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Dissertation: Prosody in Lexical and Syntactic Disambiguation in English-French
Interlanguage

This dissertation examines the interpretive response to prosody by beginning and intermediate classroom learners of French. Most research on second language (L2) sentence processing (the mechanisms involved in interpreting sentences) have largely concentrated on the importance of syntactic, lexical, thematic and contextual information. Very few studies have considered prosodic information; those that have been done in this area have shown some L2 interpretive response to prosody, but not by all learners or in all cases. This study was designed to explore whether all learners can respond to prosody for interpretation under the right circumstances and what factors affect how prosody influences final L2 interpretation. Experiments tested a lexical ambiguity involving word boundaries and three structural ambiguities involving a single adjective, a prepositional phrase, or a relative clause which could modify one of two different elements in the sentence depending on interpretation. Experimental sentences were recorded with two distinct prosodies, each with a specific phrasing intended to favor one of the two possible interpretations. Participants performed two types of auditory tasks which indicated whether they accepted the sentence they heard as congruous with a given interpretation and which interpretation they preferred for the sentence. All learners clearly responded to prosody for lexical disambiguation. Of the structural ambiguities, learners demonstrated the greatest response to prosody with adjectives and the least with relative clauses. This is indicative that greater complexity reduces demonstrated interpretive response to prosody. In addition, syntax appeared to play an important role in which interpretations were most influenced by prosody.
