

Elena N. Makarova¹✉, Irina S. Pirozhkova²

Ural State University of Economics

Yekaterinburg, Russian Federation

makarovayn@mail.ru

Variants of English phrases' accentual structure: Perception of prominence and prosodic parameters

Abstract

The article aims to compare perceptual and acoustic cues of prosodic prominence in an English utterance and determine the number of sentence accents. 90 English utterances (statements/negations and questions) read by 3 native British English (BE) speakers and 3 Russian speakers of English as L2 comprised the material for the study (the total of 540 one-syntagm tokens). 12 native BE listeners performed the listening task. The obtained data enable to identify single- and dual-focus patterns of the utterances with the same lexical and grammatical structure. It has been proven that two foci exist not only on the acoustic level but are perceived as such by native BE listeners. Correlation analysis of pitch values showed that the significant factors for perceiving the degree of word stress by the native BE speakers include the difference between the maximum values of the fundamental frequency on the first stressed and the second stressed syllables, the rate of fundamental frequency change on these syllables and the value of pitch interval on the first stressed syllable. The values of these parameters for dual-focus variants proved higher than those perceived as single-focus ones. Intensity difference of the two patterns proved insignificant. The obtained results can be useful for teaching EFL, particularly for acquiring and improving the skill of sentence accent pattern production as well as its perception and understanding. The outlook for further study might include perceptual experiments with native speakers of other languages listening to single- and double-focus patterns.

Keywords: sentence accent, prosodic prominence, pitch, intensity, accentual structure variants, perception, information centre

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