

Compound loanword accentuation by English-speaking learners of Japanese: How do learners form their interlanguage prosody?

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Whilst it is widely said that first language (L1) transfer plays a significant role in shaping learners' interlanguage phonology, it is also a fact that a learner's interlanguage is influenced neither by native language (NL) nor by target language (TL). Interlanguage can be formed through an individual linguistic process, and in its development there should be a fixed path to follow. The present study focuses on the formation process of interlanguage prosody.

English loanwords in Japanese are considered suitable items for the exploration of the influence of NL, TL or other possible factors. These words seem to be tricky for English learners of Japanese to treat with accuracy, because their sound patterns in Japanese are different from the original ones in English, which are adapted to Japanese syllable (mora) structure. Furthermore, the accent locus of the loanwords does not necessarily correspond to that of original English words. Although apparently L1 transfer is likely to occur in the learners' manipulation of pitch accent in such loanwords, it is unclear how learners' interlanguage actually deals with these words in terms of Japanese phonology.

This study investigates how English learners of Japanese manipulate pitch in order to realise Japanese accent of compound loanwords in perception and production. It reveals that the learners who have more exposure to Japanese can perceive pitch accent more accurately than the learners who have less exposure to Japanese. In spite of a certain amount of engagement with Japanese, however, the former fails to handle pitch skillfully in the realization of Japanese accent in the same way that the latter does. These outcomes indicate that as learners have more experience with a second language (L2), they are able to control L1 transfer. In other words, L2 learners can learn to perceive the TL without the influence of their NL over time, even though they tend to perceive the TL in terms of their L1 phonology at an early stage of acquisition. On the other hand, results from a production study show that the learners tend to produce compound loanwords in Japanese without an accent, regardless of the amount of exposure to native accented input. Given that English has word accent, L1 transfer does not seem to hinder or facilitate the production of loanwords in Japanese, because accent is observed nowhere in their production. Instead, no accent in the TL is viewed as a developmental process which influences the acquisition of the L2 accentuation.

Furthermore, as some previous studies report asymmetries in L2 learners' perception and production competences, this study indicates that perception and production are not correlated in compound loanword accentuation. From the view point of interlanguage, it is suggested that perception and production are acquired through the different processes.

To conclude, L2 prosody is manipulated in an individual way, and yet similar tendencies can be observed in the developmental stage of interlanguage prosody among learners with the same L1 background.