

Intonation intuition: production and perception in two varieties of English

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Intonation is considered vital for conveying information in languages. In order to do so, it has to be under the speaker's control (Roach 2009), whether through implicit or explicit knowledge. Although in-depth descriptions of English intonation exist – e.g., Cruttenden (1997), O'Connor and Arnold (1973), Tench (2015), and Wells (2006), the latter two also containing pedagogic material – intonation is not often taught in English pronunciation classes (Chun, 1998; Derwing & Munro, 2016). There is also little research looking at second language (L2) learner intuitions or implicit knowledge about intonation. This paper makes a start at addressing this issue by looking at features of intonation in two story-telling tasks, one perception and one production, among British English (BrE) and Hong Kong English (HKE) speakers of English, and regards the latter as L2 learners.

In a study using undergraduate students who were taking linguistics programmes, Mok et al. (2016) showed how 40 HKE participants performed differently from 25 BrE participants on an intonation selection task in which they listened to a story and had to select suitable intonation patterns from a choice of five in 28 slots throughout the story (HKE 42.9%; BrE 72.6%). Participants were able to listen to the stimuli as many times as they wished before making their selection. Among the five patterns presented, one (sometimes two) were considered to be “target”, based on descriptions in such manuals as those mentioned above. However, the BrE participants did not always select the target patterns, showing considerable variation from what was anticipated.

In this paper, we compare the above results with subsets of the same groups of participants' production data (10 HKE, 10 BrE), in which they were asked to read the same story out loud. We looked at closeness to the target patterns in each group (HKE 55.4%; BrE 70.7%). We observed a non-statistically significant, weak positive correlation between the perception and production data among the BrE speakers, but no correlation in the HKE data. We take this result to imply that this activity, although yielding interesting results, is not useful in identifying a relationship between speakers' explicit and implicit knowledge of intonation.

References

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