
| BOOK REVIEW

Intonation in L2 Discourse: Research Insights: Book Review

Hongjie, Zhang¹ ✉ and Jingna, Li²

^{1,2}*Ocean University of China, No. 238 Songling Road, Laoshan District, Qingdao, Shandong Province, China*

Corresponding Author: Hongjie, Zhang, **E-mail:** sdqdzj945@163.com

| ABSTRACT

This book originates exactly from the interest in the discourse functions of intonation. It investigates the phonetic, phonological, and pragmatic functions of L2 English intonation in spoken discourse, grounded in Halliday's systemic functional linguistic theories and taking advantage of a contrastive inter-language corpus approach. Structurally comprised of ten chapters, the compelling volume is split into two parts. The first part of the volume consists of the theoretical framework and the empirical methodology on which the present research is founded. The second part of the volume includes the findings from contrastive inter-language corpora analysis of Spanish L2 learners and English L1 intonation, analyzing and depicting the intonation patterns used by English L2 and L1 speakers. Surely, this well-organized book is worth reading, especially for researchers and graduate students in applied linguistics and English language teaching.

| KEYWORDS

intonation; inter-language; corpora; discourse; function

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 20 March 2023

PUBLISHED: 26 March 2023

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2023.6.3.24

1. Introduction

Intonation in L2 Discourse: Research Insights: Book Review

Hongjie, Zhang and Jingna, Li

Ocean University of China, No. 238 Songling Road, Laoshan District, Qingdao, Shandong Province, China

Intonation in L2 Discourse: Research Insights

By: María Dolores Ramírez Verdugo

New York: Routledge, 2022, 255pp. ISBN: 9780367478636 (hbk), 9781032018409 (pbk), 9781003041351 (ebk)

Reviewed by Hongjie, Zhang and Jingna, Li

Ocean University of China, China

Intonation, the melody of speech, has become a powerful tool for exchanging messages in any language. Different researchers suggest that listeners perceive and regard intonation as a clue to processing and understanding the information being exchanged (Cutler, 1984). Despite its significance, intonation has traditionally been a linguistic area receiving relatively little attention. Previous studies on intonation included acoustic and physiological analysis of pitch such as Ramírez-Verdugo (2005), inter-language prosodic studies such as Monroy Casas and Gutierrez Díez (2001), and comparative intonational research such as Simonet (2010). Nevertheless, little research has applied acoustic analysis to English learners' spoken corpora to explore the intonation system of speakers who express themselves in English as a foreign language. It is necessary to carry out research

Copyright: © 2022 the Author(s). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Published by Al-Kindi Centre for Research and Development, London, United Kingdom.

on a language learner corpus together with a comparable L1 speaker corpus since we are interested in second or foreign language teaching and learning, comprehension, and production, from which we may discover the communicative difficulties and needs of L2 learners.

The present study originates exactly from the interest in the discourse functions of intonation employed by L1 and L2 English speakers when exchanging information or transmitting messages. In response to this, the present volume investigates the phonetic, phonological, and pragmatic functions of L2 English intonation in spoken discourse, grounded in Halliday's systemic functional linguistic (SFL) theories and taking advantage of a contrastive inter-language corpus approach. This contrastive inter-language corpus study of native English speakers and Spanish English learners offers us an approach to their specific intonation features. Compared with other research on the intonation of L1 speakers of English and Spanish learners of English, the current research aims to carry on a longitudinal study between L2 learners' intonation production and that of L1 speakers involved in the same sort of tasks, attempting to look upon the consequences of L2 intonation patterns from a different angle rather than taking the generally assumed idea that L2 intonation merely causes foreign accent.

Structurally comprised of ten chapters, the compelling volume is split into two parts. The first part of the volume (Chapters 1-6) consists of the theoretical framework and the empirical methodology on which the present research is founded. The second part of the volume (Chapters 7-10) includes the findings from contrastive inter-language corpora analysis of Spanish L2 learners and English L1 intonation, analyzing and depicting the intonation patterns used by English L2 and L1 speakers. Surely, this well-organized book is worth reading, especially for researchers and graduate students in applied linguistics and English language teaching.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the volume. It starts with the introduction of intonation's significance. Ramírez-Verdugo introduces her view of intonation, regarding it as a way of expressing different meanings and an essential organizing principle influencing the information and the message we transmit. Meanwhile, the author illustrates research developments of intonation and leads to her own research purpose, methodological foundation, and theoretical framework. Then Ramírez-Verdugo proposes research hypotheses, followed by the origin and motivation of the present research. This chapter ends with the author's statement of the contribution and applicability of this investigation, that is, some pedagogical implications according to her teaching experience. Simply, this chapter provides an excellent introduction to the entire book and serves as a guide to the research design, helping readers obtain a quick understanding of the whole volume.

Chapter 2 presents Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as the theoretical framework of this study. The author first teases out the sources of Halliday's theory from a historical perspective by introducing various linguists' theories, such as Firth's concept of system, Malinowski's anthropological view of language, Hjelmslev's glossematics, Lamb's stratificational grammar, and Pike's tagmemics. Later on, the author makes a comparison between systemic functional and transformational generative theories that describe and analyze language under two distinctive perspectives. The following section outlines the main principles on which systemic functional linguistics is based and demonstrates the validity of Halliday's phonological model, which represents the theoretical framework for the present research. The final section of Chapter 2 describes the grammar of speech.

Chapter 3 reflects the close relationship between language corpora research and language learning as well as linguistic theory. In this chapter, Ramírez-Verdugo briefly refers to corpus-based studies and their historical background, highlights the contribution of language learner corpus research to second language acquisition and interlanguage studies, and enumerates the main theoretical and empirical principles underlying corpus research together with some implications and applications of computer-assisted corpus linguistics according to Stubbs (1996). The rest of the chapter focuses on learner corpora, discussing some issues related to the creation, design, analysis, applications, and limitations of this kind of corpus. Learner corpus research contributes to the development of language acquisition theory by providing both statistical and qualitative information on errors and thereby answering some unresolved questions, such as the exact role of transfer.

Chapter 4 depicts the intonation systems of English as the constituent of discourse functions, setting the basis for the present study to analyze and interpret the corpus from the systemic functional perspective. Two main principles in the analysis of intonation have been discussed in this chapter, covering the notion of prosodic structure and the hierarchical character of intonation which is extended to the three English intonation systems proposed by Halliday, namely, tonality, tonicity, and tone. Then Ramírez-Verdugo elucidates that the division of the tone system into primary and secondary tones expresses the distribution of information units and thereby contributes to the organization of information. This chapter has also explored the discourse functions of tonality and tonicity systems, which further sheds light on the textual and interpersonal meta-functions of language.

Chapter 5, further divided into four sub-parts, is devoted to the concepts of interlanguage intonation, exploring the role of native language, universal principles, language transfer, and cross-linguistic identifications in the acquisition of L2 intonation. Part 1 gives a historical retrospect on the influences of some earlier foreign language acquisition theories employed in the studies of applied linguistics. In order to better understand the foreign language development of learners, Part 2 intends to provide the readers with various inter-language theories concerning universal linguistic aspects. The focus of this chapter gradually moves from a broad perspective to a specific intonational character. Part 3 discusses the dichotomy assumption which implies that intonation is paradoxically both universal and language-specific. The dichotomy is illustrated in Part 4 by examining the speech prosody of Spanish English learners and outlining some of the intonational parameters to contrast characteristics of English and Spanish intonation.

Chapter 6 exhibits the research design of the present research in detail. Following the introduction of two corpora adopted in this volume, the author identifies L1 and L2 English intonational features based on comparable data. According to Granger (1998), Ramírez-Verdugo then lists the main design criteria involved in the present research for compiling a language learners corpus such as subjects and materials. This chapter also reports on the instrumental employed in intonation labeling and annotation, the analysis of results, and the structure of the transcription system used in the present study. Furthermore, the author draws a set of hypotheses from the analysis of interpreting and reading aloud discourse contained in the corpus, indicating that different intonation patterns between L2 and L1 English users will not only make the L2 speakers sound foreign-accented but also affect the transmission of messages, mainly in the textual and interpersonal meta-functions.

The above concludes the first part of the volume; the following chapters belong to the second part. In order to give an insight into the intonation patterns used by English L1 and L2 speakers, the research findings obtained from the contrastive analysis are presented in the following three chapters, corresponding to the three main speech functions proposed by Halliday (1994): Chapter 7, giving information; Chapter 8, demanding information; and Chapter 9, giving and demanding goods and services. According to Halliday (1994), there are two fundamental types of speech roles: giving and demanding. That is, the speaker is either giving something to the listener or is demanding something from the listener. To be specific, two main distinctions have been made in accordance with the nature of the commodity. As Halliday (1994) notes, the commodity being exchanged can be either information or goods and services. The latter signifies that the commodity being exchanged is not verbal information but an action or an object. Put it another way, the speaker manages to give the listener something or let the listener do something for the speaker with the help of speech in which intonation plays a dominant role.

Chapter 7 is dedicated to analyzing speech functions associated with the speech role of giving information to the listener which has been demonstrated schematically: statements, answers, statements and question tags, contradictions, exclamations. Chapter 8 explores the speech functions concerning the speech role of demanding information from the listener, including *wh*-questions, alternative questions, polar questions, short questions, and echo questions. Chapter 9 discusses the speech roles of giving and demanding goods and services, which consist of commands, invitations, apologies, warnings, reassurances, and requests. Each speech function is examined under Halliday's perspective of the three intonation systems (tone, tonality, and tonicity) that function as signals of textual and interpersonal meta-functions, as described in Chapter 4. Most of the speech functions analyzed are expressed through different intonation systems, depending on whether they are L1 or L2. The results validate the set of experimental hypotheses clarified in Chapter 6, which are also verified in role-plays and spontaneous conversations, showing that the null hypothesis (H0) is rejected. As a consequence, Ramírez-Verdugo comes to three pieces of conclusion: there is a significant difference between L1 and L2 intonation systems; these differences influence the three intonation systems: tone, tonality, and tonicity; there exists an inter-language intonation system which causes the underuse, overuse, and avoidance of specific intonation patterns.

Chapter 10 further discusses, interprets, and classifies the results of the current research. Meanwhile, the author summarizes the volume, reiterating and synthesizing the contents of the preceding chapters. In addition, the final chapter also reflects on future directions of the research on L2 speech prosody critically and creatively. Further investigations on intonation, both theoretical and empirical, are necessary. Future studies shall focus on other discourse modes in a foreign language context to examine intonation from a phonetic, phonological, and pragmatic discourse perspective.

Taken as a whole, this remarkable volume represents the latest development of research on intonation. It investigates the intonational discrepancies between English L1 and L2 speakers by comparing various functions of their intonation manifested in speech examples selected from the UAM English Learner Spoken Corpus, combining an SFL framework with a corpus-based approach. Overall, this book provides the readers with a brief description of SFL theories and frameworks, focusing on Halliday's

model of phonology and exploring the prosodic complexities, which is useful to handle problems encountered in teaching and learning English as a second (foreign) language. The author has obtained an intonation model distinguishing primary and secondary English tones, which is helpful and valuable in a contrastive inter-language English intonation analysis of utterances collected in the corpus. This intonation model aims to develop a taxonomy and annotation system, from which the researcher can get quantitative data that contributes to revealing significant differences between L1 and L2 English intonation systems, as is summarized in the second part. In comparison with L1 English users, the results prove that the main differences of intonation patterns employed by L2 speakers not only lie in the negative transfer of L1, deviant performance, or fossilization but also refer to the overuse, underuse, avoidance, or overgeneralization of some intonation patterns. Furthermore, the results may give rise to a better understanding of the inter-language system, L1 transfer, fossilization, as well as universal and language-specific linguistic principles.

However, like any other research, the current one is not free of criticism and counterproposals. As a matter of fact, this study shall be optimized in the following aspects. The intonation patterns that assign information status and express various speech functions within the spoken discourse of the present study are supposed to be more delicate and subtle to transmit a message adequately in English so that the researcher may arrive at more conclusive results with these kinds of discourse modes. When referring to the comparable data in Chapter 4, it would be better if the author stated clearly and directly the definition of comparable corpora in case of puzzling the readers who are not familiar with learner corpus research.

Notwithstanding some shortcomings, this insightful and thought-provoking volume is worth reading thoroughly, especially in terms of its originality in topic and coherence in content. This corpus study makes sense in the analysis of Spanish English learners' intonation system and provides pedagogical suggestions for L2 English learners' better prosodic performance. Generally speaking, this study definitely marks a great step forward in revealing the importance of non-native intonation which has not received enough attention yet.

Statements and Declarations

- (a) Funding: This article received no external funding.
- (b) Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Cutler, E. A. (1984). Stress and accent in language production and understanding. In D. Gibbon & H. Richter (Eds.), *Intonation, accent and rhythm* (pp. 77-90). De Gruyter.
- [2] Granger, S. (2015). Contrastive interlanguage analysis: A reappraisal. *International Journal of Learner Corpus Research*, 1(1), 7-24.
- [3] Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar*. Arnold.
- [4] Monroy Casas, R., & Gutierrez Díez, F. (2001). Perspective on interlanguage phonetics and phonology [Special issue]. *International Journal of English Studies*, 1(1).
- [5] Ramírez-Verdugo, M. D. (2005). Nature and patterning of native and non-native intonation in the expression of certainty and uncertainty: Pragmatic effects. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 37(12), 2086-2115.
- [6] Simonet, M. (2010). A contrastive study of Catalan and Spanish declarative intonation: Focus on Majorcan dialects. *Probus*, 22(1).
- [7] Stubbs, M. (1996). *Text and corpus analysis*. Blackwell.