claimed that teachers practice the theories in the classes and researchers produce theories and their experience would be different. An exchange of ideas between two parties, the practitioners and theory makers, is fundamentally necessary and there is no formal settings for various professional groups who are concerned with second language prosody to exchange their perspectives.

Therefore, I suggest that the same problem exists in the interpreting curriculum in Iran. Instructors in most of the cases are not aware of how prosody helps in message perception and they do not pay attention to it in their working syllabus and in the cases that some of them have noticed the importance of prosodic feature awareness training, they are not competent and skillful enough in training their learners to apply prosodic feature awareness strategies in the classrooms. So, this issue needs more investigation in different academic settings in order to pave the way for training qualified future interpreters.

2. Prosody awareness training and the quality of interpreting

Jilka (2007), writing on the difficulty and problems associated with teaching of prosody and training awareness of the learners, pointed out that establishing a comprehensive rules and guidelines for speech production and teaching of prosody is difficult compared with the specific second language learner problem in pronunciation which can be easily corrected in second language learning classes. Jilka also says that nature of prosodic features is inherently complicated and because of the complexity of prosodic feature errors, no specific teaching methodology deals with them appropriately and most of the teaching methods are focused on segmental aspects in second language learners pronunciation problems. Research and data analysis of prosodic feature awareness has its own problems/difficulties. In this regard, Gut (2007), for instance, claimed that second language prosody research in most cases deals with specific points into national structure of non-native prosody.

All the prosodic domains and their relationship is not so far studied comprehensively. Generally investigations do not relate their results to non-linguistic factors which have impact on acquisition of prosody in second language. The impact of second language learners' native language on their second language prosody has been the only explanatory point in second language learning. Ahrens (2004: 10) in order to solve some of the problems of instructors in prosodic feature awareness stated that the technology should be called upon to solve the problems associated with this aspect. She claimed that through computer-aided analysis of voice characteristics and prosody we can get more information on the relationship of prosodic domains. She also stated that despite the helpfulness of computer-aided analysis of voice characteristics, there should be cooperation with experts in voice and signal processing in getting conclusions about these aspects. In another study on the effect of computer assisted- prosody training, Hardison (2004), claimed that the most important impact of computer-assisted training would be in the acquisition of second language prosody and in segmental accuracy of second language learners' speech.

Moreover, she stated that whenever the second language learners exposed to prosodic cues in their training frequently it facilitated the recall of lexical content of sentences easily. This finding is in line with exemplar-based learning models in which all the attended perceptual details of different issues stored as traces in memory. In this study the easiest point to recall were the prosodic and lexical content which attracted the most the learner' attention.

Hirschfeld and Trouvain (2006) looked at the methodology in teaching prosody to the learners and asserted that there should be lots of studies in order to develop suitable methods for teaching prosody for second language learners. It demands recognition of phonetic, prosodic deviations, application of exercises in training programs and developing a sound assessment procedure for the mastery of prosodic features for second language learners. Moreover, they stated that systematic training awareness of prosodic features results in higher degree of intelligibility in the foreign language learning which was illustrated by teaching practice in different academic settings.

Gussenhoven (2015) investigated the role of phonological prominence of utterances in the perception of emphasis in structures which should be perceived by the learners in message perception and he pointed out that different factors have impact on listeners' impression of the significance of utterances that, consequently, they would influence on the listeners' judgments of the importance of words or syllables in them.

Hirschfeld and Trouvain (2007) pay attention to the teaching and materials which instructors should employ in the teaching of prosody. They pointed out that in the materials which are used in teaching prosodic domains for second language learners, the choice of exercises are not done appropriately. The materials do not meet the specific needs of the students in providing awareness prosodic cues. They believe that the materials should differ according to the learners' first language, the proficiency in second language, the age of the learners and the learning goals of learners. Moreover, the issue of proficiency of instructors with respect to prosodic features would be another important aspect. In this regard, Hirschfeld and Trouvain (2007) pointed out that teacher training programs do not pay attention to the mediation of phonetic and pedagogical basics in training teachers. The result of this insufficient attention to train teachers satisfactorily would be that teachers are not qualified enough in teaching phonetic aspects, especially in teaching prosodic domains of second language for foreign language learners.

Therefore, the teaching of prosody should be of utmost importance in the interpreter training curriculum. Also, in this respect, appropriate materials and data should be chosen carefully according to the mother tongue of the learners and the analysis of the data should be done by professionals to see the gaps in the teaching and students' learning processes. The choice of methodology in the teaching of prosody can be important aspect as well. It should target individual differences between learners in different contexts. Moreover, the instructors themselves should be proficient enough to implement the materials to be developed in the training of prosodic features for the interpreter trainees.

3. Farsi syllable structure

Farsi syllables cannot begin with vowels, while vowels can initiate syllables in English. Initial consonant clusters are not possible in Farsi whereas consonant clusters are used both in initial and final syllables in English. Furthermore, clusters contain no more than two consonants in Farsi, but more than three are permissible in English. It can be stated that syllable structure of Farsi should be presented as CV(C)(C). This schema allows three legal syllable types in Farsi, i.e. CV, CVC and CVCC, whereas at least 18 different types of syllable are permissible in English. Shademan (2002: 1) observes that an initial consonant cluster in an English word is broken up by vowel epenthesis by Farsi learners of English if the cluster is illegal in their native language. The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis predicts that this area of differences can cause problems in perception, namely, parsing and segmenting an English auditory input, and in the production of speech for Farsi second language learners of English.

Shademan points out that (2002) when consonant features are in line with vocalic features of spreading, then the inserted vowel would share their features. But, in cases that consonant features are not in line with the features being spread, the default vowel /e/ will be inserted. Hall (2007) mentions that Farsi speakers when they are learning English they generally use sC (s+Consonant) clusters which have epenthetic /e/ (epenthesis is the addition of one or more sounds to a word, especially to the interior of a word). Therefore, it is always can be seen that the epenthetic vowel is put before the /s/, which can be problematic for Farsi speakers of English. Some examples are given below:

ski → [eski]
 small → [esmal]
 student → [estudent]
 spell → [espel]
 street → [estirit]

On the other hand, in non-sC clusters, the second member of the cluster is either /l/ or /r/. In these cases, if the cluster is followed by a high vowel, then there is copy epenthesis. For example:

freezer → [firizer]
 clean → [kilin]
 group → [gurup]

4. Stress in Farsi

In Farsi the final syllables of nouns, adjectives, most adverbs and unprefixes verbs are weighted by assigning of stress (Abolhasanizadeh et al. 2011, Ferguson 1957, Lazard 1957, Samareh 1986). Prefixed verbs take stress on the prefix. Kahnamyipour (2003) argued that in Farsi, morphological difference between nouns and verbs makes them have different rules in stress placement and follow different prosodic domains. Prefixes are separate phonological words in his analysis, and a phrase-level stress rule puts the stress on the final syllable of the initial phonological word in a phonological phrase. Some researchers (e.g. Mahjani 2003, Samareh 1986), in an experimental study of prosodic features and intonation in modern Farsi, add that the syllable patterns in Farsi generally follow these patterns, CV, CVC, or CVCC. It shows that in Farsi there is always an onset in syllable structure. It is different with English syllable pattern which it can have only a rhyme, with a nucleus and a coda. Syllabification would be easy in Farsi to do since the phonological restriction in this language does not permit the occurrence of two vowels in one syllable. Therefore, by counting the number of vowels, the number of syllables can be categorized.

Moreover, Mahjani (2003) also asserted that Farsi lexical stress system is a weigh-insensitive language (Windfuhr 1990); since the stress goes to fixed syllable in most of cases (the last syllable). It is not like English which has the pattern of weight-sensitive stress system that some syllable patterns according to their higher weight get stress.

Farsi is a stress-accent language (Samareh 1986). This means that in Farsi meaning of words cannot be changed by pitch variations. Pitch variations change an utterance from statement to a question or it can give emphasis for pragmatic function of utterances (Tehrani 2007, Samareh 1986).

The intonational structure of Farsi has been interpreted as involving three levels of prosodic hierarchy, viz. the accentual phrase, the intermediate phrase and intonational phrase. Pitch accents are associated with stressed syllables (Abolhasanizadeh, Gussenhoven & Bijankhan 2011). Stress patterning in Farsi is manifested in simplex words, complex words, compound phrases, clauses and sentences (Amini 1997), which will be elaborated in the following section.

4.1 Stress on simplex words

A simplex word pronounced in isolation has stress on the final syllable. A simplex word consists of one to five syllables (Amini 1997):

sabr 'patience'
 es~~ʔ~~taxr 'pool'
 ha.fe~~ʔ~~ze 'memory'
 mo.jassa~~ʔ~~me 'statue'
 mo.to.vas.se~~ʔ~~te 'intermediate'

4.2 Stress on complex words

Simplex words when inflected still have stress on the final syllable of the stem (Amini 1997). The stress rules are blind to the affix:

de ʔ raxt	+ ha	de.raxt ʔ ha	'trees'
ma ʔ riz	+ an	ma.ri ʔ zan	'the sick'
ne.vi.san ʔ de + gan		ne.vi.san.de ʔ gan	'writers'

4.3 Stress on compound words

The second (or last) member of a compound carries the main stress (is the prosodic head at the compound level). Words making up the compound are stressed by the main rule of Farsi (i.e. fixed final stress).

gol	+	xaʒne		gol.xaʒne		'greenhouse'
batʒri	+	saz		bat.riʒsaz		'battery maker'

4.4 Connective compounds

Connective compound words do not differ from regular compounds in carrying the main stress. Some examples are provided below (Amini 1997).

kar	+	o	+	karʒgar	ka.ro.karʒgar	'work and worker'
shab	+	i	+	xun	sha.biʒxun	'surprise attack'
bar	+	a	+	bar	ba.raʒbar	'side by side'

Therefore, the following conclusions can be derived from the above mentioned examples that (i) stress is on final syllables in nouns, adjectives, most adverbs and non-prefixed verbs, (ii) Farsi is a weight-insensitive language, (iii) the pattern of stress cannot be affected by the number of syllables (Amini 1997).

In different languages of the world there would be a minimum about the size of the words (McCarthy & Prince 1995, reported in Amini 1997). A lot of words in Farsi (e.g. /dʒa/ 'place') consist of one syllable. Yet, such words have to be obligatorily parsed and footed. So, degenerate feet can be assumed for this language (Amini 1997). It suffices to say here that complexes and compounds receive stress on the rightmost syllable, while, in verbs, the stress goes from the right most syllable to the left most one if a prefix be added to the simple verbs (Amini 1997).

5. English and Farsi sound systems

Languages can be classified as stress-timed or syllable-timed (Pike 1945, cited in Aquil 2012). In stressed-timed languages like English words can be reduced. Languages take different measures so that stress would occur at equal intervals (Aquil 2012). For instance, a great deal of phonetic reduction can be observed in English unstressed syllables (Aquil 2012). This is true, especially, in the case of function words. A phonological rule, namely, "monosyllabic destressing" is applied to satisfy "rhythmic restricting" (Selkirk 1984; cited in Aquil 2012: 340). In monosyllabic function words which they have weak stress vowels and certain consonants would be deleted in fast speech (Aquil 2012). This phenomenon can be illustrated in the sentence, *What do you want to eat?* The monosyllabic function words of *do* and *you* would be deleted because there would be vowel reduction in them. Therefore, the consonants assimilate with the final consonant of the word *what* and the result would be palatalized allophone (Selkirk 1984, reported in Aquil 2012).

Recently there have been some studies focusing on English and Farsi sound systems and in most cases these investigations are related to segmental aspects. In this respect, Hall (2007) stated that Farsi is syllable-timed language which was pointed out by Windfuhr (1979), which it refers to this point that the number of syllables in a sentence can be representative of the time for saying the sentences and syllables are separated at regular interval of times. The possible syllable structure of English can be illustrated as (C)(C)(C)V(C)(C)(C)(C). Therefore, English allows up to three consonant clusters initially and four consonants clusters at the end of the word. This aspect can be seen at the word of *scrambles*.

6. Conclusion

Therefore, it can be stated that the curriculum of interpreting needs modification and – depending on the different types of languages involved – prosodic feature awareness training should be included in the curriculum of the training for future interpreters. So, it demands that instructors, who are the models in most cases for the interpreter trainees, be conscious and proficient enough in the perception and production of prosodic features of the language(s) that they are working with. The materials which are produced for interpreter training should include prosody teaching and tasks which can make the learners raise their consciousness about this aspect. The aforementioned points can be of great help for instructors, practitioners, material producers, researchers in the field of interpreting and for future interpreters to improve the quality of their work. Moreover, instructors should bear in mind that they should have conversation with researchers in this area so that to put into practice the results of the studies of the researchers and they should not look at themselves just as practitioners.

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