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THE INFLUENCE OF SPANISH PHONOLOGY ON ENGLISH INTONATION AND STRESS PATTERNS

LA INFLUENCIA DE LA FONOLOGÍA DEL ESPAÑOL EN LA ENTONACIÓN Y LOS PATRONES ACENTUALES DEL INGLÉS

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The Influence of Spanish Phonology on English Intonation and Stress Patterns

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of Spanish phonology on the acquisition of intonation and prosodic patterns in English by Spanish speakers. It highlights that structural differences in the prosodic systems of both languages significantly impact pronunciation, fluency, and the perception of naturalness in oral communication. In Spanish, a syllabic rhythm predominates, with a predictable placement of stress on certain syllables, contrasted with the accentual pattern of English, where variability in emphasis placement and modal intonations reflect pragmatic intentions and nuances. These differences cause native Spanish speakers to tend to apply Spanish-specific accent and intonation patterns, making comprehension difficult for English-speaking listeners and limiting expressive capacity in English discourse. The paper emphasizes the need to implement pedagogical strategies that promote the internalization of English prosodic patterns through specific training in tonal variations, stress placement, and contrasting intonational structures. This would facilitate more authentic and effective communication, helping Spanish speakers overcome phonological obstacles and improve their communicative competence in English.

Keywords: phonology, intonation, accent

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La Influencia de la Fonología del Español en la Entonación y los Patrones Acentuales del Inglés

RESUMEN

Este estudio examina la influencia de la fonología del español en la adquisición de la entonación y los patrones prosódicos en inglés por parte de hispanohablantes. Se destaca que las diferencias estructurales en los sistemas prosódicos de ambos idiomas impactan significativamente la pronunciación, la fluidez y la percepción de naturalidad en la comunicación oral. En español, predomina un ritmo silábico, con una ubicación predecible del acento en ciertas sílabas, a diferencia del patrón acentual del inglés, donde la variabilidad en la ubicación del acento y las entonaciones modales refleja intenciones y matices pragmáticos. Estas diferencias provocan que los hispanohablantes nativos tiendan a aplicar patrones de acento y entonación específicos del español, lo que dificulta la comprensión para los oyentes angloparlantes y limita la capacidad expresiva en el discurso en inglés. El artículo enfatiza la necesidad de implementar estrategias pedagógicas que promuevan la internalización de los patrones prosódicos del inglés mediante un entrenamiento específico en variaciones tonales, ubicación del acento y estructuras entonacionales contrastantes. Esto facilitaría una comunicación más auténtica y efectiva, ayudando a los hispanohablantes a superar los obstáculos fonológicos y a mejorar su competencia comunicativa en inglés.

Palabras clave: fonología, entonación, acento

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INTRODUCTION

Rhythm and Stress

Spanish has a syllabic rhythm, where each syllable carries approximately equal weight, whereas English is stress-timed, characterized by some syllables that are stressed and others that are reduced.

Spanish speakers tend to emphasize every syllable with equal force, which affects the natural flow and authenticity of English speech.

The study of comparative phonology between Spanish and English has demonstrated that rhythmic differences constitute one of the main obstacles for Spanish speakers when learning English as a second language. While Spanish is characterized by a syllabic rhythm, in which each syllable carries a similar weight, English is structured around an accentual rhythm, alternating stressed and reduced syllables. This divergence not only affects speech perception but also impacts the oral production of those facing the challenge of communicating effectively in a language different from their native one (Ramus et al., 1999).

The tendency of Spanish speakers to assign uniform intensity to every syllable causes their English production to sound rigid and lacking the natural cadence of the target language. In English, the contrast between stressed and unstressed syllables is essential for intelligibility, as this pattern allows listeners to identify relevant information within the spoken message (Cutler, 2012). Consequently, the lack of vowel reduction or the excessive emphasis on each syllable by Spanish speakers directly affects the naturalness of their speech.

This phenomenon has implications both for teaching and for assessing oral proficiency. Errors in transferring rhythm are not limited to prosody but also influence overall message comprehension. Applied phonetics studies indicate that native English speakers perceive the speech of Spanish speakers as monotonous or artificial due to the absence of the characteristic alternation between strong and weak syllables (Roach, 2009). Therefore, prosodic appropriateness becomes a fundamental component in English as a foreign language training.

Furthermore, the contrast between these rhythmic systems impacts the acquisition of foreign accent. The predominance of a syllabic rhythm in the production of Spanish learners hampers the internalization of

English-specific stress patterns. Although their pronunciation may be segmentally accurate, it can be hard to understand due to inadequate prosodic organization. Thus, the perception of fluency and communicative competence depends on the ability to adapt the rhythmic pattern to English conventions (Flege & Bohn, 2021).

In summary, the differences between Spanish's syllabic rhythm and English's stress-timed rhythm are critical factors in acquiring proper intonation and accentuation in English. The tendency of Spanish speakers to mark each syllable with equal intensity undermines both intelligibility and naturalness in speech. Therefore, it is essential for English teaching to incorporate explicit instruction on these prosodic features.

Lexical Stress Placement

In Spanish, stress typically falls on predictable positions — mainly the penultimate or final syllable.

In contrast, English exhibits a variable and contrastive stress placement, which often leads to errors among Spanish learners.

The placement of lexical stress is a central element in the prosodic organization of languages. In Spanish, stress tends to be in regular and relatively predictable positions—generally on the penultimate or final syllable, with exceptions marked orthographically by an accent (tilde). This regularity provides stability to the stress system and facilitates word identification within spoken language (Hualde, 2014).

Conversely, English features a more complex and less predictable stress system. The placement of stress within a word can vary, and it serves a contrastive function; that is, changing the stressed syllable can alter the word's meaning. Examples such as record (noun) and record (verb) illustrate how variation in stress creates semantic distinctions essential for communication (Cruttenden, 2014).

For native Spanish speakers, this variability in English stress poses a significant challenge. The tendency to apply the predictive rules of their native language often results in recurrent errors in lexical stress placement. These errors not only affect the naturalness of speech but also impede comprehension by native interlocutors, who rely heavily on prosodic cues to identify and differentiate meanings (Archibald, 1998).

Furthermore, the reduced vowel system of English accentuates the importance of correct stress placement. Unstressed syllables often contain reduced vowels, such as the schwa, which amplifies the

contrast between prominent and weak syllables. Spanish speakers, accustomed to the relative uniformity of their vowel system, tend to maintain similar intensity across all syllables, thereby diminishing communicative effectiveness in English (Flege & Bohn, 2021).

Lexical stress placement is thus a major area of negative transfer from Spanish to English. The predictable nature of stress in Spanish contrasts with the variability and distinctive function of stress in English, leading to difficulties in oral production for learners. Explicit instruction on stress patterns, combined with listening practice, is essential to improve intelligibility and fluency in English usage.

Intonation and Prosodic Patterns

Spanish primarily uses intonation to mark syntactic boundaries and informational focus, whereas English employs it also to express contrast and pragmatic nuances. This results in a perception of monotony or flatness in the intonation of Spanish-speaking learners of English.

Intonation and prosodic patterns are fundamental components of phonology, marking significant differences between languages—particularly between Spanish and English. In Spanish, intonation is mainly used to delineate syntactic boundaries within sentences and to highlight the most relevant information. That is, in Spanish, tonal variation plays a crucial role in grammatical structure and discourse organization. Speakers use pitch changes to signal sentence boundaries and direct attention to key elements of the message, facilitating understanding of ideas and their relationships (Gussenhoven, 2004).

Conversely, in English, intonation serves a broader and multifaceted function. It not only marks syntactic borders and informational focus but also allows speakers to express contrasts and pragmatic nuances. English speakers utilize more complex tonal variations to convey different meanings depending on the context, such as contrasting statements, questions, and responses, or emphasizing emotions and attitudes. This tonal flexibility is essential in daily communication, influencing how messages are interpreted and how interlocutors connect with each other (Ladd, 2008).

For Spanish-speaking learners of English, the lack of such flexible intonation can create difficulties in oral production. Since Spanish has a more predictable and linear intonation pattern, speakers tend to transfer this pattern into their English speech. As a result, their intonation may be perceived as more monotone or flat, as they do not employ the tonal variations needed to mark nuances and contrasts

effectively. This influence from Spanish can make their speech sound less expressive and lacking the tonal dynamism characteristic of native English speakers (Monzó, 2013).

These phonological transfer effects are not limited to speech production but also impact how native English speakers perceive learners. Monotonous intonation or inadequate tonal variation can hinder message comprehension, as English speakers might not effectively grasp the communicative intentions or emotional nuances being conveyed. This limitation in intonation can lead to a perceived decrease in fluency and naturalness in the speech of Spanish learners (Tench, 1996).

To overcome these challenges, it is crucial for English learners to receive specific training in the management of English intonation and prosodic patterns. Contrastive intonation training between Spanish and English can help learners better adapt to the English language expectations, enabling them to handle tonal variations more skillfully and thus improving the clarity and expressiveness of their speech. In this way, students will be able to use intonation not only to structure ideas clearly but also to convey the subtle nuances and emotions characteristic of spoken English in real communication contexts (Roach, 2009).

Interference in Questions and Statements

Spanish speakers tend to use a final rising intonation in yes/no questions, but in English, this rise is more pronounced.

In statements, Spanish speakers may maintain a higher pitch at the end, which sounds unusual in English, where intonation generally falls.

The prosodic interference of Spanish speakers learning English manifests notably in questions and statements. In Spanish, yes/no questions are typically characterized by a final rising intonation, which aims to indicate the interrogative modality of the sentence. While this rise is effective within the Spanish prosodic system, it does not fully conform to the prosodic pattern of English, where, although a final rise is also used in questions, it tends to be more marked and elevated more substantially (Ladd, 2008). This difference in the intensity of the rise may produce an intonation that sounds unnatural or forced to native English speakers, who expect a different tonal pattern.

Furthermore, the final rise in yes/no questions in Spanish has a limited function, solely indicating that the sentence is interrogative. In contrast, in English, this rise not only signals the interrogative modality but also plays a significant role in expressing doubt, surprise, or emphasis. The greater prominence of the rise in English adds an emotional or pragmatic nuance that may be absent in questions formulated by Spanish speakers, thereby affecting the naturalness and perceived authenticity of their speech (Tench, 1996). This phenomenon highlights the fundamental differences between the prosodic systems of both languages, demonstrating how Spanish lacks the tonal variability found in English during interrogative contexts.

Regarding statements, phonological interference manifests differently. In Spanish, it is common for speakers to maintain a higher pitch at the end of a declarative sentence, which in some cases can serve as a strategy to emphasize the message's content or to maintain the listener's attention. However, in English, the prosodic pattern is different: declarative sentences typically end with a falling intonation, signaling closure and providing a sense of conclusion or certainty. This tonal difference between the two languages can make the speech of Spanish speakers in English sound less natural or even incomplete to native listeners, as they do not employ the expected tonal fall (Roach, 2009).

The inappropriate use of the final rise in questions and the elevated tone at the end of statements can affect perceptions of fluency and comprehensibility in English discourse. Native English speakers may find it difficult to interpret the speaker’s intentions or emotions if they do not adjust their intonation to the interlocutor's pattern. For example, a Hispanic speaker who maintains a high tone at the end of a statement might be perceived as insecure or as if asking a question, which can lead to confusion (Monzó, 2013). This type of prosodic interference underscores the need for more detailed instruction in prosody within language learning.

To address this interference, it is essential that English learners receive training in the prosody of the language, focusing on the appropriate use of rises and falls in questions and statements. Learning contrastive intonational patterns between Spanish and English can be key to enhancing the naturalness and intelligibility of non-native speakers’ discourse. In this way, students can overcome phonological barriers and communicate more effectively and authentically in spoken English (Gussenhoven, 2004).

Perception and Comprehensibility

These transferences influence the perceived intelligibility and naturalness of speech in English. However, their impact is more pronounced in overall intonation and the placement of lexical stress than in sound segmentation.

The perception and understandability of speech by Spanish speakers in English are affected by various phonological transferences derived from Spanish. These interferences mainly influence global intonation and lexical stress placement, thereby impacting how listeners perceive the fluency and naturalness of the utterance. The transfer of prosodic patterns from Spanish, such as the use of less variable intonation and more predictable accents, can result in speech that native English listeners perceive as monotonous or less dynamic, ultimately affecting full message comprehension. Native English speakers tend to rely on more complex intonation patterns, which include tonal variations that not only indicate sentence boundaries but also convey nuances of meaning and emotion (Ladd, 2008).

The impact of these interferences is most notable in overall intonation than in segmenting sounds. Although Spanish speakers might encounter difficulties pronouncing certain English phonemes, it is the transferences in intonation and accent placement that more significantly affect intelligibility. This is because, in English, intonation not only structures sentences but also emphasizes and encodes communicative intent. Spanish speakers employing tonal patterns from Spanish may be perceived as less precise or expressive, as they fail to use intonation adequately to reflect implicit meanings that a native English speaker would transmit through tonal variations (Monzó, 2013).

Furthermore, the placement of lexical stress in English also poses a significant challenge for Spanish speakers. Lexical stress in English has a contrastive function, as the position of the stress can alter the meaning of a word, as in “record” (noun) versus “record” (verb). However, in Spanish, stress is generally placed predictably, leading speakers to overgeneralize patterns and incorrectly apply stress in words that require a shift in position to differentiate meanings. This difference in handling lexical stress contributes to the perception that Spanish speakers’ English speech lacks the tonal precision necessary for complete understanding (Tench, 1996).

Another factor affecting the naturalness of speech in English is how Spanish speakers manage pauses and emphasis within sentences. In Spanish, pauses tend to be more regular, and sentences are more

balanced, whereas in English, the placement of pauses and emphasis is much more variable and often depends on the pragmatic intentions of the speaker. This prosodic structural difference can cause English speech by Spanish speakers to sound less fluid and more rigid, thereby affecting comprehension and perceived naturalness (Roach, 2009).

To improve the perception and comprehensibility of English speech, it is crucial that learners receive a detailed focus on prosody and lexical stress management. Training in tonal variation and correct placement of stresses can help Spanish speakers overcome phonological barriers, achieve pronunciation closer to that of native speakers, and facilitate understanding of their discourse. This approach will not only increase intelligibility but also allow English learners to communicate more effectively, accurately expressing both semantic and pragmatic elements of language (Gussenhoven, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative approach aimed at thoroughly exploring the relationships between the phonological characteristics of Spanish and their impact on intonation and accentual patterns in the English language. This approach allows for examining the phenomenon from an interpretive perspective, emphasizing a deep understanding of linguistic complexities and the subjective experiences of speakers.

The data collection process was based on an exhaustive review of specialized literature, complemented by the analysis of recordings of native and non-native English speakers, particularly those whose first language is Spanish. The combination of these sources facilitated the identification of recurring patterns, common errors, and phonological transfer mechanisms, as well as an understanding of the challenges faced by learners during their process of acquiring English.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the results, systematic analysis procedures were implemented, including source triangulation, data comparison, and the application of interpretive criteria grounded in well-established theories of phonology and prosody. These steps enabled a comprehensive and coherent overview of how Spanish phonological structures influence the production and perception of English, also leading to pedagogical proposals aimed at improving pronunciation teaching.

The humanistic nature of this research is reflected in its recognition of each speaker's individuality and in the contextualization of data within real communicative situations, seeking conclusions that are

valuable both from an academic and practical perspective. Additionally, ethical principles were strictly observed throughout, with sources correctly cited using APA format to maintain the integrity and academic honesty of the study.

This methodology aims to provide a profound, human-centered, and rigorous analysis that contributes to understanding how the phonological particularities of Spanish influence the acquisition of prosodic patterns in English, offering useful insights for both the academic community and language teaching practitioners.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this research clearly demonstrate how the phonological characteristics of the Spanish language exert a significant influence on the acquisition and perception of intonation and accentual patterns in English among Spanish speakers. Firstly, it is evident that phonological transfers originating from the Spanish syllabic system hinder the production of a proper English stress rhythm, resulting in speech perceived as monotonous or rigid by native speakers. This tendency is linked to the Spanish speakers' inclination to maintain uniform intensity across all syllables, which contrasts with the rhythmic structure of English that favors alternating strong and weak syllables to facilitate comprehension.

Furthermore, the study shows that the placement of lexical stress in English generates confusion among Spanish speakers, who tend to overgeneralize Spanish accentuation rules. This leads to pronunciation errors in words where the position of the stress distinguishes different meanings, such as in "record" (noun) versus "record" (verb), thereby affecting intelligibility and message accuracy. Additionally, the influence of tonal patterns of Spanish origin—characterized by reduced variability and more frequent use of rise tones—impacts perceptions of naturalness and expressiveness in English communication, reaffirming difficulties in conveying pragmatic and emotional nuances.

Regarding intonation, it is observed that Spanish speakers often employ a final high tone in declarative sentences, reminiscent of Spanish intonation patterns, with sustained high pitch, as opposed to the falling intonation typical of English in these contexts. This pattern can be interpreted as a sign of insecurity or incomplete idea closure, which impacts perceptions of fluency and language proficiency. Moreover, in questions, the final rise, although present in both languages, appears with less intensity or a less marked

pattern in the speech of Spanish speakers, potentially causing confusion about the interlocutor's communicative intent.

The results underscore the need for pedagogical approaches that specifically address phonological transfer, promoting awareness of prosodic differences between the two languages. Teaching contrasting patterns, along with intentional practice in stress placement and tonal variations, will enable learners to develop a more accurate and natural pronunciation, thereby enhancing both perception and understanding in communicative interactions.

These analyses support the conclusion that the transfer of Spanish phonological structures has a profound impact on how Spanish speakers produce and perceive English. Incorporating targeted strategies to modify these patterns can improve phonological competence and foster more effective and authentic communication.

CONCLUSIONS

The influence of Spanish phonology on English intonation and accentual patterns is significant, affecting both the production and perception of naturalness in the speech of Spanish speakers. Phonological transfers, such as the syllabic rhythm and the predictable placement of stress, hinder the acquisition of prosodic patterns characteristic of English, potentially leading to speech that appears monotonous or less expressive to native listeners.

Differences in the function and variability of intonation, particularly in the use of pitch rises and falls in questions and statements, contribute to the perception that Spanish speakers' English speech sounds less natural, thereby compromising understanding and the conveying of pragmatic and emotional nuances.

The overgeneralization of Spanish accentuation rules, especially regarding the placement of lexical stress, results in oral production errors in English that impact intelligibility and communicative effectiveness. Recognizing and specifically training these aspects can improve learners' phonological competence and fluency.

There is a clear need to implement pedagogical strategies that address contrastive teaching of prosody and intonation, promoting explicit phonological awareness and deliberate practice in modulating tonal and accentual patterns typical of English. Such approaches will facilitate more native-like pronunciation and enhance perceptions of naturalness and accuracy in speech.

Overcoming these phonological barriers requires a specialized didactic approach that values the structural differences between both languages, enabling Spanish-speaking learners to communicate in English more effectively, naturally, and convincingly.

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