

Methodological Perspectives on Second Language Prosody

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SOME EPISTEMOLOGICAL SUGGESTIONS FROM L2 PROSODIES

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to propose six epistemological suggestions, that emerged from the prosodic analysis of the L2 Italian corpus that we collected (1-3), to linguists interested in the study of L2 Italian prosody and, more generally, of L2 prosodies. These suggestions concern many different and complex aspects of L2 prosody analysis, such as: the problem of common 'constitutive enunciative conditions' in comparisons between L1 and L2 Italian utterances (4); the problem of 'abstraction' of L2 constitutive enunciative conditions (5); the voice features relevance in the study of L2 utterances (6); the double nature, both linguistic and metalinguistic, of *editing* phenomena in L2 enunciations (7); the question of a standard Italian linguistic model to which compare several L2 ethnic Italian enunciations (8); finally, the question of which kind of comparison procedure, if 'many to one' or 'many to many', is more indicated for L2 prosodies analysis (9)¹.

Keywords: prosody, voice, editing, ethnic Italian, standard Italian.

1. INTRODUCTION

Starting from a study about the «Italiano Regionale Abruzzese» (IRA) [10], we collected a corpus of more than 540 utterances in the so called 'ethnic Italian'. The unavoidable astonishing linguistic variety [11] is the first and most important characteristic of our corpus and, at the same time, a formidable obstacle to a 'standard' analysis of these data. Therefore, some methodological reflections are inescapable in order to study the prosodies of L2 Italian.

2. CORPUS

Our corpus collects 9 semi-spontaneous face-to-face conversations with 7 female speakers (2 Albanians, 2 Russians, a Rumanian, a French, a Chinese) and 2 Eritrean male speakers, for an overall duration of 3 h 56 min 41 s.

These conversations are made up of three parts: the first one consists of a free interview in Italian about the individual story of the speaker and his relation with Italy and Italian language; the second one consists of a short repetition of the same contents in his mother tongue; the third one consists of a three times pronunciation of 10 utterances stated by our protocol [8, 9, 10]:

- a. three affirmative sentences:
 - 1) *Giovanni arriva*
 - 2) *Giovanni mangia la mela*
 - 3) *Andiamo al cinema*

- b. the same three sentences as *yes/no* questions:
 - 4) *Giovanni arriva?*
 - 5) *Giovanni mangia la mela?*
 - 6) *Andiamo al cinema?*
- c. four *wh*-questions:
 - 7) *Chi arriva?*
 - 8) *Dove andiamo?*
 - 9) *Chi mangia la mela?*
 - 10) *Che cosa mangia Giovanni?*

3. PROSODIC ANALYSIS

The prosodic analysis of ethnic Italian enunciations, conceived as global phenomena marked off by a sense no matter what grammatical organisation they have nor how long their duration is [4, 6], is carried out through the observation of several parameters, such as:

- the configuration of the 'terminal contour', i.e. the part of the pitch contour included from the last tonic syllable to the end of the utterance;
- the syllable where an 'accent' falls, with its value and its timing;
- the 'last remarkable variation' of f_0 , that goes from the last turning point to the end of the pitch contour;
- the syllabic position and the timing of the last 'turning point';
- the syllabic position and the value of 'maximum' and 'minimum' of f_0 ;
- with a constant regard to enunciations 'global duration' [4].

¹ Sections 1, 2, 3, 8 are by Domenico Di Russo; the sections 4, 5, 6, 7, 9 are by Domenico Russo.

4. THE PROBLEM OF 'CONSTITUTIVE ENUNCIATIVE CONDITIONS'

The protocol adopted here shows an almost total absence of common constitutive enunciative conditions between the elicited L2 'enunciations' and the L1 ones because, while in case of L1 the whole enunciative conditions is always at least implicitly known and anyway entirely controlled, in case of L2 utterances all the constitutive enunciative conditions have to be clearly explicitated. In the case of L2 utterances, in fact, we are in front of an almost "unknown" string of human sound: who is the speaker? Where does he come from? What is his own mother tongue? Which Italian does he speak? On the contrary, also the most anonymous Italian speaker shows us immediately his linguistic and cultural identity. In other words: while every Italian utterance is a little piece of our language, an ethnic Italian utterance is a little piece of sound of which we have to re-build all the threads of the web that makes it possible.

So, no type of direct correlation between Italian data, neither standard nor any other, and ethnic Italian data seems to be really possible.

5. THE PROBLEM OF 'ABSTRACTION'

In consequence, it seems that a global reconsideration of analytical criteria is necessary in order to strengthen the scientific status of the analysis of our corpus.

In fact, while it is possible "to put in brackets" the constitutive conditions of L1 enunciations, or rather, "to reduce" them to the only prosodic one, even though the comprehension process never starts from a particular linguistic component like the prosodic one [1], the same reduction appears problematic, as well as without any interesting theoretical result, for ethnic Italian enunciations.

6. THE NEUTRALIZATION OF VOICE FEATURES

A very important case where this reduction is clearly problematic is represented by the voice. In fact, while voice features are neutralized in intralinguistic comparisons, i.e. in comparisons among different Italian enunciations, the same neutralization is deeply complex in interlinguistic comparisons, such as between L1 Italian utterances and the ethnic Italian ones.

Even from the preliminary viewpoint of the well-known physiological, laryngeal, super-laryngeal and muscular factors which regulate the vocal setup [5], there are cultural, social and emotional aspects that are normally put aside in L1

Italian data but are, on the contrary, fundamental for the analysis of L2 Italian enunciations.

Going into more details, we may note down only the following two points.

In ethnic Italian enunciations, the voice features, that we can not reduce to syntagmatically discrete elements, are an evident trace of linguistic contact phenomena which have a deep influence on the general configuration of utterances and, particularly, on their prosodic contours. Our utterances show that voice features in mother tongue are always very different from the voice features of the same speaker in Italian (we may easily perceive this if we look at the cases of Russian, Chinese and Eritrean utterances).

What is more interesting and less evident is that there is no neutralization of vocal characters "meaning" of our ethnic utterances. When we study any Italian utterance, the sense effects associable to voice characters are very near to the meaninglessness. This situation is very often not congruous with the utterances of an ethnic Italian voice: particularly, the cases of Chinese, Russian, French and Eritrean enunciations show that the use of voice characters has a great influence on them and their "intonational arrangements".

7. THE EDITING PHENOMENA

Another "hidden" but very important factor of ethnic enunciations analysis, although not much taken into account by the state-of-the-art, consists of the neutralization of *editing* operations made both by the speaker and by the linguist. We can argue that nothing better than the *editing* operations in ethnic enunciations shows the importance of the subject co-enunciator, both as a speaker and as a listener, in the construction of our sentences and meanings [2, 3].

The *editing* operation made by the speaker is a phenomenon given by the 'mimetic *auto-editing*' degree of the speaker himself during the L2 enunciation. This 'unconscious camouflage' (as is well shown in the case of Rumanian utterances), that the speaker plays in the whole linguistic activity, both in production and in perception, has to be taken into consideration in order to appreciate how much it is to be ascribed to intra- or inter-speakers variation dynamics.

In fact, while in standard comparisons among different Italian enunciations the *editing* operations are next to zero, that represents the first basic requirement of laboratory treatments on utterances, this condition does not exist for ethnic Italian enunciations because they are able to capture linguist's attention only after he has "re-written" and "restored" them on the basis of the general

model adopted. So that all new data obtained by these re-writing and restoring operations are assumed as constitutive coordinates of ethnic Italian enunciations themselves, no matter if positively or negatively evaluated (see, for instance, the linguist's intervention during the conversations with the first Russian speaker and the younger Eritrean one).

8. THE SO-CALLED 'STANDARD ITALIAN LANGUAGE'

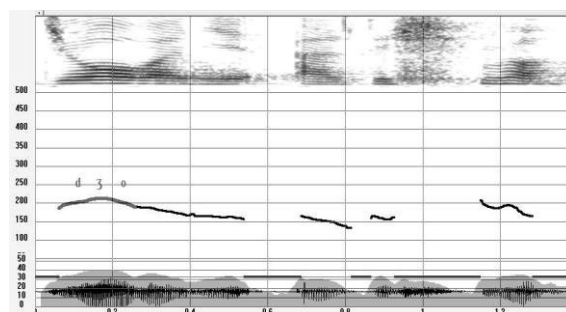
As much from a descriptive point of view as from a grammatical one, linguistic analysis traditionally needs a reference model, in this case a 'standard Italian' model, to which compare all particular data collected thanks to the observation of linguistic facts. Nevertheless, as comparative analyses of Italian varieties openly show, a standard Italian model does not exist [7].

Consequently, the study of ethnic Italian enunciations is even more complicated because there should be two reference models: the Italian one and the mother tongue one. The Italian model presupposition is subject to the same restrictions of the mother tongue model presupposition, so that the work is not only of arduous practical feasibility but it also appears to be voted to a modest result.

In the case of accent, which is even known as 'sentence-stress', we may note, in fact, that the distribution of accent in L2 Italian enunciations is not correlated to the distribution of 'world-stress', that is on the contrary one of the usual basic conditions for the accent distribution in L1 Italian enunciations, even though it is always not possible to build a standard Italian accent distribution just because the regional diversity is too wide. We may consider several examples of this essential difference comparing some ethnic Italian enunciations to the results of 'Italiano Regionale Abruzzese' analysis [10], for instance:

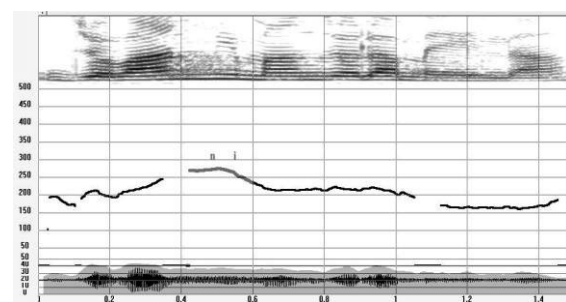
1. in the utterance [*Giovanni arriva*], made by the Chinese speaker, the accent is on the pretonic syllable [dʒo] rather than the first tonic syllable [va] as in the most of cases of IRA (Figure 1: where on the abscissa axe there is the timing (s); on the ordinate axe there are: (a) at the bottom the intensity (dB), in grey, and the sound wave form, in black; (b) in the middle, the f_0 pitch contour (Hz) in black, except for the syllable where the accent falls, which is in grey; (c) at the top, the enunciation sonogramme. The figure, like the others, is obtained through the software *WinPitch Pro*, developed by Philippe Martin [12]).

Figure 7: The utterance [*Giovanni arriva*].



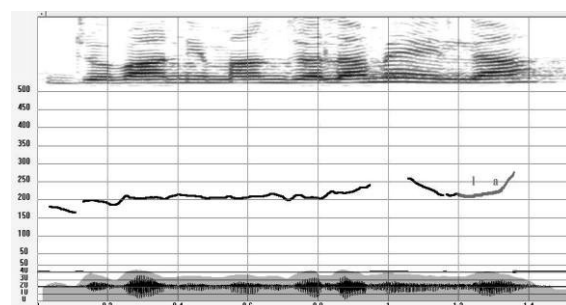
2. In the utterance [*Giovanni mangia la mela*], made by the second Albanian speaker, the accent falls on the post-tonic syllable [ni] rather than on the first tonic syllable [va] or the last tonic one [me] as in the most of cases of IRA (Fig. 2);

Figure 8: The utterance [*Giovanni mangia la mela*].



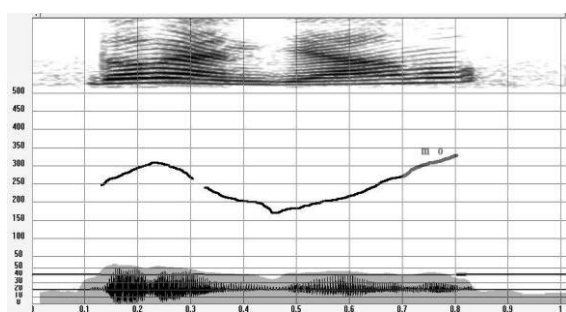
3. In the utterance [*Giovanni mangia la mela?*], made by the second Albanian speaker, the accent is on the post-tonic syllable [la] rather than the last tonic syllable [me] as in the most of cases of IRA (Fig. 3);

Figure 9: The utterance [*Giovanni mangia la mela?*].



4. In the utterance [*Dove andiamo?*], made by the Rumanian speaker, the accent falls on the post-tonic syllable [mo] rather than the last tonic syllable [dia] as in the most of cases of IRA (Fig. 4).

Figure 10: The utterance [*Dove andiamo?*].



Therefore, we may conclude that the accent distribution represents a special critical aspect of prosodic comparison between standard Italian utterances and the ethnic Italian ones, since it is a very strong clue of the “mother tongue imprinting” which leads to a very particular case of linguistic modelisation “crossover”.

9. MANY TO ONE OR MANY TO MANY?

In the light of what we have just seen, there is no epistemic convenience of a ‘many to one’ comparison, where the “one” is a standard model; so the most effective analytical procedure is represented by the ‘many to many’ comparison, even though it appears more complicated.

In fact, while it is effective in the case of L1 Italian data, the ‘many to many’ procedure is much more difficult in comparisons between L1 Italian enunciations and the L2 Italian ones also because the “critical mass” of ethnic Italian data collected up to now is not yet sufficiently representative for our purposes.

So, the complex road we have to take for L2 prosodic analysis seems to coincide with that one which leads to the “dawn” of linguistic system itself, as much in single human beings as in historical-social communities, i.e. with that special dynamic configuration which mathematicians usually call ‘pergola’.

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