

Iberian Romance Intonation and Language Contact

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Research on intonation and language contact, though still scarce, has shown that bilinguals tend to transfer melodic patterns from their L1 to their L2, while mixed L1-L2 systems and L2-to-L1 transfer are less common. Contact effects at the community level are mostly of the “substratum interference” type (Andrews 1993; Atterer & Ladd 2004; Colantoni & Gurlekian 2004; Gut 2005; Jilka 2000; McGory 1997; Mennen 2004; O’Rourke 2005; Queen 1996; Willems 1982; see Winford 2005). In the present paper, we offer data on the transfer of melodic contours in a contact situation, Catalan and Spanish in the island of Majorca. For this study, we report on the behavior of Catalan-Spanish bilinguals who are dominant in either of the two languages. All subjects were non-simultaneous, early bilinguals and used their L1 more frequently than their L2 in adulthood. Men and women as well as younger and older participants were recruited from both language groups.

Previous phonetic research has indicated the existence of differences in the overall tonal configuration of yes/no questions in the two languages, HL*..L-L% in Catalan and L*..HH% in Spanish (Sosa 1999; Vanrell 2006). We aimed to quantify the use of both tonal configurations in the L1 and the L2 of all our participants, as well as to investigate the level of perceptual awareness of the difference (eg. van Leyden & van Heuven 2007). Speech data were collected with the help of an unscripted, interactive elicitation task. Five two-way comparisons are informative: (1) both groups of subjects speaking their L1, Spanish vs. Catalan; (2) both groups speaking Catalan; (3) both groups speaking Spanish; (4) L1 and L2 production of the Catalan-L1 subjects; and (5) L1 and L2 production of the Spanish-L1 participants. Overall, the results suggest that the Catalan contour is being extended to Spanish, since it is used by Catalan-L1 speakers when using Spanish (their L2) as well as (and most importantly) by Spanish-L1 speakers when using their L1, Spanish (as frequently as the Spanish contour). On the other hand, the Spanish contour is used by Catalan-L1 speakers only sporadically and exclusively in their L2. In summary, there seems to be evidence of the “borrowing” of contours.

We then aimed to investigate the level of perceptual awareness of the melodic differences. For this, Catalan-L1 and Spanish-L1 listeners rated the ‘acceptability’ and ‘naturalness’ (in their L1) of the tonal configuration of gradually-manipulated yes/no questions, which were rated on a Visual Analog Scale (Chen 2005). The results suggest that the listeners that were aware of the intonational differences between the two languages were mostly Catalan-L1 subjects, while Spanish-L1 listeners tended to find both contours equally ‘acceptable’ and ‘natural’. This agrees with the findings of the production study in suggesting that change is in progress in the Spanish dialect spoken in Majorca only.

These findings show the influence of Catalan on Spanish at the prosodic level (while Spanish seems to influence Catalan strongly at the segmental level). They also show contact effects of the “borrowing” type, although this may also be a case of contact-accelerated change instead of strict contact-induced innovation.