

Study on the influence of a period abroad on L2 intonation

Influence of a period abroad on tonal alignment in English. A comparative study: the case of prenuclear alignment in read declaratives.

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English and German are known to differ in various linguistic aspects; on the one hand, studies have found marked contrasts on the segmental level (Flege and MacKay 2004), on the other hand, prosodic aspects, such as intonation and the timing of tonal targets with the segment (i.e. alignment), have been found to differ as well (Mennen 2004). Prenuclear rises are realized earlier in SSBE (Standard Southern British English) compared to SAG (Standard Austrian German) (Atterer and Ladd 2004; Mücke et al. 2008). These cross-linguistic differences in intonation are likely to pose challenges to Austrian learners of English (Grosser 1989), who differ considerably in the attainment of aspects of the L2 and in perceived accentedness. In order to reduce their foreign accent, numerous students take advantage of the opportunity to complete parts of their study program at a foreign university and studies have demonstrated the positive effect of immersion on various aspects of L2 pronunciation (Geeslin et al. 2010).

Therefore, the present study investigated prenuclear alignment in (i) EFL learners enrolled in the English Studies program at the University of Graz who have spent at least one semester in the UK and (ii) 7 university students of English who have never been to an anglophone country for more than a month continuously and have primarily received form-focused instruction in the L2 in an L1 environment. It was anticipated that (i) would approach the L2 norm and align the start and end of prenuclear rises earlier than (ii). However, the results falsified the original hypothesis as both groups of learners aligned the tonal targets even later than monolingual speakers of SAG. In a follow-up experiment, the influence of the L2 on the L1 was tested, as the influence of languages has been found to be reciprocal (Mennen 2004). Counter to the expectations, an influence of the L2 on the native language was not documented, as the learners did not align the start and end of the prenuclear rise earlier than the control SAG speakers. The results suggest that one or two semesters in the L2 environment are insufficient to master certain L2 aspects. In addition, L2 attrition might account for the results, given that the time window between immersion and the production experiments might have had a bearing on learners' L2 productions.