

Double accentuation system in modern French

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Modern French is known as a fixed stress language, the position of stress can usually be predicted by a simple rule, both at lexical level and at prosodic phrase level. However, a double accentuation system underlays in modern French. This study aims to clarify the two categories of accentuation in modern French, the functional structures of the secondary stress and the phonetic realization of the double accentuation system in French speech.

(1) In modern French, the primary stress is not assigned in lexical word as most romance languages are (Martin, 2004) but in the prosodic unit (*groupe clitique*) as defined by Garde (1968). The primary stress (*accent tonique*) in French is generally fixed and fully predictable (Delattre, 1938). It falls systematically in the final syllable of a prosodic phrase, this delimitative stress leads to a general acceptance that French is a frontier language (Vaissière, 1996). Thus, the primary stress in French is internal and structurally demarcative in value.

(2) There exists a secondary stress system in modern French, terminologically known as *accent initial* or *ictus mélodique*. The secondary stress is floating because it accentuates the initial syllable at most of time and can also fall on the penultimate or antepenultimate syllable depending on rhythmic and information structures (Avanzi, 2013). The Functional values of secondary stress are external and multiple: rhythmic, emphatic, insistent, informational, emotional, etc.

(3) The two ways of accentuation coexist and interact during speech. Grammatically speaking, the primary stress is neutral; the secondary accent is variable and will not replace the primary stress. However, acoustic analyses show that the pitch accent (contour F0) of secondary stress is categorically higher than primary stress in native speech, even in a neutral context. Such finding indicates that secondary stress is phonetically more salient to a certain extent.

To conclude, the initial syllable being more or less stressed depends on the informational structure of the message, and the final syllable depends on depth of the syntactic break (Vaissière, 1996). Mastering the double accentuation system of French is an obvious difficulty for L2 learners; extra attention must be paid to the variation and representation of the secondary stress.

Main References

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