L2 Learners’ Interpretation of Intonation and Meaning

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Intonation is an illocutionary force indicating device (IFID) that makes use of pitch modulations to convey speaker intent. The recognition of such cues generally facilitates comprehension of the meaning behind what the speaker intends to communicate. Although studies have shown that L2 learners have varying degrees of success with producing targetlike intonation patterns at the sentence-level (e.g. McKinnon, 2017; Ortega-Llebaria & Colantoni, 2014; Ramirez Verdugo & Romero Trillo, 2005), inappropriate or inadequate use of intonation in discourse to convey speaker intent has been pervasive in discourse studies (Alexander, 2011; Tateyama 2011; Ramsey, 1996). While previous studies have examined learners’ production of intonation in discourse, they have not explored learners’ understanding of the relationship between different intentions of the speaker and their corresponding intonation patterns.

This study investigates whether L2 English learners consider intonation in the interpretation of meaning in an utterance, whether proficiency plays a role in the success rate of interpreting the meaning of the utterance and whether unmarked utterances are easier for learners to interpret compared to marked utterances. The classification of intonation patterns in the current study are described in general terms of unmarked and marked intonation. An unmarked intonation pattern is attributed to the literal meaning of an utterance while a marked intonation pattern triggers a recalculation of the literal meaning of the utterance in favor of another interpretation—either an opposite or completely different meaning. 14 intermediate learners and six advanced L2 English learners (L1 Chinese and L1 Korean) were presented with 24 short dialogues that contained target utterances produced with either unmarked or marked intonation patterns and were asked to paraphrase the meaning of the target utterance. The results of the interpretation task showed that both intermediate and advanced proficiency groups had high rates of accuracy for interpreting unmarked intonation patterns, and the intermediate learners were significantly better at interpreting the unmarked intonation utterances (97 percent accuracy) compared to the marked intonation utterances (41 percent accuracy). The advanced learners, who outperformed the intermediate group and patterned like the NS control group, were able to effectively interpret intonation in the unmarked intonation condition (100 percent accuracy) as well as the marked intonation condition (83 percent accuracy). The results of the interpretation task provide evidence that learners notice intonation to various extents because no learner at either proficiency level only provided literal interpretations of the target utterances with marked intonation. However, these results suggest that language proficiency or experience with the target language is related to the ability to accurately identify what information the intonation pattern is conveying. Furthermore, the ability to interpret marked intonation patterns with a high rate of accuracy likely has developmental stages in which certain utterances and their respective intonation patterns are acquired earlier. In order to become more proficient in communication in the target language, learners must be able to encode intonation that is used to convey both literal and non-literal meaning.