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ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH PITCH CONTOURS IN SERBIAN SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH

Abstract
This paper deals with the production of English intonation phrases (IPs) and the common deviations in pitch contours in a group of sixty-eight L2 speakers of English. Five English nuclear types with varying prenuclear patterns are explored (High-Fall (HF), Low-Fall (LF), Low-Rise (LR), Fall-Rise (FR) and Rise-Fall (RF)) and evaluated auditorily. Acoustic analysis identified the common errors in L2 English intonation contours and accounted for some of the underlying reasons. Serbian speakers of English devoid English intonation phrases of their characteristic extensive pitch modulations that define the L1 English intonation. This is manifested as the following: flattening of the high head or high prehead (LF, LR), levelling of the rising tail (LR, FR), and difficulty producing multiple pitch dives and pitch climbs in a single intonation phrase. Pitch modulations are easier to produce on a single syllable than on a string of syllables (FR).

Key words: English intonation phrase, pitch contour, pitch modulation, Serbian EFL learners, L2 prosodic errors

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1. Introduction

Even though prosody is one of the first components of language acquired by children during L1 acquisition, we still need to gain a deeper understanding as to how both L1 and L2 prosodic systems are developed, realized and manifested. L2 prosody researchers have been making strides in the right direction recently, as linguists keep pointing out the importance of variations in pitch, duration, and intensity that are used to express both linguistic and attitudinal meanings. If phonetics and pronunciation have been the Cinderella of linguistics, then intonation assumes the role of the Cinderella of phonetics. Chun (2002: 82–83) duly points out:

> If our goals in teaching pronunciation are that students attain "near-native" and "socially acceptable" pronunciation, however, then teaching suprasegmentals (stress, rhythm and intonation) will be an important complement to the teaching of segmentals (the consonants and vowels of old-style pronunciation teaching).

This paper deals with the acquisition of English intonation phrases from the perspective of Serbian EFL speakers. More specifically, it will look into the most common errors in intonation contours, both nuclear and prenuclear, in the case of advanced EFL speakers of English, all first-year students of English Department, Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade.

2. Previous research

Errors and deviations from English L1 prosody observed in the production of English intonation of L2 speakers of different language backgrounds appear similar in prosodic research studies. In order to enable cross-linguistic comparisons of intonation, Mennen (2015) has more recently proposed *L2 Intonation Learning Theory* (LILt), that is built on Ladd (1996). Mennen (2015: 173) recognizes four dimensions in her theoretical framework: 'systemic', 'realizational', 'semantic' and 'frequency'. The systemic (or phonological) dimension concerns "typological similarities or differences in the inventory of structural phonological elements (such as pitch accents, accentual phrases, prosodic words and boundary phenomena" (Mennen 2015: 174), and accounts for how such elements are utilized systemically

and how they are combined in any given language. The realizational or phonetic dimension outlines how phonological elements of intonation are realized phonetically, e.g. the shape or slope in a rising tone – whether it is shallow or steep, or alignment of tones with segments in utterances. Next, the semantic dimension deals with the meaning conveyed by using a pitch contour. Finally, Mennen (2015: 175) proposes a new dimension that is termed the 'frequency dimension' that looks at the "similarities and differences in the frequency of use of the language's inventory and distribution of intonation primitives." One such example is provided by Nayan and Setter (2016: 295), who claim that a fall and a fall-rise are the two basic and most frequently used tones in Southern British Standard (SBS).

The English intonation system is characterized by refined pitch contrasts. Various linguistic aspects of pitch change seem perceptually relevant for L1 speakers of English: direction of pitch change (a rise, a fall, a fall-rise, as the most common nuclear tones), the range of pitch change (especially within the head, i.e. the difference between high and low levels), but also the promptness of pitch change (abrupt or gradual change in the transition from one element of an IP to another). All these aspects co-occur in English IPs so as to relay both linguistic information and attitudinal meaning. Some prosodic studies of L2 intonation of English demonstrate that neglecting pitch contrasts may bring about monotony in L2 (Mitrofanova 2012: 290). I will now provide an overview of intonation studies of English as L2 and discuss the most relevant areas of prosodic research.

English intonation has often been studied from a cross-linguistic perspective, offering insight into the unknown territories of L2 prosody. It has been shown that various groups of L2 speakers of English speak this language employing a narrower pitch range compared to L1 speakers of English (Backman 1979; Jenner 1976; Komar 2005a, 2005b; Mennen et al. 2007; Busà and Urbani 2011). Mennen (2007: 64) claims that there is "strong anecdotal evidence that people perceive differences between for example English and German – with English sounding higher and having more pitch variation than German (which is believed to be spoken with a relatively low and flat pitch)."

Backman (1979) investigates the errors in intonation contours of Venezuelan Spanish male speakers with American control speakers in several sentence types such as yes/no questions, wh-questions, and declaratives. The study shows that Spanish EFL speakers have most difficulty with the

following aspects of English prosody: pitch range is too narrow, prominence placement occurs too far to the left, and unstressed syllables are realized too low (Backman 1979: 239).

Jenner (1976: 182) studies the interlanguage of Dutch speakers of English and concludes that "the overall maximum pitch range appears to be narrower in Dutch than in English." Perceptually, an interlanguage speaker sounds " 'dull' and 'subdued' " (Jenner 1976: 186) and their attitudinal meaning seems obscured.

More recent studies show that various groups of L2 speakers of English have a narrower pitch range and less pitch variation. To this aim, Komar (2005a, 2005b) finds that the falling tones are produced in a much narrower pitch range in Slovene speakers of English, compared to L1 speakers of English. Mennen et al. (2007) studies the pitch ranges of German speakers of English only to find evidence for a wider pitch span, but not pitch level in L1 speakers of English; Busà and Urbani (2011: 383) investigate the speech sample of Italian speakers of English in comparison to L1 speakers of American English and find that Italian speakers have "overall higher pitch levels and narrower ranges than those produced by the Americans. In addition, the Italians' pitch shows overall less variation than the Americans' ". Paunović (2015: 73) investigates the intonation features of English in Serbian L2 speakers and finds that her study participants use "a narrower, mid-level pitch range in speaking, as well as inappropriate, rising pitch contours."

Alignment, as a temporal relation within the string of segments in an IP (Mennen 2007: 57) is another relevant parameter. L1 temporal prosodic patterns or misalignment of peaks and valleys in the production of L2 English intonation present themselves as a frequent source of phonetic error in L2 prosody. Mennen (2007: 59–60) elaborates on examples given in Backman (1979) and ascribes some errors of Venezuelan Spanish speakers to temporal misalignment:

> visual inspection of some of the sample contours presented in her paper, suggests that the Spanish learners tend to have an earlier alignment of rise-falls in their L2 American English. In their utterances the F0 reaches its peak very early (*before* the accented syllable), and falls just before and during the beginning of the accented syllable. This may have caused the American judges to conclude that the stress was placed incorrectly (too early), since Americans would expect the falling pitch to occur much later.

Incorrect pitch movement may result in L2 intonation sounding unnatural. Examples of pitch contours given in Mennen (2015: 174) best describe this phenomenon: shape or slope of pitch accents may vary – "shallow or steep rising or falling pitch accents, pitch accents with a clear peak versus flat or plateau pitch accents."

The attitudinal meaning of intonation is another important aspect that may become blurred in L2 intonation due to the use of unusual pitch contours. O'Connor and Arnold (1973) offer sets of adjectives to describe the attitude of the speaker as part of their rich drill-oriented material. Hlebec (2010: 49) develops his own attitudinal system conveyed by intonation tunes used in English:

> […] the pitch of the nuclear tone tells of the speaker's emotions, higher tones express those emotions that associate with higher temperature, such as excitement, while lower tones convey emotions that associate with lower temperature, such as, for example, caution.

Wells (2006: 216, 218) discusses general meanings of tones (falls are often associated with definitiveness), but they also have additional meanings (a high fall involves a greater degree of emotional involvement). All in all, a lower and less dramatic pitch used in L2 intonation contours implies a negative attitude, which may not have been intended by the speaker.

Recurrent prosodic issues revolving around L2 speakers of English are scalar in nature like a narrower pitch range, but are also reflected in misalignment of pitch peaks or valleys. Serbian speakers generally sound flat, which Paunović (2015) confirms. However, I would like to investigate further why this is the case by looking at most frequently used pitch contours in English as L2. To this aim, a total of 680 IPs were recorded and analyzed with the means of acoustic and auditory analysis.

3. Methodology

An oral assignment was given to sixty-eight first-year students of English Department, Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, enrolled in 2019/2020, where they were asked to record 10 anatomically different IPs in the form of 5 short dialogues (each turn had one IP). All informants

were registered for the English Phonetics 2 course, having had a semester of English Phonetics 1 (segmental articulatory phonetics) in the previous semester. English Phonetics 2 involves 30 hours of teaching, distributed into roughly three months, half of which are devoted to the basics of English intonation according to the tenets of the British School. The textbook used for extensive in-class and home practice is Wells (2006). Students had 60 minutes to practice and record the 10 IPs in a stress-free home setting. Each IP was fully annotated for intonation and was recorded twice by every student. Only the second attempt was evaluated. Imitations were judged by one listener, a trained phonetician, on a 10-point scale (1 being the lowest, and 10 the highest score). The evaluation included both the assessment of prenuclear and nuclear patterns.

All students had been given explicit instruction about pitch contours used in English for all the constituting elements of an IP (prehead, head, nucleus, and tail), and their attitudinal meanings in SBS. Students were familiarized with most pitch contours and were able to grasp the nature of scaling (pitch changes) and timing of the pitch trajectory in British intonation phrases. Practical exercises in class and at home were based on both auditory and visual feedback[1], the latter being proven to effectively help L2 learners improve prosodic aspects of English as L2 (Bot 1983; Estebas-Vilaplana 2017). Interlinear representations provided in Wells (2006) were implemented in class alongside with auditory input, which students readily accepted as a supplementary form of explanation. Furthermore, Praat (Boersma and Weenink 2020) pitch tracking tool was made available to students who wished to improve their English intonation.

4. Discussion

The production of five nuclear tones was tested in the oral assignment task: High-Fall (HF), Low-Fall (LF), Low-Rise (LR), Fall-Rise (FR) and Rise-Fall (RF), combined with other elements of an English IP. Judging from classroom experience, complex pitch contours, FR and RF, pose some difficulty for a Serbian EFL student in practice sessions. This hypothesis will be tested, alongside with the common prosodic errors of simple

[1] For a detailed overview of teaching prosody with the help of audio-visual feedback, see Chun 2002.

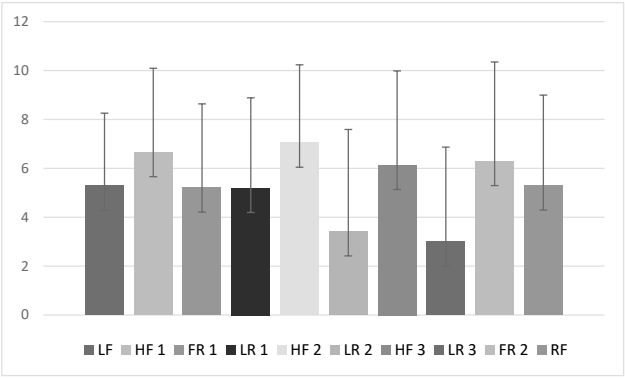
nuclear tones (HF, LF and LR). Descriptive statistics data will be provided first, followed by a detailed analysis of each individual intonation phrase recorded by students.

Table 1 displays mean values with standard deviations for the 10 IPs for 68 students who participated in the oral assignment task.

Nucleus	LF	HF 1	FR 1	LR 1	HF 2	LR 2	HF 3	LR 3	FR 2	RF
Mean grade	**5.29**	**6.65**	**5.20**	**5.19**	**7.04**	**3.41**	**6.13**	**3.00**	**6.29**	**5.29**
SD	2.96	3.43	3.42	3.68	3.18	4.17	3.85	3.86	4.05	3.70

Table 1. Mean scores for each IP with standard deviations

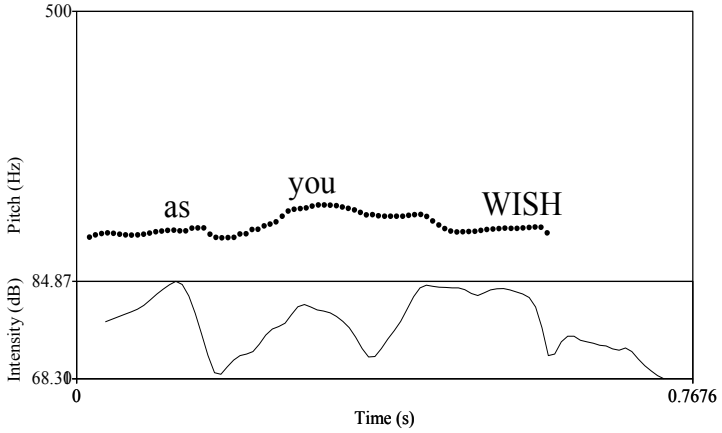
The same data is presented visually in Graph 1 below:



Graph 1. Mean scores for each IP with standard deviations

The success rate of the three IPs with high-falling nuclei came back the highest. Students were presented with varying prenuclear patterns before the high-falling nuclei: (1) low prehead + HF 1, (2) high head + HF 2, and (3) rising head + HF 3. Judging by the numerical results shown in Table 1, the more dramatic pitch movement in an IP, the lower the IP success rate in the production task. In other words, extensive modulations of pitch over a short period of time yielded lower scores. Thus, the success rate gradually decreased from HF 2 (7.04) to HF 1 (6.65) to HF 3 (6.13) with standard deviations typically very high for all three (3.18, 3.43 and 3.85, respectively).

On the other end of the spectrum, the production of the three low-rising nuclei IPs seemed most challenging for students. The IPs with LR nuclei had different prenuclear pitch contour scenarios: (1) high head + LR 1, (2) low head + LR 2, and (3) high prehead + LR 3. Descriptive statistics data implies similar assumptions as for the IPs with High-Falls. The most dramatic pitch jump described as scenario (3) above achieves most emphasis by combining the high prehead with a low-rising nucleus. The production score was the lowest in this case, 3.00 (SD 3.86). Following the hypothesis about the abrupt pitch changes that result in low production scores, scenario (2) should not raise difficulties due to a similar pitch level in the head and the nucleus. However, students produced this IP with a pitch contour that deviates from the given notation. A plausible explanation for this is that students analyzed this IP semantically and pronounced it using the prosodic habits of L1. Auditory analysis indicates that in these cases most students produced the IP with a mid-pitch *level* nuclear tone, rather than with a characteristic rise. Graph 2 shows an example of a relatively flat pitch contour throughout the IP, where the onset (beginning of head) is 'as', and the nucleus is capitalized (WISH)[2]. The pitch floor is set to 100 Hz with the pitch ceiling at 500 Hz for this female speaker and is used consistently in all graphs below:

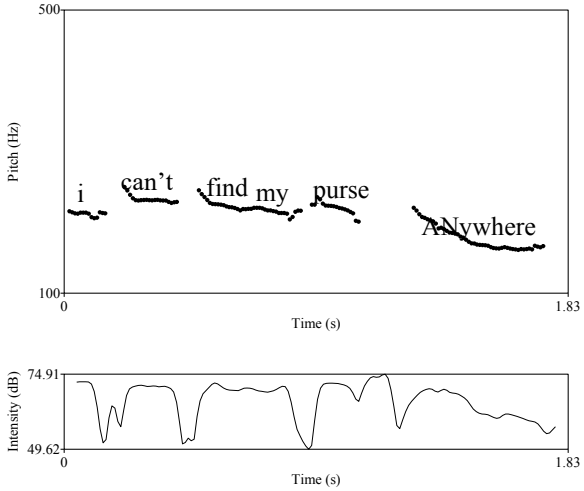


Graph 2. Pitch and intensity contours for LR 2, female speaker

[2] For greater emphasis, nuclear syllables are capitalized in all graphs.

The mean success rate for LR 2 is 3.41 with a very high standard deviation (4.17). Finally, students' production of LR 1 (high head + LR) rated highest with the mean score of 5.19 (SD 3.68). The success rate may be attributed to one of the prosodic universals that relates to the rising question intonation shared by both Serbian as L1 and English as L2. Santiago and Delais-Roussarie (2015: 245) argue that this universal rising intonation contour is "activated by speakers when they start learning and speaking a foreign language."

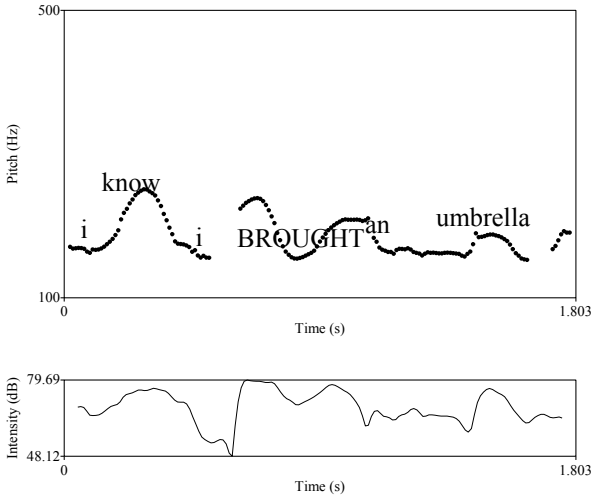
The IP with a low-falling nucleus yielded an unexpectedly low score, 5.29 (SD 2.96). A dramatic pitch fall from a high head to a low-falling nucleus in this IP created problems for students. A sample pitch contour in Graph 3 below shows the lag in the onset of a low tone necessary for the realization of the LF. Due to this delay, the low-falling nucleus is produced on a pitch higher than desirable, conveying a markedly different attitudinal meaning in English. This is shown in Graph 3. Furthermore, an absence of a significant pitch change from a low prehead (*I*) to the onset (*can't*) influences an inadequate L2 prosodic performance. The entire L2 pitch contour, lacking in abrupt pitch changes characteristic of SBS prosody, fails to convey the intended attitude.



Graph 3. Pitch and intensity contours for LF, female speaker

The fall-rise intonation contours are present in two IPs in the oral assessment task, and their mean scores are 5.20 (SD 3.42) and 6.29 (SD 4.05) for FR 1 and FR 2, respectively. Both IPs contain a low prehead, a characteristic falling head, and the FR nucleus. They differ in the realization of the FR nuclear tone by the number of syllables in the tail: (1) FR 1 + 4 syllables in the tail, and (2) FR 2 + zero syllable in the tail.

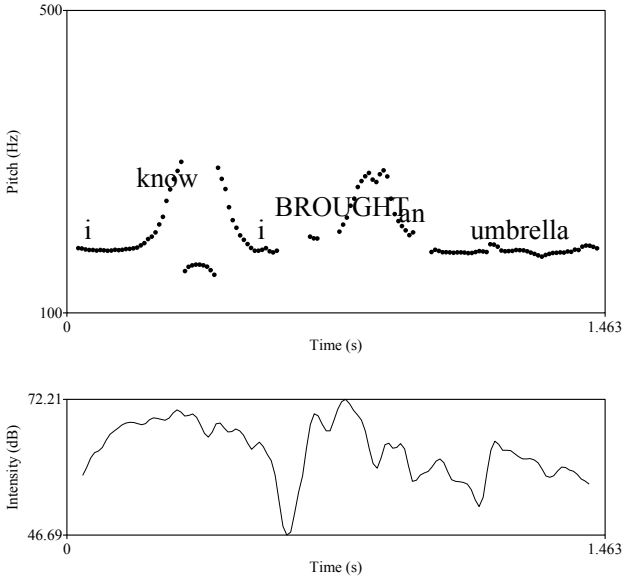
FR 1 productions show two error patterns in Serbian EFL speakers. Firstly, the fall-rise should not be realized exclusively on the nuclear syllable if there is a tail following. The pitch contour expected in such a case is described by Wells (2006: 23) as follows: "the rising part takes place towards the end of the tail and extends up to the last syllable of the IP." The tail in FR 1 contains four syllables (*an um.brel.la*), and the rising part begins on the second syllable of *umbrella* (as was marked in the original task). However, the L2 FR contour is limited to the nuclear syllable, an example of which is displayed in Graph 4.



Graph 4. Pitch and intensity contours for FR 1, female speaker

Secondly, in some realizations of FR 1, the characteristic utterance-final rise in pitch is missing. This is clearly seen in the pitch contour given in Graph 5, which shows a relatively flat, low-level tail, in place of an intended rising tail. Verdugo (2006) points to a similar overuse of a falling contour (instead of rising and fall-rising tones) in Spanish speakers of English, especially before intonation training. Serbian speakers similarly

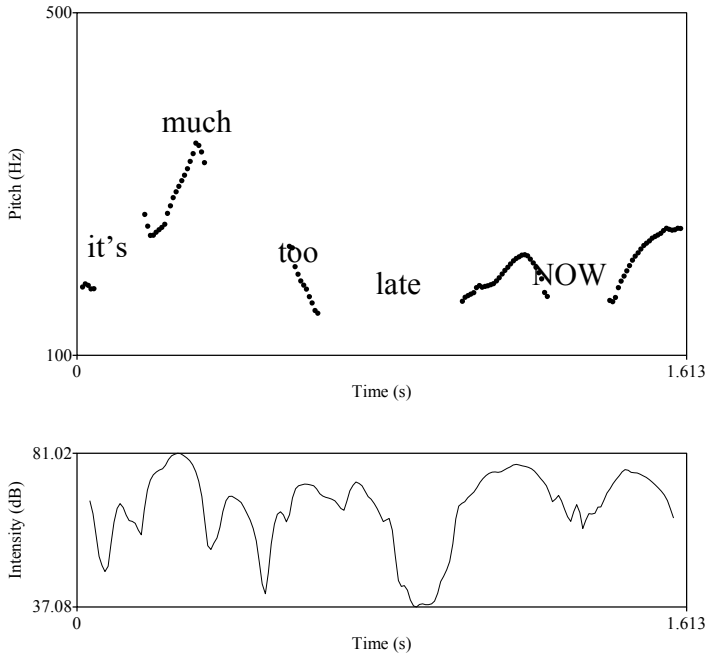
are not accustomed to a fall-rise and seem to readily replace it with a final fall.



Graph 5. Pitch and intensity contours for FR 1, female speaker

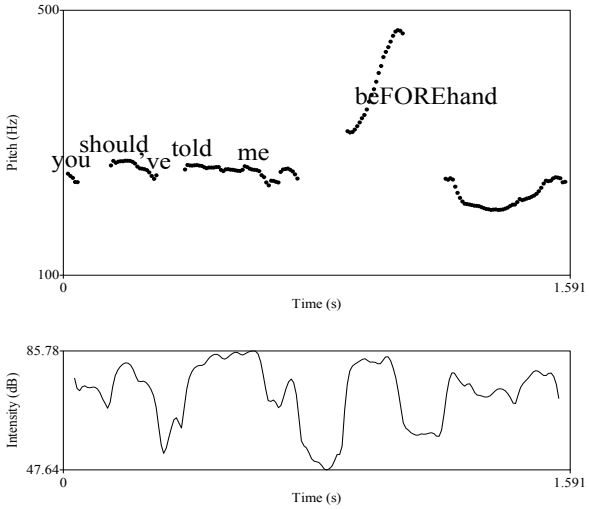
FR 2 exhibited an overall better success rate due to the fact that most students were able to perform the falling-rising tone on the final syllable only (see Graph 6). Most errors made in FR 2 intonation phrase relate to the delayed rise which was ousted due to the lack of time. Such IPs were generally perceived as falls, a tone comparable to a flat tail represented in Graph 5.

A more successful production of FR 2 may be attributed to the fact that most students have acquired the fall-rising contour, but extending it to the syllables in the tail remains a challenge. Graph 4 and Graph 6 are speech samples of the same female speaker.



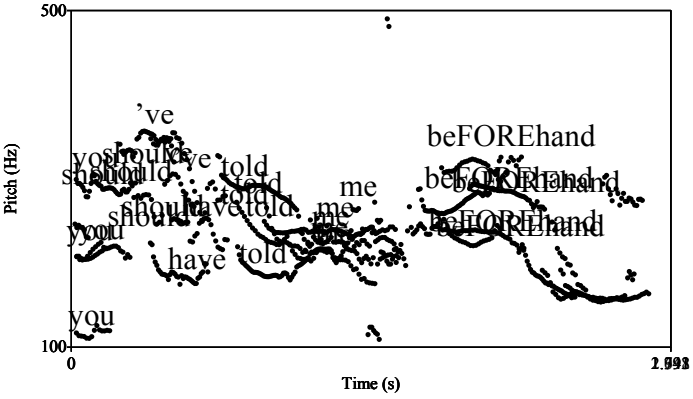
Graph 6. Pitch and intensity contours for FR 2, female speaker

The last nuclear tone to be analyzed is RF. L2 prosodic contours of the IPs with rise-fall nuclei mostly manifest a lack of expressiveness due to the absence of substantial pitch movement from the low prehead to the high head in preparation for a rise-fall. This observation is in line with the main hypothesis of this paper that Serbian L2 speakers of English find it difficult to carry out dramatic changes throughout an English IP. Graph 7 illustrates this claim where the pitch level remains constant in the prehead (*you should have*) and head (*told me be-*). However, the pitch contour of the RF itself was rightly produced.



Graph 7. Pitch and intensity contours for RF, female speaker

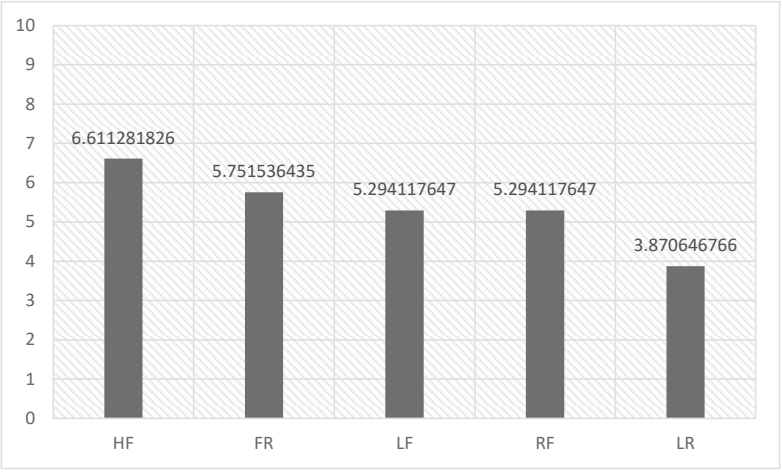
Auditory analysis also shows that many students resort to another mechanism to reserve more time to prepare for a rise-falling nucleus. A slower tempo seemed to help attain the complex RF pitch contour. On the whole, students were generally able to manipulate the RF nuclear pitch movement so that it resembles the one produced by L1 speakers of English. Sample pitch contours for 6 students are mapped in Graph 8 to illustrate some change in the pitch direction on the nucleus and the tail.



Graph 8. Pitch and intensity contours for RF, 6 random female speakers

5. Conclusion

After extensive training and assessment, Serbian EFL learners seem to have acquired some intonation phrases (with their corresponding constituents) better than other intonation phrases. Graph 9 displays a cumulative success rate for the IPs investigated in this paper, from the most accomplished ones to those with somewhat lower scores. High-Fall is the nuclear tone that students had most success with, followed by Fall-Rise, Low-Fall, Rise-Fall and Low-Rise. The numerical data presented in Graph 9 provides a general idea about which nuclear tones call for more attention.



Graph 9. Average scores for each nuclear tone

However, auditory analysis called for acoustic analysis that further resulted in identifying recurrent patterns in the English intonation of Serbian EFL learners. Firstly, substantial and dramatic changes in the pitch contour were the biggest stumbling block to attaining L1 prosody of English with its intended attitudinal meanings. Simple nuclei (i.e. falling and rising) will be elaborated on first. High falling nuclei whose prenuclear and nuclear patterns agree in pitch (e.g. high head + HF) are the least demanding, e.g. HF 2. Low-level tails that are found after falling nuclei in English generally do not pose difficulty to Serbian speakers of English.

A relative lack of success in pronouncing low-rising nuclei may also be explained away by the extensive modulations in pitch that are counter-intuitive to Serbian speakers of English. Furthermore, when IP constituents

were shorter and students had less time to modulate the pitch, the success rate was lower. Therefore, a monosyllabic high prehead + LR 3 yielded a lower score than a 3-syllable high head + LR 1. The characteristic rising head after low-rising nuclei often underwent pitch levelling.

The IP with a LF, analyzed in this study, is also characterized by a substantial change in the pitch level (high head + LF), hence a relatively low success rate.

Finally, this study shows that complex nuclear tones, FR and RF, may be learned, improved and polished with extensive practice. However, the prosodic habit of extending the pitch movement to the syllables other than the nucleus remains a difficult task for advanced Serbian learners of English. For instance, IPs with word-final FR had a better outcome than those that had a tail that was affected by the fall-rising contour in the shape of a rising tail.

One of the main findings of this study is that Serbian EFL speakers resist dramatic pitch peaks and valleys crucial to acquiring the English prosody. Due to the lack of such pitch modulations, Serbian speakers tend to sound somewhat dull and nonexpressive. Serbian speakers are not alone in this phonetic habit. Mitrofanova (2012: 280) rightfully points out that Russian speakers also struggle with very refined pitch contrasts that L1 speakers of English use, and rely more on intensity.

The results of the current study may point an English teacher in the right direction as to where to start and how to proceed with the teaching of the intricacies of English intonation.

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УСВАЈАЊЕ ИНТОНАЦИЈСКИХ КОНТУРА ЕНГЛЕСКОГ ЈЕЗИКА КОД ГОВОРНИКА СРПСКОГ ЈЕЗИКА

Сажетак

Предмет проучавања овог рада је продукција енглеске интонацијске фразе и идентификација најчешћих проблема у реализацији интонацијских контура енглеског код шездесет-осам напредних говорника енглеског језика чији је матерњи језик српски. Аудитивном евалуацијом обухваћено је пет типова нуклеуса (енг. High-Fall, Low-Fall, Low-Rise, Fall-Rise, Rise-Fall) у комбинацији са различитим преднуклеарним обрасцима. Акустичком анализом висине тона идентификовани су најчешћи пропусти у интонацијским контурама енглеске интонацијске фразе и понуђена објашњења таквих прозодијских појава у енглеском као страном језику. Драматичне промене у висини тона, карактеристичне за енглеску интонацијску фразу, често су одсутне код српских говорника. Основне манифестације Л2

прозодије говорника српског могу се описати на следећи начин: недовољна висина тона код високе главе или високог предглавља (LF, LR), заравњење растућег остатка (LR, FR), као и потешкоће при релизацији вишеструких и наглих промена висине тона у интонацијској фрази. Српским говорницима лакше је да изврше модулацију висине тона на једном слогу него на низу слогова (FR).

Кључне речи: енглеска интонацијска фраза, интонацијска контура, модулација висине тона, српски говорници енглеског језика, прозодијске грешке у Л2