Review article

		Linguistics
Effective Practices in Improving the French Pronunciation – The Prosodic Elements		

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Abstract

     This paper aims at providing the most effective ways and practices to attain a better pronunciation of French based on the best achievements in the field of theoretical, practical and experimental phonetics, as well as on the contemporary understanding of comparative linguistics, methodology and teaching of French as a foreign language. Pronunciation plays an important role in achieving linguistic communication in foreign languages but mispronunciation, a violation of correct pronunciation norms, prevents the process of communication. Mastering the articulatory and acoustic aspects of the sound formation means mastering the phonetic pattern, however, the prosodic or the suprasegmental features are also part of the phonetic system and their mastering is very important. In the teaching practice and in many foreign language textbooks we notice that prosodic elements are not paid due attention. This paper has a double purpose: on one hand it aims at focusing the teachers' and lecturers' attention on the prosodic phenomena and their dealing with the challenges of French prosody such as the word stress, rhythmic group stress, breath group stress, sentence stress, elision, linking, sequence, intonation and rhythm, and on the other hand, at serving the teaching purposes. It aims at providing practical advice necessary to the aspects of prosody and corrective phonetics, and to supply several types of exercises in order to establish the right concepts and habits in developing a "new" prosodic system.

Introduction

     Pronunciation plays an important role in achieving linguistic communication, especially in foreign languages. The wrong pronunciation and violation of the correct pronunciation norms impedes the communication process. For a correct communication, application of the pronunciation rules is important in the speaking and understanding processes and mastering a foreign language first and foremost means mastering the prosodic elements and its phonetic system. Correct pronunciation of a foreign language, or better, mastery of verbal expression is also an important factor of integration in the society this language is spoken in.

     The acquisition of a foreign language in the university/school/course begins with the conscious and deliberate use of the sound and prosodic elements of its phonetic system. From the beginning, it is important to acquire the prosodic or suprasegmental elements, as well as the articulatory and acoustic aspects of sound formation, which means mastering the phonetic model, which presents its own difficulties. The skills obtained from practising the native language can rarely be transferable. They would rather limit the development of new habits dictated by the phonetic system of the foreign language being learnt.

     Pronunciation, like any other behaviour-related aspect, is built at whatever age or level the pupil/student is. Systematic and persistent work, with explanations and exercises suitable for the articulatory basis of the pupils/students will have significant effects in achieving correct pronunciation. However, in teaching and in many foreign language textbooks we note that prosodic elements such as stress, intonation, melody, rhythm, etc. are not paid due attention.
This article attempts to offer our experience in improving the pupils'/students' pronunciation in terms of mastering some key prosodic elements of French and in treating them in the teaching process.

1. Prosodic elements

     "Whoever wants to learn to pronounce a foreign language correctly, must first gain new articulatory habits. He must learn to pronounce foreign sounds exactly the way they are pronounced in the language in question, and should not simply use the native language habits. We should not believe that it is enough to learn to pronounce some new sounds and use the rest of the sounds we know. It is an entire articulatory habit system, including intonation and stress use, which will be replaced by something new, "-says Malmberg (1954)

     Some of the most important prosodic phenomena in teaching French deal with the stresses: word stress, sense group stress, "breath group" (*groupe de soufle*) stress, sentence stress, elision, linking (*liaison*), sequence (*enchaînement*), intonation and rhythm.

1.1. Word stress

     The main difference between both languages in terms of phonetics is the prosodic phenomenon of the word stress. In French, the stress falls on the last syllable of the word (Malmberg, 1954). It is fixed (Guex and Pithon, 1988). French is an oxytone language carrying the stress on the last syllable because during their evolution, words were transformed and reduced: thus, for example the paroxytone word arbor retained its stress but the rest of the vowels were devocalized leading to the word ['aRbR] "arbre" (Carton, 1974).

In Albanian the stress may fall on different syllables of a word, on the first, second, third and fourth syllable. Albanian is mainly a language with a penultimate stationary (fixed) stress (Memushaj, 2009).

This feature leads to a frequent and typical error that pupils/ students make while pronouncing words in French: they place the stress on the penultimate syllable.

Therefore it is necessary to start with a session on phonetics using greeting expressions right from the first teaching class of French (as a foreign language), and to insist on placing the word stress on the last syllable.

E.g.: Bonjour !/ Bonsoir !/ Salut ! A bientôt !

A lundi ! A mardi !/ A demain !

Au revoir !/ Professeur, au revoir !

Not rarely do we notice pupils/students splitting the greeting expression in two words during its pronunciation and placing the stress on the penultimate syllable, on the first part of the word [bɔ̃ ʒuR], [bɔ̃ swaR], based on the native language habits.

The problem is that in both languages placing the stress on other syllables infringes or changes the meaning of the word. This indicates that, besides the sounds, the stress participates in shaping the word sounding, since it is its undeniable feature. Therefore, right from the first classes, we should build the concept of the right stress in French to minimize pronunciation mistakes among the pupils/students.

1.2. Sense group stress

Another key difference between both languages is the fact that in French the basic stress-bearing unit in discourse is the sense group stress and not the word stress (Carton, 1974), differently known in Albanian as the phrase, or semantic group stress. The sense group stress falls on the last syllable of the sense group (Abry and Veldeman, 2007), which can be a noun phrase consisting of definitive or indefinite articles or other types of complements + a noun; a verb phrase; an object phrase, an adjunct phrase, etc. This stressed syllable of the sense group is distinguished by its length, intensity, full articulation (Carton, 1974) and the melody line finishes on it. The French shifted from the word stress to the sense group stress in the 14th-15th century (Carton, 1974).

In Albanian, the semantic group or the phrase stress falls on the last word which is heard more clearly than the rest of the words in these groups. However, the other word retains a secondary stress. Both stresses the primary and the secondary stress fall on the syllable bearing the phonetic stress, and reinforce their intensity. Differently from French, Albanian is a language where the phonetic boundaries between lexical units or between the lexical units and functional units arising as stress units are kept more or less clear (Memushaj, 2009).

Therefore it is necessary in the next teaching classes to proceed with another phonetic session focusing on introducing class objects, pupils/students who can be asked to introduce themselves by saying their first and last names (if it is possible, this introduction should be made in both languages), and to insist on the sense group stress, which in French falls on last syllable of the last word in the sense group.

E.g.: Voilà le tableau/ le bureau/ le plancher/ le plafond

Voici des cahiers/ des stylos/ des cartables

Voilà une salle de classe de notre faculté.

- Je me présente, madame Kastrati, professeur de français dans votre école. Et toi ?

- Je m'appelle Eva/ Mimosa/ Maria/[195] …

Right from the first classes it should be clear for pupils/students that placing the stress on the last syllable, regardless of the stress position in a proper noun in the native language, is a rule and feature of French, related to the fact that French is an oxytone language, with last syllabic word stress. This explanation will avoid the hilarity arising from the unnatural sounding of the proper nouns which is quite different from what they sound in the native language.

1.3. "Breath group" stress

Another difference between both languages is the fact that in French during connected speech, two or three sense groups are pronounced connected, in a sequence, with the primary stress on the last syllable of the last word similarly to a polysyllabic phonetic word, forming the "breath group" (groupe de soufle) (Carton, 1974).

Therefore, other classes may cover phonetic sessions focusing on various, more extended introductions and insist on the breath group stress which in French falls on the last syllable of the last word.

E.g.- Je m'appelle Elisabèthe Kastrati, professeur de français dans votre école. Et toi?

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[195] In Albanian (stressed syllables are in bold): Eva, Mimosa, Maria.

- Je m'appelle Eva/ Thoma/ Kristi et je suis étudiant en première année.
- Je viens d' Italie du sud pour étudier dans votre école.
- Je viens de Bérati pour apprendre le français.

1.4. Sentence stress

Another difference between both languages rests in the sentence stress. In French the stress falls on the last vowel of the last syllable in neutral sentences when we do not want to insist on certain words or to express emotions. In some instances, the French uses the emphatic stress. This is an optional and supplementary stress, added to the sentence on various words, without confusing with the sentence stress. It has a different place, nature and function (Guex and Pithon, 1988). It may also fall on the first consonant, the first vowel when the word we aim to emphasize starts in a vowel, or the linking consonant.

In Albanian, the sentence consists of the topic (*thème*) and the focus (*rhème*) and sentence stress is used to emphasize the most semantically important part of the phrase. Since the word bearing the semantic weight of the statement belongs to the focus, which generally comes after the topic, the phrase stress falls on the last word of the focus group leading to a rhematic stress (Memushaj, 2009). In Albanian, when we want to express affection or insist on a certain word, which is not the last word of the sentence, the sentence stress shifts from the last word onto the word we aim to emphasize. In such cases we are dealing with a different type of stress: the insistence stress which can be logical or emotional (Memushaj, 2009).

The logical stress falls on the lexical and functional units, whereas, the emotional stress falls on lexical units, by extending the first vowel and raising its fundamental tone, when expressing positive emotions. When we express negative emotions, the first consonant of the word is extended.

Therefore, other classes may cover various phonetic sessions focusing on rapid rhythmic sentences and insist on the sentence stress, which in French falls on the last syllable of its last word.

E.g.: - Je suis professeur de français dans votre faculé. Et vous ?
- Je suis étudiante de droit en première année.
- Je travaille comme sécrétaire de votre faculté.
- Je suis étudiant de la langue anglaise.

1.5. Elision, linking and the sequence

The phenomena of elision, linking and the sequence, typical of French, assist and directly affect the attainment of the rhythmic group, which is the fundamental stress unit in French. Based on those, the rhythmic group is pronounced as a single, polysyllabic phonetic word stressed on the final syllable, on the final pronounced vowel. These phenomena are almost absent in Albanian. Albanian preserves the word boundaries not only in the formal style pronunciation but also in colloquial speech with a swifter pace (Memushaj, 2009). Within the sense group, if a notional part of speech ends in a consonant and the other starts in a vowel, they do not form a syllable (Dodi, 2004). The opposite happens with French where such syllables are formed during elision, linking and sequence.

We said "almost" because in Albanian, elision occurs in front of the pronouns' contracted forms and the particle "u" of the passive voice. The sequence occurs between a functional monosyllabic word (when the logical stress does not fall thereon) and a notional word and both are pronounced a single word (Memushaj, 2009). At times when dealing with a functional and a notional word, the word boundaries do not correspond to the syllabic ones (Dodi, 2004). These cases help us make comparisons and consequential explanations.

These cases make up one of the challenges our students face in differentiating the word boundaries and identifying the basic sentence units in French. However, even when they see or read the written words in these groups, it is incorrect to pronounce each word separately in French.

Therefore, it is necessary in various sessions to work on the rhythmic groups, moreover, to insist in the prosodic phonetic phenomena typical of French such as elision, linking, sequence, which help build these rhythmic groups and place the stress on the final syllable similarly to the following examples.

In discourse, every notional part of speech in French carries the stress on the final syllable and the last vowel [ə] at the end of a word never forms stressed syllables. In general, the letter "e" and the consonants at the end of words in French are not pronounced.

Ex. a) elision (underlined)
L'élève de notre classe, c'est l'élève de l'école des langues.
[le-lɛv-d(ə)nɔtrə-klas//sɛ-le-lɛv-d(ə)le-kɔl-de-lãg]
J'ai une idée./ Je n'ai pas d'idée.
Qu'est-ce que c'est ? – C'est le livre de Martin.

*C'est le **livre** qu'il **m'a** don**né.***
*C'est parce qu'il **t'aime**.*
*Il arrive jus**qu'ici.***

Ex. b) linking (de liaison):
    *C'est un tab**leau.***
    *[sɛ-tɑ̃-ta-**blo**]*
    *C'est une facul**té**.*
    les élèves/ des élèves (or with aux/ mes/ ces/ quels/ deux…)
    *nous écou**tons**/ ils é**coutent**/ on é**coute***
    *dans une mi**nute**…/ après une réac**tion***
    *en Ita**lie**/ chez un pharma**cien***
    *premier a**mi**/ petit a**mi***

Ex. c) sequence (d'enchaînement):

1) consonant
    *Il est con**tent**.*
    *[i-lɛ-kɔ̃-**tã**]*
    *Il a du cou**rage**.*
    *Il habite **là**.*
    *Elle écoute RFI chaque ma**tin.***
    *Une tête arron**die**.*
    *Un monde en fo**lie**.*
2) vowel
    *Elle a envie de sor**tir**.*
    *[e-lɑ̃-vi-də-sɔR-**tiR**]*
    *C'est le tableau électro**nique.***
    *Tu es en **face**.*
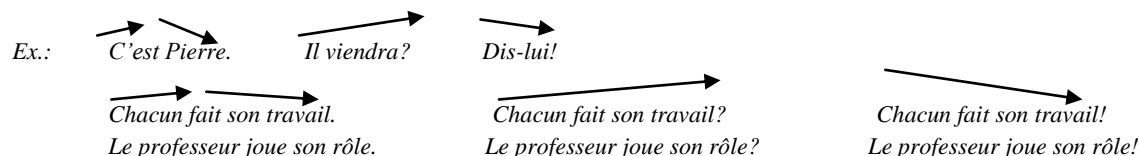   *Jean est gravement ma**lade**.*
    *Il ira au mar**ché**.*
    *Tu as vu **Paul**.*

1.6. Rhythm

Another conspicuous difference between both languages is the rhythm, which in French is regular (Abry and Veldeman, 2007). In French all unstressed syllables share sensitively the same length and are pronounced as clearly as the stressed syllable (Guex and Pithon, 1998). Rhythm combines with the intonation resulting in another prosodic phenomenon that Albanian speakers need to exercise and master, albeit the intonation schemes of simple sentences are generally the same in both languages (Boriçi, 1988). Whereas in Albanian, dynamic stress of the sense group establishes a focus spot leading consequently to vowel shrinking in the unstressed syllables (reduction of length). The farther from the stressed syllable, the higher is the number of reduced unstressed vowels (Memushaj, 2009). They lose part of their length and force but keep the pitch (Dodi and Gjinari, 1985).

Therefore, we have to insist in imitating the regular rhythm of French. We have to explain to pupils/students the intonation schemes of French. The intonation is rising and then falling in statements, commands and general questions that do not start in an interrogative words (Guex and Pithon, 1998).

Ex.:   *C'est Pierre.*   *Il viendra?*   *Dis-lui!*

Chacun fait son travail.   *Chacun fait son travail?*   *Chacun fait son travail!*
Le professeur joue son rôle.   *Le professeur joue son rôle?*   *Le professeur joue son rôle!*

Mastering the rhythmic patterns is fundamentally important: it is the basis of learning to speak (Wioland, 1991). Phonetic correction would work better when applied naturally with catalysts such as the intonation, rhythm, affection (the attitude expressed through placing the emphatic tone on one/several words in the sentence) (Renard, 1979)

Ex.: C'est un récit extraordinaire.

[sɛ-tɑ̃-Re-si-eks-tRa-ɔR-di- nɛ:R]

Elle est plus intelligente que sa soeur.

[ɛ-lɛ ply-zɛ̃-tɛ li- ʒɑ̃:t-kə-sa-sœ R]

By replacing "récit" with: conte, histoire, poésie etc. and "intelligente" with other adjectives we can form other patterns.

2. Conclusions

Mastering the prosodic elements and the phonetic system of a foreign language is paramount in pronouncing it correctly to establish the linguistic communication. In the teaching practice and in many textbooks of foreign languages prosodic elements such as the stress, intonation, rhythm, etc. are not given proper attention, therefore, this article should be considered as the wish to improve the pronunciation of pupils / students in terms of mastering the key prosodic elements of French.

Depending on the linguistic level and age of pupils/students the main topics of the most important prosodic elements are suggested to be studied: the word stress, rhythmic group stress, breath group stress, sentence stress, elision, linking, sequence, intonation and rhythm. Exercises aimed at creating the correct concepts of the French phonetic system and establishing the habits of automation should start in the early classes through numerous exercises organized for some minutes at the beginning of the session to provide the correct patterns pupils/students should imitate, right from the start. These exercises may follow the theoretical explanation based on the pupils/students' language competences which are identified by the teachers/lecturers who assess the difficulties these learners may face. Reference to and comparison with the native language may take place when identifying wrong pronunciation rising from borrowing the native language pattern. This article does not claim to provide a comprehensive and exhaustive overview of dealing with the prosodic phenomena, but quite modestly it aims at providing some typical exercise templates, with a growing difficulty scale on the prosodic phenomena in order to establish the necessary pattern.

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