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Prosody in the context of an English language classroom: An interdisciplinary exploration

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Prosody in the context of an English language classroom: An interdisciplinary exploration.

Jesús Romero-Trillo (ed.). 2012. *Pragmatics and Prosody in English Language Teaching*. Heidelberg: Springer.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Pragmatics and Prosody in English Language Teaching" is a valuable contribution to the growing movement of integrating prosody into the theory and practice of pragmatics. The collection edited by Jesús Romero-Trillo is an interdisciplinary work, which promotes the idea of prosody being an integral and indispensable part of pragmatics. Through its varied contributions the volume offers an extensive overview of theory, as well as examples of successful integration of prosody and pragmatics into an empirical framework (e.g. Pickering et al. 2012, Riesco Bernier 2012). The collection combines state-of-the-art research on prosody with venerable traditions of pragmatics in a very dynamic and satisfying way. Although it focuses on English language pedagogy to a large extent, it is recommended to those interested in the subject of the pragmatics of prosody in general.

The volume is one out of 16 in Springer's Educational Linguistics series (edited by Francis M. Holt and Leo van Lier). It contains 12 independent articles organized thematically into three sections, and it includes introductory and concluding remarks from the editor of the volume which serve to integrate the articles into a coherent whole. As each contribution to the volume is quite unique, each will be reviewed separately, while particular attention will be given to their pragmatic aspects.

2. PART I: Theoretical Approaches to the Teaching of Prosody

In Part I of the collection emphasis is put on the theoretical considerations regarding the acquisition of various aspects of L2 prosody, wherein pragmatics should be considered the guiding principle of the process. Pragmatic perspective given to the studies of prosodic issues of rhythm (Deterding) and differentiating sentence types (Xu), as well as to pedagogical issues of L2 prosody acquisition (Piske) and overcoming foreign accent (Lengeris), and finally prosody is redefined as an indispensable aspect of pragmatic competence (Nilsenová and Swerts).

David Deterding's "Issues in the acoustic measurement of rhythm" illustrates the inadequacy of the fundamental division between stress- and syllable-timed languages though an empirical study comparing rhythmic patterns in the Brunei and British varieties of English (p. 18). The author then considers the role rhythm plays in the intelligibility of speech and in (mis)communication in situations where English is used by native and non-native users, especially the context of language learning (p. 21). The study provides a practical improvement to the Pairwise Variability Index (PVI) formula, which is a tool for the acoustic measurement of rhythm (Low et al. 2000), and presents a number of interesting problems for future pragmatically-oriented studies of prosody (p. 21).

In "Prosody and Second Language Teaching: Lessons from L2 Speech Perception and Production Research", Angelos Lengeris turns his attention to the issue of gaining native-like proficiency in pronunciation and prosody (p. 25). Following a broad meta-analysis of literature on the subject he proposes that difficulties in gaining native-like pronunciation for learners without early exposure to L2 are the effect of persistent negative transfer from L1. Challenging the idea of gradual loss of neural plasticity as an insurmountable obstacle (p. 26), Langeris enumerates documented means of overcoming foreign accent from strong motivation (p. 29) to visually-assisted techniques using contour visualization software (p. 33).

In "Factors Affecting the Perception and Production of L2 Prosody: Research Results and Their Implications for the Teaching of Foreign Languages" Thorston Piske offers a systematic analysis of the existing research on the subject of broadly understood "foreign accent." The author presents the role of attitudes towards foreign accents in gaining native-like proficiency (p. 42), and establishes the segmental, suprasegmental, and fluency parameters as major contributors to the perception of foreign accent (p. 45). This is followed by a critical review of research methods on the subject, wherein problems and inconsistencies in the methodology are identified and useful guidelines for future research are drawn (pp. 47-53). The author concludes with some suggestion for future research concerning the development of pragmatic competencies of L2 learners.

"Function vs. Form in Speech Prosody – Lessons from Experimental Research and Potential Implications for Teaching" is an interesting attempt by Yi Xu, to extrapolate the results and implications of research on tone languages to non-tone languages. The article stresses the significance of parallel encoding of many aspects of meaning in the prosodic signal (pp. 66-72), but the pragmatic and pedagogical implications are somewhat unsystematic. The pragmatic aspect could be greatly improved by the inclusion of Speech Act Theory into the

analysis (cf. Searle 1969), and the pedagogical aspect by referring to the analysis of teaching materials for prosody provided by Piske et al. 2012.

"Prosodic Adaptation in Language Learning" by Marie Nilsenová and Marc Swerts provides a very useful insight into prosodic adaptation as a significant aspect of L2 pragmatic competence. The authors show the potential for communication breakdowns in the absence of prosody. The paper furthermore offers judicious observations on the nature of the universal biological foundation (the nature) and the culture-dependent variability (the nurture) of prosody as a phenomenon (pp. 78-84). The authors also propose the use of pitch contour visualization software as a useful tool in the teaching of L2 prosody (p. 90).

3. PART II: Pragmatics, Prosody, and Communication

Part II of the collection focuses on establishing links between the prosodic form and pragmatic function and meaning, and gives an overview of some of the problems involved in the nascent field of L2 prosody acquisition. The issues concerning prosodic expression of emotions are discussed from theoretical (Wharton) and practical (Romero-Trillo and Newell; Szczepek Reed) standpoints. The practical problems of investigating prosody as an aspect of the pragmatic competence are also illustrated (Balog).

"Prosody and Meaning: Theory and Practice" by Tim Wharton proposes a new notion of encoding meaning in communicative contexts based on the Relevance Theory. The author distinguishes between *conceptual encoding* of meaning whereby words encode concepts in the context of a sentence, and procedural encoding, whereby words or other linguistic expressions encode cues to guide listener inferences (p. 109). The author concludes, uniquely among the contributors for this collection, with a bold suggestion that pedagogical concerns regarding L2 prosody will be made redundant by the peak of the globalization of English as "the *last* Lingua Franca" (p. 114).

"Prosody and Feedback in Native and Non-native Speakers of English" by Jesús Romero-Trillo and Jessica Newell delves into the usage and acoustic patterns of back-channeling cues in native and non-native English speakers. Marked quantitative and qualitative differences are duly reported and the authors stress the pragmatic potential of the (mis)application of cues in communicative contexts (p. 129). The study's external validity, however, could be greatly improved by adding a prosodic meaning perception study with the inclusion of gender as a factor in the analysis of back-channeling practices (cf. Cameron 2007). This would solidify the direct links between function and form of prosody implied by the authors.

In “Early Prosodic Production: Pragmatic and Acoustic Analyses for L2 Language Learners” Heather L. Balog takes a pragmatic approach to the acquisition of prosody in L1 and in L2 by children at the earliest stages of cognitive development. The author provides a thoughtful and balanced critical overview of literature on the subject (pp. 134-141), and identifies the analytical difficulties posed by the methodological inconsistencies of the existing literature (pp. 139-140). She then proposes practical guidelines for future studies, advising theory-driven empirical work, careful analyses and description of adult prosodic pattern, as well as encouraging the use of advanced freeware for the acoustic analyses of prosody (p. 144).

“Prosody in Conversation: Implications for Teaching English Pronunciation” Beatrice Szczepek-Reed puts particular emphasis on the interactional character of prosodic phenomena. She puts forward the idea of prosody playing a subsidiary role to pragmatic demands of any social interaction involving a verbal exchange (p. 148). She gives illustrative examples of the multiplicity of meanings conveyed by prosody in the context of a conversation, giving special attention to the issues of turn-taking (pp. 149-155) and prosodic alignment (pp. 156-159). With respect to language teaching, the author proposes that prosody should be taught implicitly, through teaching social interaction in which the collaborative nature of prosody is best revealed (p. 162).

4. PART III: Pedagogical Implications for English Language Teaching

Part III is the most practically oriented to language pedagogy. It presents two informative examples of how empirical studies of prosody guided by pragmatic considerations can be conducted. One study is concerned with teachers’ prosodic proficiency and pragmatic competence (Riesco-Bernier), the other compares the prosodic cueing of (dis)agreement between native and non-native speakers (Pickering, Hu, and Baker). One example of how theory may usefully inform and guide research is also presented (Gutiérrez Díez).

“Same but Different: The Pragmatic Potential of Native vs. Non-native Teachers’ Intonation in the EFL Classroom” by Silvia Riesco-Bernier is a solid illustration of an empirical study connecting prosodic and pragmatic considerations in the context of EFL research. In it the authors conducted a detailed analysis, first defining pragmatically various aspects of Child-Directed Speech (CDS) in native and non-native teachers of English, and then investigating the prosodic patterns in thus defined fragments of discourse (pp. 180-181). The quantitative and qualitative differences in the prosodic patterns of both groups of teachers are methodically reported, but there is no report of potential differences students’ levels of performance in relation to the performance of the teachers. This matter could provide a very useful and informative perspective on language pedagogy.

Another example of an empirical study involving both prosody and pragmatics is “The Pragmatic Function of Intonation: Cueing Agreement and Disagreement in Spoken English Discourse and Implications for ELT” by Lucy Pickering, Guiling (Gloria) Hu, and Amanda Baker. Their experiment compared native and non-native speakers of English formulating (dis)agreement in interaction, and found intriguing pattern of high tonal variability in the non-native expressions of disagreement (p. 212). This study is exemplary in presenting links between function and form of prosody as well as in the implementation of acoustic measurements to the investigation of the pragmatics of prosody.

“Trouble Spots in the Learning of English Intonation by Spanish Speakers, Tonality and Tonicity” by Francisco Gutiérrez Díez is a practical pedagogical sketch on issues of negative transfer from Spanish L1 to English L2 which hinders the acquisition of English intonation. The main focus is on the negative transfer in tonicity stemming from the learners’ poor understanding of the fine differences in the language-dependent coding of what Halliday (1967) called the new and the given information. The author stresses the need for intonation teaching programs in which this pragmatic function of correct application of tonicity would be at the center (p. 228).

5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the volume “Pragmatics and Prosody in English Language Teaching” is a rich source of information, both theoretical and practical, for anyone interested in the issue of integrating prosody into the study of pragmatics. The volume is an edited collection of articles, which does not make easy reading, and the picture of prosody as a part of pragmatics emerging from it is consequently somewhat fragmented and unsystematic. Several of the empirical or empirically-based studies suffer from slight deficiencies, mainly related to the levels of their external validity. Phoneticians and phonologists investigating prosody will find useful advice and guidance regarding pragmatics, and pragmaticians will find a number of tools, means and methods of investigating prosody. For those interested in pedagogy this volume will provide strong arguments for the systematic introduction of prosody teaching into the English language classroom, as well as a generous list of freely available software to aid the process. This volume is by no means a definitive work, but may be an excellent starting point for the theoretical and empirical investigation of prosody as an aspect of pragmatics both within and outside the context of English Language Teaching.

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