

Perception of interrogative sentence modality by Japanese students of Spanish

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Previous studies (Takasawa, Kimura, Sensui, Toyomaru, & Atria, 2012; Sensui, 2015) have proved that it is difficult for Japanese students of Spanish to distinguish between intonation and stress, both while speaking and listening, which can often lead to incorrect identification of sentence modality. This study focuses on recognition of interrogative intonation from the view point of phonetic perception and is aimed at investigating problems faced by Japanese students of ELE (Spanish as a foreign language) due to the expression of interrogative modality with different pitch patterns and lexical stresses in the intonation nucleus. To make sure that modality is only perceived through prosodic features, we have used an identification perception test with synthesized stimuli without lexical and semantic content obtained from natural emissions in two varieties of Spanish (northern – Madrid, and southern – the Canary Islands) characterized by rise and rise-fall pitch patterns, respectively. In this corpus we alternated words to obtain the three stress types of Spanish (oxitone, paroxytone and proparoxytone) in the nucleus of the phrases, while the verb and the subject always remains paroxytone, like in *La guitarra se toca con paciencia* (Dorta, Martín Gómez, & Díaz, 2015). In order to control the results of the test, we have also used synthesized declarative stimuli with falling end. The stimuli perception by Japanese students will determine if they identify both Spanish interrogative patterns as equal knowing that, in Japanese, rising end is used to mark interrogative mode along with particle *ka* and that in colloquial style can be found questions without this particle, only keeping the rising pitch pattern. We part from the hypothesis that the listeners will recognize the northern interrogative modality better than the southern one since it is generally taught as a standard, and, at the same time, than the falling intonation at the end of the southern interrogative patterns will be recognized as a declarative modality marker.

The results indicate that the rise-fall (peaking) interrogative pattern (H* L%) in the southern variation of Spanish is confused with the falling pitch marker (L* L%) of the declarative modality in 80% of cases. It proves that when teaching Spanish to Japanese students, special attention needs to be paid to explaining the relations between intonation, modality and stress in southern variations of Spanish spoken by many millions of people, in order for the students to avoid serious comprehension and speaking mistakes.

References

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