

The multimodal marking of information structure in the L2: the case of Catalan learners of French

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Languages do not only differ in the linguistic devices used to signal information structure (lexical markers, syntax, prosody) but also in the way (prosodic) prominence is implemented to mark focus or information status (Kügler & Calhoun, 2020). At a parallel level of description, manual gestures have been found to occur more frequently with new and inferable referents than with given ones (Debreslioska & Gullberg, 2020), and specific head movements have been attributed a prominence-lending function as well (Esteve-Gibert et al., 2017). While the synchrony between prosody and gesture has been established for native speech, little is known about how second language learners mark information structure through prosody and gesture. Previous studies mostly described the expression of focus in L2 English, and showed that learners tend to adopt the prosodic patterns of their L1, including accent placement (Nava & Zubizarreta, 2010; Ramírez-Verdugo, 2006) and type of pitch accent (O'Brien & Gut, 2006). Regarding information status, previous research has shown that deaccenting given information may be a challenge for speakers of languages which do not feature an equivalent cue (Rasier & Hiligsmann, 2007). As for gestures, there is evidence that learners tend to over-explicitly mark referring expressions such as pronouns (Yoshioka, 2008). To our knowledge, an analysis of information structure expressed through both prosodic and gestural prominence by L2 learners has not been carried out so far.

In the present study, we aim at uncovering the mechanisms of information structure marking with prosodic and gestural cues (here: head movements) in spontaneous speech by Catalan learners of French. Twenty-five Catalan speakers with intermediate proficiency in French recorded short audiovisual sequences describing a) their Erasmus stay abroad and b) their best friend. In total, fifty recordings are currently being annotated in terms of a) information status of words at the referential and lexical levels and contrastive focus, following a simplified version of the RefLex Scheme (Riester & Baumann, 2017), b) pitch accents, applying the ToBI labeling system and, when possible, the F_ToBI system (Delais-Roussarie et al., 2015), c) perceived prominence following the DIMA guidelines (Kügler et al., 2022) and d) head movements' types, strokes and peaks (points of maximum extension), as specified in the M3D guidelines for gesture annotations (Rohrer et al., 2020).

Results show that Catalan learners of French marked new and inferable (i.e. unused and bridging) information more frequently than given information either with pitch accent alone or with a combination of pitch accents and head movements. Head nods, for example, were produced significantly more often with new referents. Accordingly, given information was marked - and perceived - as less prominent than ne(er) information (more initial accents, fewer rises and head movements, lower mean prominence score) but still received a large proportion of pitch accents, suggesting that over-explicitly marking given information may be a characteristic trait of L2 speech. Contrastive words were not perceived or marked as more prominent than other information-structurally relevant items, disconfirming the general expectation of a correspondance between contrastivity and increased prominence. All in all, our findings suggest that L2 speakers make active use of prosody and gesture to express information structure, but that these skills still need to be honed.

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