REVIEW

Disfluency and narrativity: the relevance of the prosodic view about language acquisition

Melissa LAZZARI (iD)

Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS)

Isabela PETRY (iD)

Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS)

ABSTRACT

The present review is part of Ester Scarpa's speech, which deals with the role of prosody in language acquisition. The speaker conceives prosody as a privileged space for interface between linguistic levels; thus, prosodic facts are seen as linguistic resources in the language acquisition phase, stage of limited lexical-grammatical resources. Therefore, prosody is a space for the child's engagement in subjectivation, discourse and dialogue, and it is also a way of organizing linguistic forms. The speech contemplates three main topics: (i) the presentation of the first intonation systems of two children; (ii) the discussion about prosody and disfluencies; and (iii) the beginnings of intonational cohesion and narrativity. Two sets of data are presented: one referring to the use of prosody in initial narratives and the other referring to hesitation and disfluencies.

RESUMO

A presente resenha parte da fala de Ester Scarpa, que versa sobre o papel da prosódia na aquisição da linguagem. A palestrante concebe a prosódia como um espaço privilegiado de interface entre os níveis linguísticos; dessa forma, os fatos prosódicos são vistos como recursos linguísticos na fase de aquisição da linguagem, estágio de recursos léxico-gramatical limitados. Assim, a prosódia se constitui como espaço de engajamento da criança na subjetivação, no discurso e no diálogo, e é também via de

organização das formas linguísticas. A fala contempla três principais tópicos: (i) apresentação dos primeiros sistemas entoacionais de duas crianças; (ii) discussão em torno da prosódia e de disfluências; e (iii) primórdios da coesão entoacional e da narratividade. São apresentados dois conjuntos de dados: um referente ao uso da prosódia em narrativas iniciais e outro referente a hesitação e disfluências.

The speech here reviewed, entitled *Prosodia and Language Acquisition*, was given by professor Ester Scarpa on July 25, 2020 for the event *Abralin Ao Vivo* - Linguistics Online, promoted by the Brazilian Linguistics Association (Abralin), with mediation by Marianne Carvalho Bezerra Cavalcante. Ester Scarpa is a retired professor at the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP) and has experience in language acquisition with an emphasis on prosodic and psycholinguistic aspects.

Scarpa begins her speech by bringing a quote from Tatit (2020), for whom the intonation is the only way to speak. Based on that, the speaker complements what the author says, arguing that prosody is a privileged space for interaction between different linguistic levels. In this way, prosody is responsible for being a bridge between the formal organization of speech and the significant potential of language during the language acquisition phase.

Regarding the role of prosody in language acquisition, it is important to highlight two points of Scarpa's conception: (i) it is the primary way to orient phonic forms, acting in the apprehension of systems of rhythm and intonation of languages; (ii) it is a space for the child's engagement in the subjectivation processes, in the dialog, in the discourse, in the processes of constitutive alterity of the subject. On this last aspect, Scarpa highlights the performance of the parameters of contour, speech speed, texture, duration and intensity of the voice. Still regarding the role of prosody in language acquisition, the speaker argues that this is a coherent way *to segment, configure, and delimit the sound chain.*

When presenting the first intonation systems of the two children, the speaker identifies significant similarities, such as a low descending curve for introspective speeches, ascending steps for vocatives and an ascending curve from a low intonation to medium one for enumeration. It is pointed out, then, the fact that the notations are relevant for both grammatical and pragmatic meanings. In addition, it is emphasized that children produce relatively mature tones, whose the configuration is

the same found at the end of assertive phrases in Romance languages and that the systems presented are sensitive to a final postonic fall, which is very characteristic of Brazilian Portuguese (BP)

Supported by the concept of prosodic domain, established by Nespor and Vogel (1986), in addition to using ideas from prosodic phonology and intonational phonology, Scarpa presents the fluency and disfluency of the dyad. The fluency of speech in the mother tongue translates the ideal of writing, of reading - at least of those rehearsed - and of speech, when it is rehearsed and objectified; it is the unmarked term, it is the result of a socio-historical construction. On the other hand, disfluency is the marked term and presupposes a linguistic and psycholinguistic deficiency or difficulty - such as, for example, lexical access - and translates into what is disposable, deviant, and problematic. About these concepts, Scarpa states that, for those who work with orality, it is challenging to find a definition for fluent speech that is beyond the ideal of neutral speech that meets the research objectives. A possible solution commented by the speaker is to face the dyad as sides of the same coin, facing the conditions of distribution between disfluency and fluency.

It is similar to what has been mentioned above that phoneticists address this issue: these traces of speech disfluencies are generated to guarantee the flow of speech. Thus, the dynamics of speech itself is responsible for generating fluency and disfluency. Scarpa points out the concept that this alternation could be due to the balance (tension) game generated between the principle of articulatory simplification and the principle of perceptual contrast. For Merlo and Barbosa (2012), also mentioned by Scarpa, disfluency is required for there to be fluency, since it is necessary for the speaker to (re) organize his oral text. The speaker uses what Scarpa and Fernandes-Svartman (2012a) says to defend that disfluency marks the occupation of certain spaces in the prosodic hierarchy. When presenting the contexts in which disfluency occurs more frequently, it is concluded that it tends to appear more at the beginning of prosodic domains than at the end of rhythmic and intonational units.

Regarding the relationship between prosody and language acquisition, Scarpa proposes the following question: *can one think of a trend in the distribution between fluency and disfluency in children's speech?* By exposing her hypothesis, she answers this question by pointing out that the disfluencies in the infant's speech are not immune to the principles that govern the prosodic structuring of the statement.

The speaker states that passages considered fluent are present in *adjacent ritualized pairs*, *stereotyped statements*, *familiar*, *frozen*, *often in a situation of immediate specularity*, *in expressions that exhibit greater stability*, while disfluent passages seem to be similar to assert the pattern found in adult speech, i.e., they tend to occur in non-head parts of intonation phrases, for example. The professor also points out that there are differences between the hesitations of infants and adults: children tend to show variation in speech speed and audible inspiratory movements besides inserting sounds filling in prosodic places and glottal occlusives in their speech.

Scarpa argues that hesitant disfluency - rhythmic adjustment and readjustment - is part of the natural language acquisition process, bringing its own marks of orality and speech dynamics. Therefore, in adult speech, this "stutter" would not dissolve as other areas of study put it. Such disfluency is part of the acquisition of the frontier of phonological words within the prosodic statement. This

is also revealed when more complex and long constructions are elaborated - from a semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic point of view - than in previous phases.

The researcher also points out that disfluency is not a residue of the baby's speech, nor the adult's speech. It is a phenomenon inherent to the production and understanding of language; therefore, the participants in the dialogue do not perceive it as abnormal. Although it is often treated as a waste in the study of language acquisition, it can, in fact, provide clues for the researcher interested in the interfaces of grammatical components.

Regarding the topic *Narrativity and Prosodic Cohesion*, Scarpa states that attempts to link prosodic successive statements of words may precede the linearity of more complex sentences in the process of language acquisition. The concept of intonational macrostructures by Couper-Kuhlen (1993; 1998) is highlighted by the researcher, in which tonal groups are combined to form larger units, called sequences of tones, sequences of pitch or paratons. The prosody of the oral text assumes that the intonation generates phonological gestalts, such a process results in a fully experienced and cohesive unit as a whole.

Exploring the role of prosody in textual coherence and cohesion, it could be said that multimodal traits are involved so that cohesion and coherence can be seen in the discourse; hence, the other does not seek meaning only in what is lexically indexed. As an example for her argument, the speaker cites her own study, which shows the relevance of discursive markers by integrating what the researcher called "(macro-) structure of storytelling". Regarding discursive markers, Scarpa highlights that they do not participate in the propositional content of the discourse. The discursive marker selected by the dyad in question cited by the researcher is *então* (then), which reveals a sequential, anaphoric, cohesive and continuous feature.

With this example, the speaker shows similarities in the use of the referred discourse marker by the same child at one year and ten months and at almost three years. It is important to highlight that Scarpa points out that there is no *stricto sensu* narrative when it comes to the Labovian molds about this textual genre, however she also emphasizes that, in the first interaction, there are (i) references to figures as they appear in the book being used as a motivator of interaction, (ii) the verb *achei* (I found), in the past, which, despite not having a semantic relation with the names the infant mentioned, has got the same paratom attributed, (iii) the pragmatic contribution through the common use of a narrative paratom, both of introduction - through the marker *então* - and of closing, with descending intonation. It is interesting that, around the age of three, when the children already build longer and more complex sentences, they still employ the marker with the same function in relation to the "game of narrating", as the professor conceives.

The importance of Scarpa's speech is clearly immense, not only because she is a pioneer in intonation studies – she is also responsible for translating the term into Portuguese, as she comments –, but also because it is a special moment of knowledge sharing, in view of the democratic way the event is presented, which collaborates with the popularization of the Linguistics. There is a clear need for interdisciplinary studies for the vast field of language acquisition, already explored in other conferences in this series, such as A *aquisição da linguagem e a alteridade em debate*, for example.

REFERENCES

A aquisição da linguagem e a alteridade em debate. Round table presented by Marianne Cavalcante, Alessandra Del Ré and Carmem Luci da Costa Silva, moderated by Ester Scarpa [s.l., s.n.], 2020. 1 video (2h 24min 35s). Posted by Brazilian Linguistics Association channel on YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgK1asrbOac. Accessed on: May 27th, 2020.

COUPER-KUHLEN, E. *English speech rhythm*: Form and function in everyday verbal interaction. John Benjamins Publishing, 1993.

COUPER-KUHLEN, E. On Prosody in Conversational Reported Speech. *InLiSt: Interaction and Linguistic Structures*, n. 1, p. 1-26, 1998.

MERLO, S.; BARBOSA, P. A. Séries temporais de pausas e de hesitações na fala espontânea. *Cadernos de Estudos Linguísticos*, v. 54, n. 1, p. 11-24, 2012.

NESPOR, M.; VOGEL, I. *Prosodic Phonology*. Foris Publications, 1986.

PROSÓDIA e aquisição da linguagem. Conference presented by Ester Scarpa. [s.l., s.n], 2020. 1 video (1h 46mim 0s). Posted by Brazilian Linguistics Association channel on YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWKzXyyF9KI&t=3951s. Accessed on: July 25th, 2020.

SCARPA, E. M.; FERNANDES-SVARTMAN, F. A estrutura prosódica das disfluências em português brasileiro. *Cadernos de Estudos Linguísticos*, v. 54, n. 1, p. 25-40, 2012.

SEMIÓTICA do pouco a pouco. Conference Presented by Luiz Tatic. [s.l., s.n], 2020. 1 video (1h 38min 35s). Posted by Brazilian Linguistics Association channel on YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0t8ne-mlPM. Accessed on: July 29th, 2020.