Prosodic Transfer in Foreign Language Learning: A Phonetic Crosscheck of Intonation and F₀ Range between Italian and German Native and Non-Native Speakers

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Abstract : Background: Foreign Language Learning (FLL) is characterised by prosodic transfer phenomena regarding pitch accents placement, intonation patterns, and pitch range excursion from the learners' mother tongue to their Foreign Language (FL) which suggests that the gradual development of general linguistic competence in FL does not imply an equally correspondent improvement of the prosodic competence. Topic: The present study aims to monitor the development of prosodic competence of learners of Italian and German throughout the FLL process. The primary object of this study is to investigate the intonational features and the f_0 range excursion of Italian and German from a cross-linguistic perspective; analyses of native speakers' productions point out the differences between this pair of languages and provide models for the Target Language (TL). A following crosscheck compares the L2 productions in Italian and German by non-native speakers to the Target Language models, in order to verify the occurrence of prosodic interference phenomena, i.e., type, degree, and modalities. Methodology: The subjects of the research are university students belonging to two groups: Italian native speakers learning German as FL and German native speakers learning Italian as FL. Both of them have been divided into three subgroups according to the FL proficiency level (beginners, intermediate, advanced). The dataset consists of wh-questions placed in situational contexts uttered in both speakers' L1 and FL. Using a phonetic approach, analyses have considered three domains of intonational contours (Initial Profile, Nuclear Accent, and Terminal Contour) and two dimensions of the f_0 range parameter (span and level), which provide a basis for comparison between L1 and L2 productions. Findings: Results highlight a strong presence of prosodic transfer phenomena affecting L2 productions in the majority of both Italian and German learners, irrespective of their FL proficiency level; the transfer concerns all the three domains of the contour taken into account, although with different modalities and characteristics. Currently, L2 productions of German learners show a pitch span compression on the domain of the Terminal Contour compared to their L1 towards the TL; furthermore, German learners tend to use lower pitch range values in deviation from their L1 when improving their general linguistic competence in Italian FL proficiency level. Results regarding pitch range span and level in L2 productions by Italian learners are still in progress. At present, they show a similar tendency to expand the pitch span and to raise the pitch level, which also reveals a deviation from the L1 possibly in the direction of German TL. Conclusion: Intonational features seem to be 'resistant' parameters to which learners appear not to be particularly sensitive. By contrast, they show a certain sensitiveness to FL pitch range dimensions. Making clear which the most resistant and the most sensitive parameters are when learning FL prosody could lay groundwork for the development of prosodic trainings thanks to which learners could finally acquire a clear and natural pronunciation and intonation.