THE PRONUNCIATION OF ITALIAN TOTAL QUESTION PHRASES BY ALBANIAN LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies have shown that very often the speakers of a foreign language find it difficult to speak correctly because of the transfer of the prosodic characteristics from their own mother tongue. Some others, despite their ability to communicate correctly, tend to persist in using their foreign accent. This process of transferring is also possible even if the first and second languages have some phonetic characteristics in common. Nowadays the theory of learning a foreign language independently from ones mother tongue is no longer accepted.

In the framework of a comparative case study between Albanian and Italian languages, we have studied the pronunciation of total question phrases of the Italian language by Albanian speakers. The target group was made up by 10 Albanian university students. The recordings were made in the Phonetics Laboratory of Elbasan University. The intonation curves were analyzed using Praat (5.3.60). Each provided spectrogram was compared to the one by an Italian speaker.

It was concluded that the Albanian male speakers pronounce the total questions phrases by making just a few changes in their melodic curves starting from the beginning to the end of it. The Albanian male speakers starts the questions phrases in a very low frequency, 75 Hz, while Italian male speaker starts it at 206 Hz. Albanian female speakers reach very high frequencies compared to those performed by the Albanian male speakers. These values are higher than those reported by Memushaj for the Albanian language.

***Keywords**: Foreign Language, Prosodic Features, Total Question Phrases, Melodic Curve, Speech Frequencies.*

INTRODUCTION

Phonology has a special importance in teaching and learning of both the mother tongue and the foreign languages. Speaking a language means knowing and using all the phonemes (vowels, consonants) and suprasegmental prosodic elements (intonation, rhythm and accent) which are functional i.e. meaning carriers. Pronunciation errors are reflected in morphology, syntax and in the contents of what is to be transferred [1, 2, 3, 4].

Intonation and rhythm learning is a very difficult process. This is because it is the starting process in the acquisition of the mother tongue and therefore it is the most resistant one. The transfer of the intonation features from the mother tongue to the foreign language, is firstly realized by ear perception and then it is reflected in pronunciation.

The transfer of the intonation features in a foreign language is more resistant in those cases when the first language and the foreign language come from two different typologies. This does not mean that the opportunity of the transfer of the intonation features does not exist between languages with the same typology.

Nowadays the hypothesis that learning of a second language is independent from the learning of the first language [5] is no longer valid.

Many studies have shown that comparative analysis is of great help in distinguishing the differences between languages, in the sense of the difficulties that students encounter in the course of learning a foreign language. On the other hand, the comparative analysis may well be used to reveal the error types which helps in a proper selection of the exercises to deal with them [6].

In the following we are trying to answer these questions: How does the Albanian language intonation features affect the intonation modulation of the Italian used by an Albanian learner? How does the Albanian language helps in achieving a pronunciation as close as possible with that of an Italian speaker?

In the case study presented in this paper, the used technique was that of reading. This choice was based in L. Costamagna findings that both the repetition in an imitation form and that of spontaneous speech, are characterized by a lot of limitation [7]. The process of imitation is a complex process which follows two stages: decodification + imitation; as a result, the listeners or the audience is more concentrated into the meaning of the text than into the perception of the phonologic features and their imitation. On the other hand, spontaneous speech is characterized by relatively long pauses, repetition, rhythm, lexical diversity, thematics and so on.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this paper we are presenting a comparative case study between Albanian and Italian languages, by studying the pronunciation of total question phrases of the Italian language by Albanian speakers. The target group was made up by 10 Albanian university students. The recordings were made in the Phonetics Laboratory of Elbasan University and the intonation curves were analyzed using Praat (5.3.60).

In order to see at what extend the intonation features of the Italian language coincide with those of the Albanian language, we were concentrated in the F^o frequency, which means into the rises and falls of the voice curve (or the vibration of the voice cords) of the Italian total question phrases performed by the Albanian male and female learners.

The results taken by analyzing the spectrograms were compared to those proposed by Slovacchia & Kaunzer [8] in their course of listening and pronunciation of the Italian language by foreigners, which is accompanied by the book "*Suoni, accento e intonazione*".

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the following figures (Figures 1a-c) we are presenting the spectrograms of the Italian total question phrase " ***Conosce questo prodotto*** ? " for three Albanian male students.

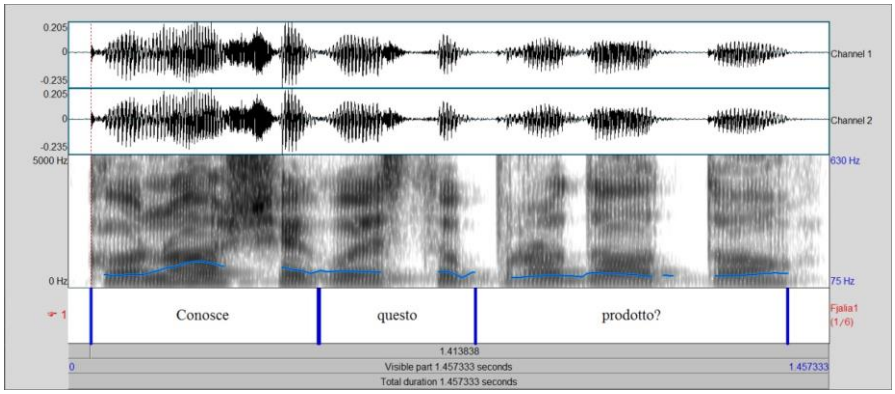

Figure 1a. Student 1 (male). (The spectrogram of the total question phrase: ***Conosce questo prodotto***?)

Student 1 (Figure 1) starts the Italian total question phrase at **75Hz** in the first syllable ***co-***, of the word ***conosce***. The voice curve shows a sharp increase in the stressed syllable ***-no-***, at **176.9Hz**, which is the maximum value of the sentence. The rest of the sentence is characterized by an uniform intonation roughly at **137.1Hz**.

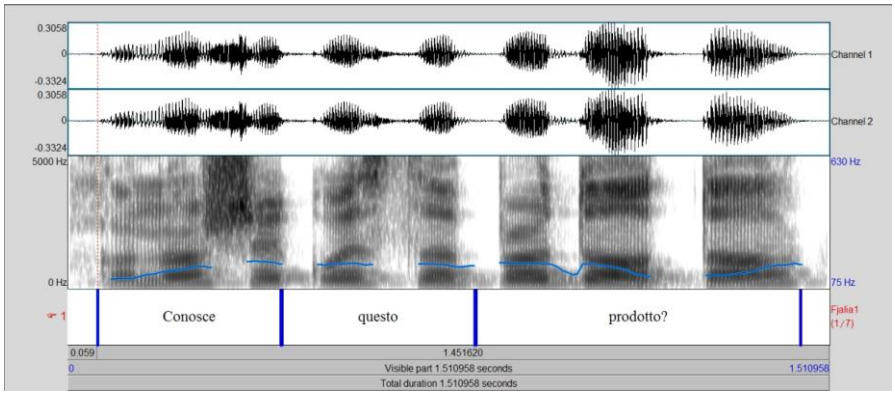

Figure 1b. Student 2 (male). (The spectrogram of the total question phrase: ***Conosce questo prodotto***?)

As in the previous example, student 2 (Figure 2), starts the first syllable ***co-*** of the word ***conosce*** at its lowest value **75Hz**. However, the voice curve follows a significant increase at **190.1Hz** in the last syllable ***-sce***. The word ***questo*** is characterized by an uniformity of the voice curve. The first and the last syllable of the word ***prodotto***, get the same value **182.1Hz**. The frequency range for the whole phrase is **75 – 182.1Hz**.

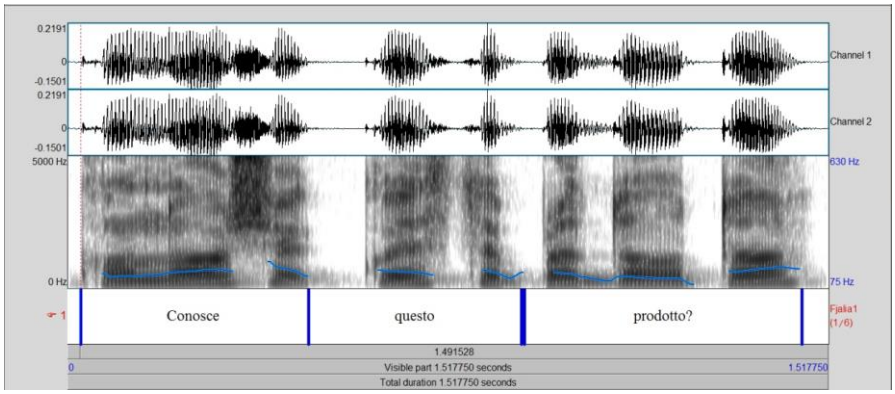

Figure 1c. Student 3 (male). (The spectrogram of the total question phrase: ***Conosce questo prodotto***?)

The spectrogram for the student 3 shows an intonation uniformity throughout the phrase. The highest value (**185Hz**) is reached in the unstressed syllable ***-sce***. The word ***prodotto*** is characterized by a slight increase of the voice curve, at the values **143.1 – 162Hz**. The frequency range for the whole phrase is **75 – 162Hz**.

Figure 2 shows the spectrogram of the Italian total question phrase "***Conosce questo prodotto***?" for an Italian male speaker.

In the case of the Italian speaker (Figure 2), the voice curve starts at **206Hz**, which is a very high value compared to those of the Albanian speakers of the Italian language (**75Hz**). The last unstressed syllables of the words ***conosce*** and ***prodotto*** have the same values of **264.6Hz**. The curve of the word ***prodotto*** goes up to the last syllable. The frequency range is **183.3 – 264.6Hz**.

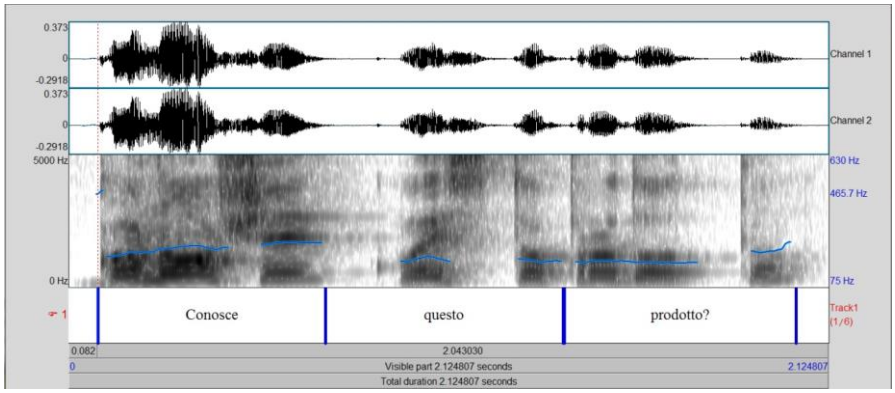

Figure 2. Italian speaker (male). (The spectrogram of the total question phrase: ***Conosce questo prodotto***?)

The experimental values of the three Albanian male speakers were compared with those of the Italian speaker. In the case of the Albanian male speakers the voice curves show a stability at the beginning of the Italian total question phrase and the corresponding frequency value is **75Hz**. However, regarding the low values, all the Albanian speakers exhibit an increase of the voice curve in the stressed syllable ***-no-*** of the word ***conosce***; in fact this increase should be realized in the last unstressed syllable ***-sce***. In the case of the Italian speaker, the intonation curve matches very well the special features of the Italian language, as described by Bertinetto – Caldognetto, 1993 (cited in [9]). The total Italian question phrases are characterized by a continuously increasing voice curve, which starts from the beginning of the phrase (turning point). Usually the turning point coincide with the last stressed syllable; this increase reaches its maximum value in the last unstressed syllable.

In a similar way as the Italian speaker, a slight increase of the voice curve at the last word ***prodotto*** is realized only by one of the Albanian male students (Student 1); however this increase is left somehow unfinished. Unlike the Italian speaker, the other two Albanian students, realize a decrease of the voice curve at the last word of the total question phrase.

The comparison of our experimental spectrograms with those of the Albanian total question phrase proposed by Memushaj [10] would have been very interesting. This was not possible, because the author does not specify if it belongs to a male or a female speaker.

Anyway, it is worth mentioning that the Albanian language shows a very complex voice curve with some sharp increases from one syllable to the other, mainly in the last word of the total question phrases.

Our analysis shows that the special features found in all the Albanian students indicate a fossilization of the voice curve in a model created by them.

We continued our study analyzing the intonation features of the same Italian total question phrase for three female Albanian students as well.

Female Albanian voices follow a curve with some rises and falls of the intonation values which are very much higher than those of the Albanian male students, mainly at the beginning of the total question phrase. Figure 3a shows some rises and falls of the voice curve in the first word of the total question phrase, ***conosce***. The first syllable starts in the value **269.7Hz**. The voice curve is then increased in the second syllable at a value of **292.3Hz**. In the last syllable (/ʃ/ phoneme of the unstressed syllable ***-sce***) it reaches a very high maximum **591Hz** and then it follows a significant decrease in the vowel /e/ at a value of **312Hz**. The first and the last syllables of the word ***prodotto*** have the same frequency values, whereas the second syllable ***-dot-***, shows the lowest frequency, **252.6Hz**.

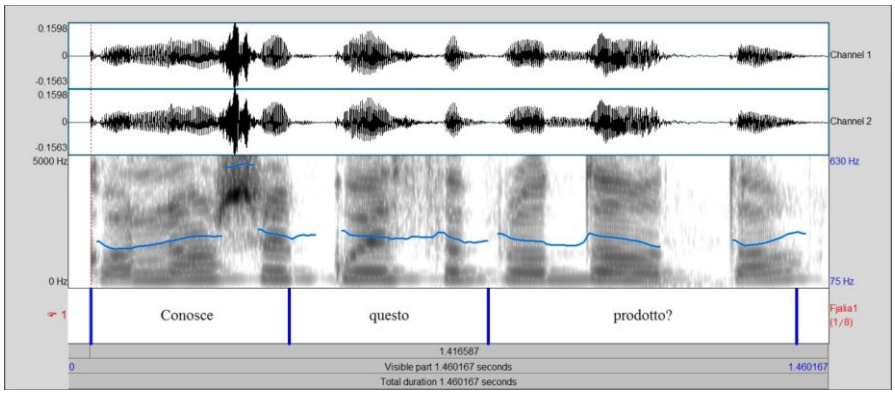

Figure 3a. Student 1 (female). (The spectrogram of the total question phrase: ***Conosce questo prodotto***?)

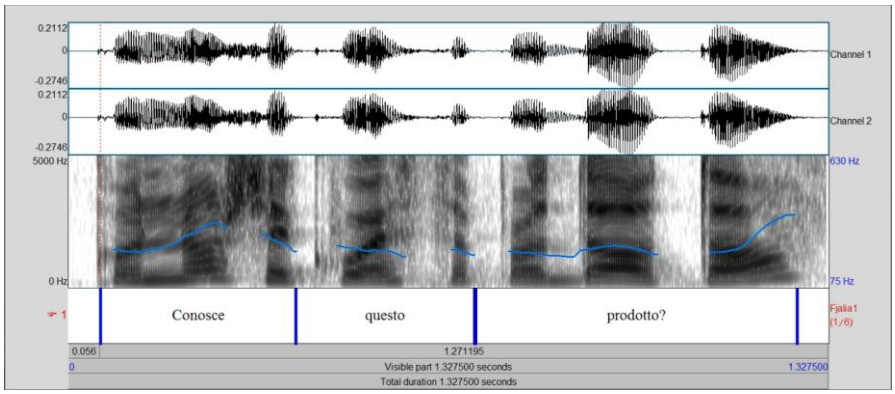

Figure 3b. Student 2 (female). (The spectrogram of the total question phrase: ***Conosce questo prodotto***?)

The spectrogram of the Figure 3b shows a very complex intonation curve, which is characterized by some rises and falls. The first and the last syllable of the word ***conosce*** are reached in a value of **206Hz**. The second stressed syllable -***no***- which is supposed to be the starting point for the increase in the voice curve, shows in fact the highest frequency, **246.6Hz**. In the last word of the total question phrase ***prodotto***, the voice curve goes up toward the last syllable. The frequency range is **183.3 – 264.6Hz**.

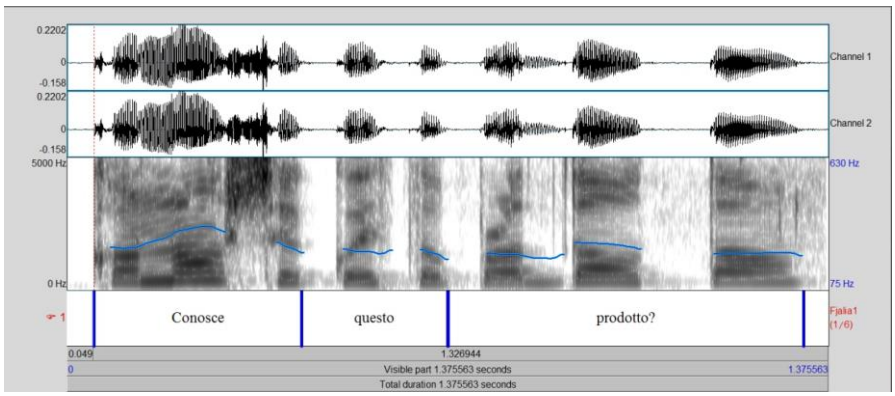

Figure 3c. Student 3 (female). (The spectrogram of the total question phrase: ***Conosce questo***

prodotto?)

As it can easily be seen from the corresponding spectrogram (Figure 3c), the intonation curve for the Albanian female speaker is very complex. The maximum value **343.2Hz**, is reached at the second syllable ***-no-*** of the word ***conosce***. Instead of showing an increase in the frequency values starting from the beginning of the Italian total question phrase, the last syllable ***-sce***, is reached at a very low value **234.3Hz**. The same is true for the last word ***prodotto***: the stressed syllable shows the maximum frequency **274.9Hz** which goes down to **234.3Hz** for the last syllable.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The models created by the Albanian students during the process of learning Italian as a second language, are very much like a mixture of the intonation features of the Italian and Albanian languages.

The Albanian female voices are characterized by frequency values which are very much higher than those of the Albanian male voices (**75Hz**). These values are also higher than those reported by Memushaj (**140-150Hz**) for the Albanian language.

The Albanian female voices show a voice curve which in general is much more complex than those of the Albanian male voices.

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