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RHYTHM IN FINNISH AND ENGLISH

Background

Finnish and English vary especially with regard to the interplay between syntax and prosody. Acoustic analysis of the interaction between two languages where rhythm functions so differently, can throw light on differences in phonological and pragmatic patterning. The definition of rhythm being used is: the temporal patterning of sounds in speech, i.e. of stress and quantity. The purpose of the investigation is threefold: to establish with phonetic analysis, whether, how, and to what extent Finns consistently deviate rhythmically when speaking English; to establish the consequences and the relative importance of the rhythmic deviances in perception; and finally, to make constructive suggestions to Finns learning English, about how to avoid or overcome the important problems.

Method

Duration is taken as the primary acoustic correlate of rhythm, but also fundamental frequency where appropriate. The material being selectively analyzed is a hundred assorted English statements and questions, recorded by 24 Finnish teenagers. This is being compared with corresponding recordings of English teenagers; promising aspects are being followed up by analysis of supplementary material. It is intended to investigate all aspects of rhythmic deviance: I am presently concentrating on reduction phenomena, specifically the presence, extent and location of compression in segments where they are increased in number in the same context.

Results

The relatively longer duration of one vowel, and the reduction even to the point of elimination of other vowels; for instance; will result in the longer vowel being perceived as stressed in English, while the phonological opposition of quantity in Finnish limits freedom of manifestation on this parameter. Lack of reduction seems like prolongation of a vowel beyond the length anticipated by a native English speaker, which encourages him to perceive stress, with concomitant perceptual difficulties. Consequently, it is important for Finns studying English to be made aware of the use of vowel reduction, and to practice it.