

José Joaquín ATRIA¹, Takuya KIMURA², Hiroataka SENSUI³, Miyuki TAKASAWA⁴ and Atsuko TOYOMARU⁵

1. Tokyo University of Foreign Studies; 2. Seisen University; 3. Nanzan University; 4. Waseda University; 5. Takushoku University.

Influence of Sentence Intonation in the Perception of Spanish Accent Position by Japanese Learners

Despite the fact that the Spanish and Japanese languages share a number of phonological characteristics, the accent is defined in very different ways in each of them. Whereas the Spanish accent is very closely linked to a rise in tone, albeit not necessarily within the boundaries of the stressed syllable (Quilis, 1981; Hualde, 2005), the accent in Japanese is marked by a decrease in tone following the stressed syllable (Saito, 2006; Vance, 2008). This causes that, on some Spanish utterances, Japanese learners fail to recognize the correct position of the stress.

By means of a perceptual experiment, we studied the influence of sentence intonation on correct recognition of accent position in different Spanish utterances by both native speakers and Japanese learners. In order to do this, we selected three Spanish words and three nonce words that differed only on the position of the stress, and placed them in six different contexts, including the target word by itself.

The results showed that the performance of the Japanese learners was on par with that from the native speakers on certain contexts, but decreased significantly when the target word was at the end of an interrogative sentence. There was also a significant decrease in non-final affirmative and negative contexts. This supports the idea that sentence intonation has an important influence on Japanese learner's perception of Spanish stress, particularly so with rising intonations, which correlates well with the aforementioned differences between Spanish and Japanese accents. The connection between this and other phonetic characteristics of the utterances used is also examined.

References

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