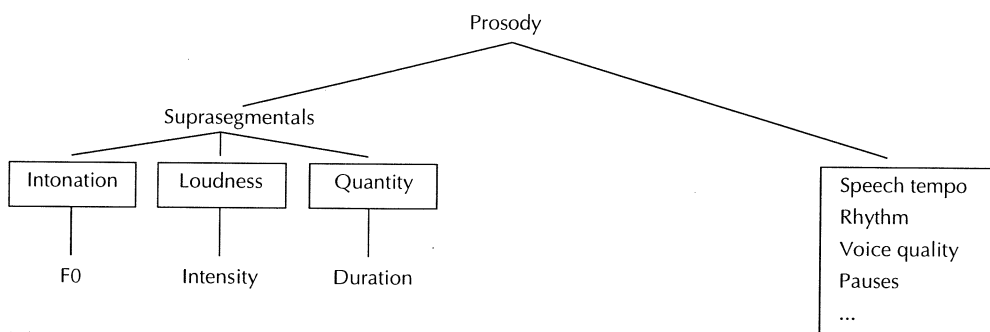


Learning German phonetics: the bilingual educational approach

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This paper presents a language teaching method specifically addressed to Italian learners of German, both beginners and advanced students. This method is centred on phonetics and prosody, treated within a contrastive German-Italian framework.

Most of the literature on phonetics focuses on segmentals, i.e. single sounds, vowels and consonants, and deals only superficially with suprasegmentals and prosody. But phonetics is a discipline concerning oral language as a whole, not only single sounds, but also rhythm, tempo, voice quality, pauses, etc., and suprasegmental features, i.e. intonation, loudness and quantity, which are responsible for stress-production.



(adapted from Möbius 1993, 9)

Work with segments alone, such as traditional exercises for the language lab, has not proved to be productive. The correction of single segments has no lasting effect and it has negative consequences on the intonation contour and the melody of the sentence. Language teaching should therefore aim at correct prosodic perception and production, as this has positive consequences on the segmental level.

Some experiments we performed with Italian students of German showed that correct pronunciation is largely dependent on the self-control of intonation – also in L1 – and on the correct position of accents in German words and sentences. With minimal effort, both beginners and advanced students were able to make themselves masters of German pronunciation. Once learners acquired a rudimental prosodic competence, many phonological interferences simply disappeared, demonstrating that accentuation had a controlling function over syllables and sounds.

Accenting and de-accenting processes are a constant feature of many languages (cfr. Cruttenden 1986) and in German – a language in which accents generally have a primary role – they are extremely important. In German, accents fall on single vowels and are not 'distributed' on the sounds nearby. So unstressed sounds undergo strong reductions (*Schwächung*

and *Tilgung*): vowels tend towards the *shwa*, and voiced consonants in syllable *coda* are 'strengthened', becoming unvoiced (*Auslautverhärtung* or final devoicing). For Italians *Schwächung* and *Tilgung* are very difficult tasks to accomplish, because in Italian unstressed vowels and consonants in syllable onset and *coda* are pronounced in a similar way, apart from minimal assimilation and coarticulation phenomena.

The starting point for our teaching method was the error analysis of linguistic competence tests carried out with Italian students of German (Missaglia 1997). I assumed that very advanced language learners – bilinguals living in Italy with a deep and long lasting (up to 13-15 years) 'scholastic' contact with German – had reached a level which is the target of foreign language learning at school. I simply wanted to collect a corpus of interferences specific of that particular group of bilinguals, the most resistant interferences, the fossilized forms so to speak, in order to define the competence level which was supposed to be the students' target after German courses at university.

However the tests had unexpected results: the mistakes, numerous and distributed on all linguistic levels, largely surpassed the interferences which were thought to be few and sporadic. The bilinguals' phonological interferences were the same as those of students learning German in Italian schools or universities. Most difficulties at the segmental level weren't primarily related to incorrect pronunciation of single phonemes, but rather to insufficient competence at the suprasegmental level.

Incorrect prosody was the consequence of distorted perception, i.e. filtered by the mother tongue's characteristics. Incorrect pronunciation was not due to defective speech, i.e. to a deficit in the speakers' phonatory apparatus, but simply to the fact that the learners were not used to perceiving the foreign sounds and intonation correctly. They were not equipped to discriminate elements of German phonology and prosody and tended to carry incompatible Italian intonational models over into German contexts.

One could think that the phonetic and prosodic errors made by Italians speaking German are generated 'on the hoof', while learning L2, but the fact that they are common to advanced students and beginners leads us to think that they are already present in the very first contact with L2, then become fossilized, thus hindering the production of correct German utterances. The phonetic stumbling block for Italians learning German seems to hinder even the first access to L2. Bearing this in mind, we began teaching German phonetics with a bilingual educational approach.

From the very beginning, learners can be considered bilingual. In «Languages in Contact» Weinreich defines bilingual individuals as the «locus of the [linguistic] contact» (Weinreich 1953, 1). Therefore we can consider each language learner the place of contact of L1 and L2, not simply a potential L2-speaker. Mistakes belong to each stage along the road which leads to bilingualism, as other speaker-specific characteristics.

In our contrastive phonetic aspects, 'mistakes' had a positive function. They were considered indicators of problematic aspects of the two linguistic systems and also of the characteristics of the learners' *interlanguage*.

Starting from the specific knowledge of our students' pronunciation defects, the teaching model was aimed at correcting phonetic and prosodic errors, i.e. not only mistakes concerning single sounds, but everything that contributes to transmitting the speaker's emotions together with the verbal component of language.

Correct perception was attained by correct identification of L2-suprasegmentals, achieved by monitoring L1-suprasegmentals. This effect percolated through to lower levels resulting in correct German prosody and segmentals.

In the initial phases of the training, which included exercises with numbers, dialogs or modern poetry, learners were confronted intuitively with prosody and phonetics, and they were supposed to be taught rules explicitly later on. By trial and error, learners with little phonetic competence could experiment with their mother tongue, where they were sure not to make pronunciation 'mistakes', monitoring it as if it were German.

The bilingual didactic units centred on prosodic competence didn't exclude the mother tongue, but made regular use of translations. The learners were not given translations in L1, they had to construct them starting from the situation given by the sentence/text. The most difficult task was the production of prosodically correct sentences in the mother tongue, whereas passing to L2 became extremely easy, given that the 'rules' deduced from Italian were simply applied with minimal adaptations. By this they acquired prosodic competence first in L1, and then profitted from the experience in Italian for the acquisition of prosodic competence in German.

By often switching from one language to the other, the learners improved their speed in code-switching and they lowered the neurological activation threshold of the foreign language (cfr. Paradis 1994).

Correct pronunciation was attained without the teacher's interventions, who never offered model-sentences to imitate; the learners never had models to repeat, but utterances – from their peers – to judge and improve.

Even if the learner was completely autonomous, he/she was never alone. Nobody was excluded from the acquisition and learning process as both speaker and listeners had to activate their *language awareness* in order to produce prosodically correct sentences and/or to control their communicative efficiency. 'Perfection' was reached when the group's members judged the sentences as being 'normal' and efficient in reflecting the speaker's intentions.

Not caring about the concrete difficulties connected with the production of single sounds foreign to the mother tongue, learners produced German utterances monitoring the generic (prosodic) elements of the communicative situation.

Prosody as a basis for a contrastive approach in language teaching is sensible, because from the beginning, learners effortlessly and unconsciously avoid mistakes which otherwise would hinder them from correctly acquiring L2. Furthermore this has positive consequences on their learning attitude because they soon realize that their sentences «sound German».

Language teachers must become acquainted with the necessity of giving prosody priority in language teaching as prosody is the 'interface' between grammar and the speaker's affective reality, his emotions, fears, anxiety, etc. Recognising the phonetic circumstances, both in the mother tongue and in the students' 'interlinguistic' experiments has proved to be one of the presuppositions for a contrastive/bilingual phonetic course for foreigners.

With the key word «contrastive» we refer to a traditional research area, to contrastive grammar and contrastive analysis and the derived error analysis. Our studies on German and Italian phonetics in contact (and in contrast) are founded on error analysis.

The bilingual approach for teaching German is based on the assumption that learners should not be considered simply students, isolating them from their reality, i.e. that of speaking two languages: starting from their first encounter with L2, they are bilingual to be studied within the framework of research on bilingualism (cfr. Titone 1996). Learners should therefore be treated as bilingual individuals, i.e. as persons who *live* with two languages.

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