

MARKING FOCUS IN L2 FRENCH AND GERMAN

M. Gandhi, A. Currey and J. Trouvain

INTRODUCTION

This study examined the realisations of prosodic focus by native and non-native speakers of French and German, within the context of the IFCASL (Individualised Feedback for Computer-Assisted Spoken Language Learning) project (www.ifcasl.org). The project aims to gain an understanding of spoken language production by L2 learners of French and German. The corpus was created with data from native French and German speakers, who were recorded in their own language and as non-native speakers of the other language.

METHODS

The corpus material was designed with the intention of extracting specific phonetic and phonological phenomena. In addition to other read sentence material, seven question-answer pairs were designed to elicit prosodic focus. Three of these were for contrastive focus (i.e. there was an explicit alternative), two were for narrow focus and two were for broad focus. We compared the realisation of focus by the advanced L2 speakers to that of the native speakers.

Based on an observation of the elicited focus sentences, certain features were selected as most indicative of focus for further study. These were: pitch accent location, pitch accent type, presence of glottalisation, presence of pauses, intensity and presence of syllable lengthening. For each of the utterances for a subset of speakers, we counted the occurrences of these features on the constituents in focus.

ANALYSIS

Advanced L2 learners were generally successful in producing native-like focus. A closer analysis of the data drew attention to four features.

Accent location: The majority of L2 speakers placed the pitch accent on the same syllable as native speakers. When a bisyllabic word (e.g. 'Yvonne') was focused, French speakers tended to have an accent on the first syllable in addition to the main accent on the second syllable, in their native language and in German. A few French speakers shifted the main stress to the first syllable. German speakers only placed an accent on the second syllable.

Lengthening: French speakers had a tendency to lengthen the entire focused word, whereas German speakers lengthened only the stressed syllable in the focused word.

Pauses: More French and German speakers produced pauses surrounding the focused constituent in French than they did in German.

Glottalisation: Both German and French speakers used glottalisation to indicate contrastive focus when speaking French. Glottalisation appeared both before and after the focused constituent, and was not necessarily accompanied by pauses. This pattern was not detected for broad or narrow focus.

CONCLUSIONS

Our findings show a difference in the location of the focus-marking features based on native language. In particular, German native speakers increased the intensity of, realised pitch peaks on and lengthened only the stressed syllable of the focused constituent when speaking German and French. French speakers tended to place prominence on the entire focused constituent when speaking both languages. This explorative study also shows that focus marking can be substantially supported by pausing and glottalisation as phonetic phenomena; these phenomena are often not considered in focus and prominence studies.