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# The effects of prosodic prominence on the acquisition of L2 phonological features

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## Abstract

Mainstream L2 phonology models do not include predictions concerning how the prosodic structure interacts with the acquisition of segments. However, many studies have shown that the realization of pitch accents or melodic contours associated to prosodic boundaries results in the hyper-articulation of segments in correspondence of such prosodic boundaries. Our goal is to provide empirical evidence for the positive effects of prosodic prominence on the acquisition of challenging L2 French sounds

The prosodic-phonetic interface has been largely underestimated in second language acquisition. Few studies have investigated whether prosodic prominence may serve as an optimal context for learners to extract information on the acoustic properties of new sounds, which may then be reflected in more accurate productions. In this paper, we report the acoustic patterns of L2 French vowels produced in two different prosodic conditions: (1) in word internal position (unaccented), (2) in initial and final boundaries of Accentual Phrases and Intonation Phrases. We analyzed oral productions by 40 participants: 10 French native speakers and 30 L2 French learners with L1 Spanish, L1 English and L1 Italian (10 each). We extracted acoustic parameters for ~15k vowels and calculated the degree of acoustic overlap via Pillai scores for the following triplets: /i~/y~/u/, /e~/ø~/o/. Our results show that prosodic prominence results in a smaller acoustic overlap of some L2 French vowel contrasts.

**Index Terms:** L2 prosodic strengthening, L2 French vowels, Pillai Scores

## 1. Introduction

The acquisition of L2 suprasegmentals and L2 segmentals have been largely studied as independent dimensions. Mainstream L2 phonology models such as *Speech Learning Model* [1], *Perceptual Assimilation Model* [2] or the *L2 Intonation Learning Theory* [3] do not make any predictions concerning prosodic effects on the acquisition of segmentals or vice versa. However, research in L1 phonology has shown that the articulation of sounds is finetuned by the prosodic structure. Literature examining the phonetics-prosody interface in English [4], Korean [5, 6] or French [7, 8] has demonstrated that the realization of prosodic boundaries modulates the phonetic realization of adjacent segments. These findings show that individual segments tend to be hyper-articulated (or strengthened) at domain-initial/final positions of Intonation/Phonological Phrases or at the edges of prosodic words. More particularly, vocalic segments produced at the

edges of prosodic constituents tend to be lengthened and to occupy more peripheral positions in the vowel space.

Some studies have also looked into the effects of the prosodic hierarchy on the acoustic/articulatory characteristics of segments. In French [7], English [4] or German [8], vowels tend to be considerably reinforced reflecting the level of the prosodic hierarchy in which they occur: the higher the level of the prosodic constituents, the stronger the hyper-articulation of vowels. This raises the question whether L2 learners are able to reproduce such vowel hyper-articulation as a function of the prosodic structure of the target language. Although the phonetics-prosody interface has been widely studied in L1 phonology, this domain has not been sufficiently investigated in L2 speech leaving many crucial questions: How do prosody and segments interplay in an L2? What is the connection between the phonetics-prosody interface and learners' L1? To what extent may prosody serve as frame promoting the acquisition of new phonological features?

These questions have been grazed by a few studies adopting different approaches. In the domain of L2 teaching practice, some scholars propose that prosodic prominence combined with body movements supports the acquisition of new L2 phonological features. In the view of scholars and practitioners endorsing the verbo-tonal method [9], prosody is one of the first dimensions that should be taught in L2 classes, as it is thought to promote accurate perception and production of L2 segments. This teaching practice assumes that the phonetic salience of vowels is enhanced under prosodic prominence, so L2 learners will better perceive the roundness of French vowels [y] and [ø] in accented syllables or at initial/final domains of intonation phrases [9, 10]. Furthermore, the accurate perception and production of the [+rounded] feature is thought to be promoted by body gestures accompanying and illustrating the prosodic patterns.

Recent studies supporting the embodied cognition paradigm also consider that gestures and prosodic prominence facilitate the acquisition of novel contrasts [11, 12, 13]. Although the idea that prosodic strengthening could serve as a natural frame promoting the acquisition of L2 sounds seems reasonable, results of empirical studies examining this hypothesis are not always consistent. [10] evaluated the impact of both gestures mimicking prosody and prosodic prominence on the acquisition of L2 French vowels by English learners and did not find evidence for positive effects of prosody on L2 segmental acquisition. However, [11, 12, 13] report that both gestures and prosodic prominence have positive effects in the acquisition of novel L2 French vowel features by Catalan learners. Such contradictory results may be due to differences in participants' characteristics and experimental designs (tasks



would not appear a sufficient number of times in each condition (IP with rise, IP with fall, AP with rise, etc.). Therefore, we merged all accented vowels in the same category as prominent, even if we acknowledge that vowels in final positions of nuclear AP may be more strengthened since they are, at the same time, locations of final IP boundaries. In short, we defined *accented* vowels all those segments associated to (pre-)nuclear initial/final pitch accents marking the edges of APs/IPs, whereas *unaccented* vowels did not display any prosodic cue of prominence.

### 2.3. Acoustic metrics for assessing L2 vowel accuracy

F1, F2 and F3 values were extracted at the mid-point of every target vowel /i/, /y/, /u/, /e/, /ø/, /o/, /ɛ/, /œ/, /ɔ/ via a custom Praat script. Vowels marked as hesitations or errors in the annotation were discarded from the analysis. In the attempt to exclude values affected by formant detection errors from the analysis, we discarded vowels whose F1, F2 or F3 was  $>2.5 SD$  from the mean (computed for each vowel for each participant), leaving 15,127 tokens for analysis (7,031 accented and 8,096 unaccented). Formant values were then normalized following Lobanov's procedure in order to minimize the effect of physiological/anatomical vocal tract differences among participants. Since the contrast between /ø/ vs /œ/, /e/ vs /ɛ/ and /o/ vs /ɔ/ is not maintained by all native French speakers and is usually not taught to L2 French learners, we considered realisations of /ø/ and /œ/, /e/ and /ɛ/ as well as /o/ and /ɔ/ belonging to the same category: respectively /ø/, /e/ and /o/.

In order to quantify the overlap of realizations for target vowel pairs, we computed Pillai scores. This score has been used in the literature to evaluate the degree of vowel mergers and splits [22] and to assess L2 pronunciation [23, 24]. Pillai scores range from 0 (complete overlap of categories) to 1 (complete separation of categories). For this study, we extracted Pillai scores for realisations of each participant in accented vs unaccented position of each target contrast from MANOVAS predicting F1, F2, F3 with vowel category as independent variable. Note that, although duration differences across French vowels are documented in the literature, we did not include this variable because duration is of course most strongly affected by prosodic condition, and as such it was considered when selecting accented vowels.

We expect hyper-articulation in accented position to result in higher Pillai scores, indicating more articulatory precision and therefore more category separation. Figure 2 and Table 2 illustrate these assumptions for two sample speakers: a French native speaker (FL1\_S11) and an Italian learner of L2 French (FL2-I\_S02).

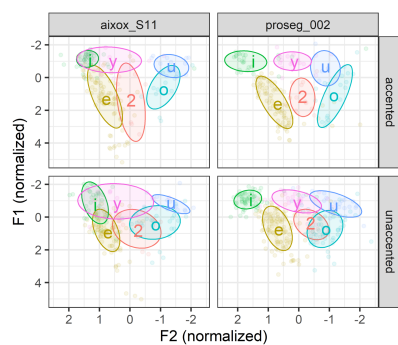


Figure 2: F1x F2 chart two sample speakers. Ellipses encompass 66.67% of the data.

Table 2: Pillai scores for two sample speakers

Speaker	Accent	/i/ ~ /y/	/y/ ~ /u/	/e/ ~ /ø/	/ø/ ~ /o/
FL1	Acc.	0.50	0.75	0.27	0.68
(S11)	Unacc.	0.40	0.64	0.41	0.18
FL2-I	Acc.	0.52	0.49	0.34	0.72
(S02)	Unacc.	0.63	0.53	0.39	0.16

## 3. Results

Average Pillai scores by group and by prosodic condition are reported in Table 3 and Figure 3, while Figure 4 illustrates the variability of Pillai scores by speaker. The Figures show that, globally, prosodic prominence seems to have an effect on the spectral quality of vowels across all groups (cf. H1: prosodic prominence has positive effects on the pronunciation accuracy of [±rounded] L2 French vowels). More specifically, the acoustic overlap of vowels produced in the accented condition is lower compared to their unaccented counterparts. In the case of the FL1 control group, our results are in line with [7, 8] who have previously demonstrated that prosodic prominence results in hyper-articulated/more canonical vowels. In the case of learners, accented vowels display more articulation accuracy than unaccented ones.

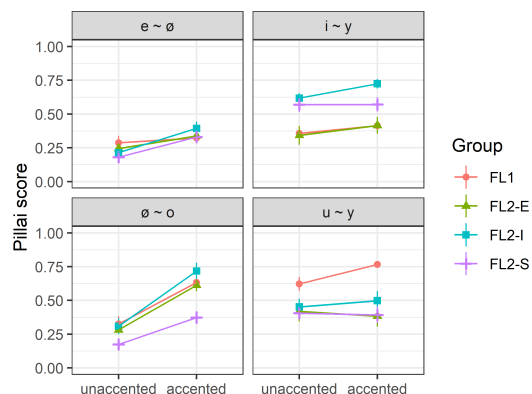


Figure 3: Pillai scores by target pair, prosodic condition and group, averaged over participants.

The results were analysed statistically with separate ANOVAS for each target pair with Pillai score as the dependent variable, and Group, Prosodic condition and their interaction as independent variables. For the /e/~/ø/ pair, the prosodic condition had a significant effect ( $p < .001$ ) on vowel overlap, but not the L1 or their interaction, suggesting that category separation is greater in accented position for all groups. For the /ø/~/o/ pair, the prosodic condition and the L1 had a significant effect (all  $p$  values  $< .001$ ) on vowel overlap, but not their interaction; fdr-corrected pairwise t-tests revealed that vowels produced by the FL2-S overlapped more than for other speakers (all  $p$  values  $< .05$ ). For the /i/~/y/ pair, the effect of prosodic condition tended to significance ( $p = .06$ ), and that of L1 was significant ( $p < .001$ ); fdr-corrected pairwise t-tests revealed that the FL2-I and FL2-S groups differed from the FL1 and FL2-E (all  $p$  values  $< .01$ ). Note that the relative low Pillai values for /i/~/y/ and /e/~/ø/ in the control group (FL1) are due to the fact that members of these pairs share similar articulatory properties (frontness and openness) which are of course reflected acoustically.

For the /u/~/y/ pair, we only observed a significant effect of L1, with the FL1 group showing a better category separation than all other groups (all  $p$  values < .001).

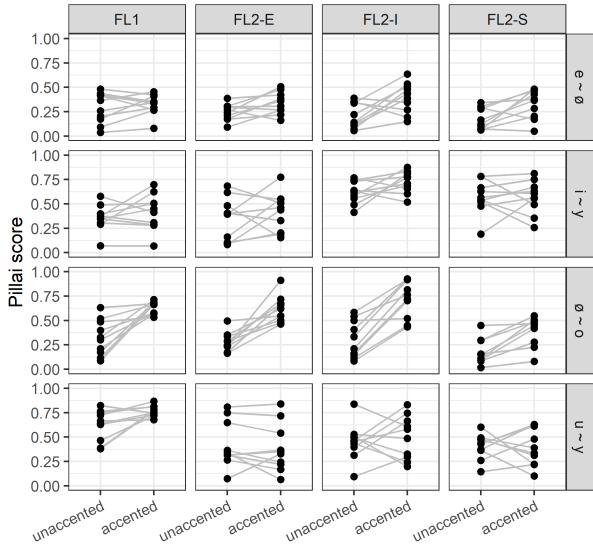


Figure 4. Pillai scores (indicating category separation) for all speakers by target pair, prosodic condition and group.

#### 4. Discussion & Conclusions

We have presented data illustrating the effects of prosodic prominence on the acquisition of L2 features. The data showed that adult learners from different L1 backgrounds reinforce some L2 French vowels carrying prosodic prominence, but only partially confirmed our hypothesis. On the one hand, Pillai scores for accented vowels revealed that both native and L2 learners tend to hyperarticulate the triplets /i/-/y/-/u/ and /e/-/ø/-/o/ in accented positions. As revealed by statistical analyses, these vowel contrasts tend to overlap less in accented condition. These results expand findings by [15] suggesting that prosodic strengthening applies not only to L2 vowels that are similar to the L1 system ([i], [u] and [a]), but also to L2 vowels that do not exist in learners' native language. Note that, aside from L1 Spanish [25], the presence of pitch accents triggers vowel hyper-articulation in L1 English [4, 5] and L1 Italian [26]. In our view, the spectral changes modulated by the prosodic structure in L2 French could be seen as a positive transfer from the L1.

The data partially support the assumption that prosodic strengthening has positive effects on the acquisition of certain L2 vocalic features. We predicted that prosodic prominence would result in the reinforcement of the [±rounded] and [±back]

features in L2 French oral vowels, so that /y/ and /ø/ would be more clearly distinguished from /i/ and /e/ respectively in accented positions, as well as from /u/ and /o/. Statistical significance was reached only for the pair /e/-/ø/, but without interaction of participants' L1. Yet, it is worth to take a closer look at the values reported in Table 3. For Spanish and Italian learners, it seems that the effect of prosodic strengthening on the overlap of /e/-/ø/ is greater than the one observed for L1 French ( $\Delta = 0.03$  for FL1 but  $\Delta = 0.15$  and  $\Delta = 0.18$  for FL2-Spa and FL2-Ita). Although the interaction does not reach statistical significance, this trend may suggest that learners produce /ø/ more easily in accented condition, thereby confirming claims that prosodic prominence serves as a frame for the acquisition of difficult phonological features.

Regarding [i]~/[y], [u]~/[y] and [ø]~/[o], the reinforcement of vowels in accented condition was not different from the one observed in L1 French. The values reported in Table 3 show that in many cases the effects of prosodic prominence were marginal, especially for the pairs [i]~/[y] and [u]~/[y] for the FL2-S and FL2-I groups.

As a whole, it seems that prosodic strengthening effects are a concomitant and natural process in L2 speech. Our results only partially confirm assumptions of the verbo-tonal method proposed by [9] that prosodic prominence facilitates the perception and production of French front rounded vowels [10]. Although this is true for [e]~/[ø], our results do not show a clear tendency for the other contrasts analysed.

We conclude that prosodic prominence triggers vowel hyper-articulation in L2 speech. Yet, our data do not clearly show whether prosodic prominence reinforce L2 syntagmatic contrasts for all vowel pairs. Learners at this proficiency level may have learnt to make the contrast for [e]~/[ø] in prominent (vs non-prominent) positions because in these locations there is more time for articulatory gestures to reach their target. This exploratory study partially confirmed our hypothesis and showed interesting trends that will need to be explored in the future with larger and more controlled data sets, as well as across L2 proficiency levels. Despite the considerable amount of production data analyzed, the number of learners per group is somewhat limited, and the number of target vowel occurrences vary by speaker. In addition, potential effects of speech rate were not considered in our study, and this may also be explored in the future. Finally, we acknowledge that prosodic prominence was considered mainly at the AP level. We speculate that positive effects of prosodic prominence on the acquisition of L2 features may be more clearly observed in higher prosodic units, for instance at the initial/final domains of IPs.

Table 3: Pillai Scores by target pair, prosodic condition and group, averaged over participants

	FL1			FL2-Spa			FL2-Eng			FL2-Ita		
	Unacc.	Acc.	$\Delta$	Unacc.	Acc.	$\Delta$	Unacc.	Acc.	$\Delta$	Unacc.	Acc.	$\Delta$
/i/ ~ /y/	0.36	0.41	0.05	0.57	0.57	0.00	0.34	0.42	0.08	0.62	0.72	0.10
/y/ ~ /u/	0.62	0.77	0.15	0.41	0.39	-0.02	0.38	0.42	0.04	0.45	0.50	0.05
/e/ ~ /ø/	0.29	0.32	0.03	0.18	0.33	0.15	0.25	0.34	0.09	0.21	0.39	0.18
/ø/ ~ /o/	0.33	0.63	0.30	0.17	0.37	0.20	0.42	0.38	-0.04	0.41	0.72	0.31

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