

A Comparative Analysis of Intonation Between Spanish and English Speakers in Tag Questions, Wh-Questions, Inverted Questions, and Repetition Questions

Uma análise comparativa de entonação entre falantes de espanhol e inglês em tag questions, Wh-questions, perguntas invertidas e perguntas de repetição

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this study was to determine the differences and similarities in intonation when producing tag questions, wh-questions, inverted questions, and repetition questions among native English speakers and ESL Spanish speakers. These differences were measured and analyzed with a computer program called Praat, and the pitch, the intensity and the intonation contour were the focus of the study. The results have shown significant differences, as well as similarities between these two languages in some questions. The implication of this study is that the obtained data can help teachers and students to identify the problems that ESL Spanish speakers can have when learning English as a L2, especially with regards to intonation.

KEYWORDS: Spanish intonation; English intonation; pronunciation; pitch; intensity.

RESUMO: O objetivo deste estudo foi determinar as diferenças e semelhanças na entonação ao produzirem-se *tag questions*, Wh-questions, perguntas invertidas e perguntas de repetição entre falantes nativos do inglês e falantes do espanhol ESL. Essas diferenças foram medidas e analisadas com um programa de computador chamado Praat. Os resultados mostraram diferenças significativas, assim como semelhanças entre essas duas línguas. A implicação deste estudo é que os dados obtidos podem ajudar professores e alunos a identificar os problemas que os falantes de espanhol ESL podem ter ao aprender inglês como L2, especialmente em relação à entonação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: entonação; espanhol; entonação inglês, pronúncia, pitch, intensidade.

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The purpose of the study is to compare the intonation in acts of speech and interrogative sentences between native English speakers and Spanish speakers speaking English as their second language, to predict possible problems in communication on account of their intonation.

Intonation plays an important role in learning a second language, but unfortunately comparatively little attention has been given to this issue in ESL instruction. Intonation is not only related to the rhythm of the language, but also it is deeply connected to how attitudes and emotions are expressed during the act of speech. It is a “powerful tool in the message of any linguistic exchange” (RAMIREZ VERDUGO, 2006).

I believe that intonation is essential in second language learning. To avoid an L2 speaker being misunderstood, it must be integrated into the curriculum of any second language instruction to help students understand the prosodic features of the new language.

L1 intonation is learned in the first stage of language acquisition and becomes automatic after this period. Because of this, second language speakers will generalize L1 intonation rules over the L2 language, opening possibilities for miscommunication or sometimes unintelligibility (RAMIREZ VERDUGO, 2006).

Another theory explains that non-native speakers can develop (in early stages) two linguistic systems that can influence the production of sounds and intonation, which does not necessarily mean an automatic negative transfer into the L2, but it is still a difference between L1 and L2 that can create a new form of intonation (FLEGE, 1987).

For Spanish speakers, the issue of intonation is essential to avoid a “flat sound” (CELCIE-MURCIA; BRINTON; GOODWIN, 1996) due to the fact that Spanish intonation has different pitch movements and language learners tend to transfer the L1 intonation contours. The most frequent error for Spanish speaker is to generalize the falling English contour without noticing the pragmatic use of it. Second language learners need to know the different prosodic elements in English, so they can understand them, and later on generate the appropriate utterance, depending on the meaning that the speech is intended for (RAMIREZ VERDUGO, 2006).

The aim of this study is to determine the differences in intonation while producing tag questions, wh-questions, inverted questions and repetition questions among native English speakers and ESL Hispanic speakers. These differences will be measured and analyzed with a computer program called Praat, which has been recently used to help students perceive and improve their L2 pronunciation.