

Effect of Semantic and Prosodic Cues in the Processing of Syntactic Disambiguation: Comparison of Native and L2 Listeners of Japanese

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A wide variety of semantic and pragmatic implications are communicated by intonation, or the melody of utterances created by pitch modulation in a systematic manner. (See Venditti, 2006, for an overview of the analytical framework.) To become an effective interlocutor in any language, therefore, one needs to hear variations of intonation accurately and associate it with appropriate meanings. Cross-language effects on the perception of similarities and differences of intonation contours, however, have received no attention in the context of second language acquisition. The research reported in this presentation is being conducted to start filling this gap by investigating the interaction of prosodic cues, on the one hand, and the semantic cues that are present in the context.

Many researchers have pointed out that intonation can provide cues to help disambiguate syntactically ambiguous sentences in Japanese. From the perspective of a listener, a pause and a local pitch range expansion serve as most salient cues to indicate the beginning of a new syntactic constituent. Misono et al. (1997) investigated the effects of such prosodic cues when they were inconsistent with the semantic bias arising from the lexical properties of utterances. Our current study extends this line of investigation and asks the following two questions: 1) what is the nature of interaction between semantic and prosodic biases, and 2) are L2 listeners of Japanese able to utilize the prosodic cue(s) as effectively as native speakers do? Empirical data will be presented and discussed, and its application to teaching Japanese as a foreign language will be sought.

References

- Misono, Y., Mazuka, R., Kondo, T., & Kiritani, S. (1997). Effects and Limitations of Prosodic and Semantic Biases on Syntactic Disambiguation. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 26(2), 229-245. Retrieved February 1, 2008, from Research Library database. (Document ID: 945095071).
- Venditti, J. J. (2006). Prosody in sentence processing. In R. Mazuka, M. Nakayama & Y. Shirai (Eds.), *The Handbook of East Asian Psycholinguistics* (Vol. II, pp. 208-217). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

List of Technical Terms

Prosody: The terms *prosody* and *intonation* are commonly used interchangeably in the literature on suprasegmental sound structure. According to Venditti et al. (2007), the term *prosody* is often used to refer to “the underlying prominences and constituent structure of speech,” while *intonation* often refers to “the realization of this structure by acoustic means, primarily by pitch variation” (p. 217).