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PROSODIC PITFALLS WHEN LEARNING SWEDISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

[Elisabeth Zetterholm](#), Linnaeus University

To avoid misunderstandings in communication it is important to achieve an intelligible pronunciation, especially when learning a new language. Different factors, such as the phonology and prosody of L1 and L2, often have an influence on a second language learner's success. In Swedish it is, in particular, the fronted rounded vowels, heavy consonant clusters and the unfamiliar prosodic structure that cause problems for second language learners regardless of their native language. This paper will focus on two important prosodic features, namely vowel quantity and word stress. Recordings of Swedish language learners with different native languages have been analyzed. Even though many of them have lived in Sweden for more than 20 years they still have problems with vowel quantity and word stress. There are individual differences between the speakers, but it is also obvious that their first language might play an important role.

INTRODUCTION

New patterns in global migration affect Sweden in similar ways to many other countries. It is necessary to learn Swedish for personal and social reasons as well as to be integrated in society. Achieving an intelligible pronunciation in the new language might be a good motive to prevent a negative attitude to immigrants. In a study by Torstensson (2010) Swedes were asked about their general attitudes to immigrants and immigration. They report a positive view in general, but concerning their attitude toward different foreign accents there is a clear preference based on stereotyping and social desirability. The Swedish movie *Se upp för dårarna* (Mind the Gap) (<http://www.imbd.com/title/tt0959342/>) from 2007 focuses not only on a pronunciation error, but also on a general attitude to immigrants. The title is taken from one of the actors' expressions when he is working on the Metro in Stockholm and is supposed to say *Se upp för dörrarna* every time he closes the doors before departure from the station. He intended to say [se:ʊpfø:dø:raŋa] (mind the gap) but he actually said [se:ʊpfø:dø:raŋa] (mind the fools). This character was a specialist in heart disease in his native country, but the only job he could get in Sweden was in the Metro. Different studies show that native speakers often judge immigrants and evaluate their personal qualities based on the speaker's foreign accent and the pronunciation plays an important role when it comes to the listener's attitude (e.g. Boyd, 2004; Flege, 1988; Munro, 2008; Torstensson, 2010). Therefore, the speaker should be motivated to acquire an intelligible pronunciation. However, it is obvious that it is difficult for some speakers to produce a near-native pronunciation depending on different factors such as transfer from their first language, differences in the languages' phonology, the speaker's age, social interaction with native speakers and motivation. It is likely that native speakers will understand a foreign-accented speech in the right context and that pronunciation errors on the segmental level are often errors of intelligibility more than of prosody (e.g. Field, 2005; Munro & Derwing, 1995; Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). On the other hand, it seems that it is possible to improve intelligibility when focusing on suprasegmental features (Derwing & Rossiter, 2003). Markham (1997) shows that Swedish listeners judged speakers as native when they imitated different languages and dialects, which indicates that at least some of us can change our articulation habits. McAllistar (2000) discusses a perceptual foreign accent and its implications for L2 acquisition and reorganization

of phonetic categories, features that are missed or not correctly identified. That causes a foreign accent in both perception and production, and when it comes to practical use in e.g. simultaneous interpreting more communication training might be needed in their education. Torstensson (2010) mentions the problem of disfluencies in bilingual dialogue and indicates that the attitude to foreign accents in a courtroom may affect how immigrants are judged, which can cause problems. The study presented in this paper was done in order to shed light on pronunciation skills among some interpreters in Swedish and will only focus on the interpreters' production and the prosodic features of vowel quantity and word stress.

SWEDISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

In the eighties of the last century Bannert (2004) and Garlén (1988) did good work in collecting describing immigrant languages and comparing them to Swedish, partly with the implication of pointing out the potential difficulties that are likely to occur for students speaking particular native languages. These studies contain descriptions of a varied number of languages, in particular the phonological systems of the different languages, and also an analysis of observed pronunciation problems, based on a large amount of data collected from L2 learners of Swedish. In Bannert (2004) there is also a ranking of the different languages according to their distance from the phonology of the Swedish language, based on observed pronunciation errors and difficulties produced by the native speakers' diverse languages collected in the material. Some of the general problems for second language learners of Swedish are the consonant clusters, the rounded front vowels and the prosody, e.g. the vowel quantity and word stress.

Swedish vowel quantity

Swedish has nine long vowels with distinctions in both quality and quantity, /i, y, e, ø, ε, u, o, α/. In most dialects there are nine long and eight short vowels since there is often a coincidence between the long e and ε vowels in the distribution of a short vowel. Diphthongization of long vowels occurs in some dialects. The front vowels /i, y, e, ø/ appear as rounded and unrounded pairs. There is also a distinction in quality between the long and short vowels, especially for the *a* vowel (Engstrand, 2007). In the orthography the short vowel is often followed by two consonants, but that is not a rule. The quantity refers to the morphology. There are minimal pairs depending on vowel quantity, see Table 1.

Table 1

Examples of minimal pairs depending on vowel quantity.

Long vowel	Short vowel
<i>ful</i> [fʉ:l] (ugly)	<i>full</i> [fʉl] (drunk)
<i>glas</i> [gla:s] (glass)	<i>glass</i> [glas] (ice cream)
<i>bus</i> [bʉ:s] (joke)	<i>buss</i> [bus] (bus)
<i>här</i> [hæ:r] (here)	<i>herr</i> [hær] (mister)

Swedish word stress

There are three important prosodic distinctions to be aware of in Swedish, namely the two tonal word accents, or pitch accents, which occur on the stressed syllable in two-syllable words and make a distinction in the meaning of the words, e.g. minimal pairs. Another distinction is the

vowel quantity and the third distinction, which maybe causes most problems for second language learners since it is important for an intelligible conversation, is the word stress pattern. There are quite a number of word pairs in Swedish whose meaning is distinguishable only by word stress. However, there is a correlation between word stress and the quantity of the syllable. A stressed syllable is extended and it is only possible to have the main stress on one syllable, but more than one syllable with secondary stress. There is no fixed word stress pattern in Swedish, and the stress can occur on any of the syllables depending on the origin of the word, the inflection or whether the word is a compound word. None the less there is a simple rule saying that the first part of a compound word usually gets the main stress. Concerning inflections the rules are more complex depending on the morphology.

The stressed syllable is not marked in the orthography, which can be confusing when reading, especially if there is no clear context. One example is the word *förslag* ['fœ:ʂla:g] (the initial gesture by the conductor in front of the orchestra or the choir) or [fœʂ'la:g] (proposal). Another minimal pair is *förtryckt* ['fœ:trykt] (pre-printed) or [fœ'trykt] (oppressed). The rule, with some exceptions, is that some prefixes and suffixes always take stress, while others never do. See Table 2 for some examples of minimal pairs depending on stress on the first or second syllable.

Table 2.

Examples of minimal pairs depending on word stress.

Stress on first syllable	Stress on second syllable
' <i>dator</i> [da:tur] (computer)	da'torer [datu:rør] (computers)
' <i>banan</i> [ba:nan] (the track)	ba'nan [bana:n] (banana)
' <i>kallas</i> [kalas] (called)	ka'las [kala:s] (party)
'modern [mu:døn] (the mother)	mo'dern [mudæ:n] (fashionable)

RECORDINGS

The recordings used in this study are from oral readings of 54 sentences, which are prepared with the focus on segments and prosodic minimal pairs that are known to cause problems for learners (Bannert, 2004). Interpreters of Swedish with different mother tongues have been recorded, in order to be aware of their own pronunciation and as a training session. They were able to compare their own speech with recordings of a native speaker and they were also given individual instructions and comments. They all participated in a weekend course in Swedish Prosody for Interpreters, a further education course. Listening to their own pronunciation was one part of the course. They were told that the recordings would be used for analysis and research, and consented to this. Forty recordings of 26 female and 14 male speakers, aged 31–64, have been analyzed. Each recording used in this specific study is approximately four minutes long. The speaker's first languages vary, with a majority speaking Arabic and Kurdish, some others Albanian, Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, Serbian, Assyrian, German, Kinyarwanda/French, Pashto/Dari, Spanish or Vietnamese. The time they have lived in Sweden ranges from less than 10 years to 40 years. Most of them, but not all, have studied Swedish for Immigrants, none of them for more than two years. They are all interpreters in Swedish in different areas and with

different experiences. Some of them are licensed interpreters, while some of them have only had an introductory course. Not all of them, but some, have an education, e.g. teacher or engineer, from their native country, but find it hard to get a job in Sweden.

ANALYSES

When listening to the recordings it is obvious that some of the interpreters speak with an intelligible pronunciation and read the sentences with a clear articulation, but still with a foreign accent. However, others are hard to understand depending on the pronunciation and the way they stress the words, even though they read prepared sentences. Of course there are individual differences, but in general the deviant pronunciation seems to have a correlation to their mother tongue in the first place, not depending on how long they have lived in Sweden.

Vowel quantity

Vowel quantity is a distinctive feature in Swedish, and the recorded sentences were prepared with quite a lot of minimal pairs to get an idea of whether the speakers were aware of this prosodic feature. There are individual differences, but in general it seems that speakers with Arabic, Kurdish or Serbian as their first language do not manage to produce the contrast between long and short vowel in Swedish, regardless of how long they have lived in Sweden. An acoustic analysis in Praat (<http://www.fon.hum.uva.nl/praat>) confirms the audible impression. In pairs like *granen/grannen* [gra:nən/granən] (the fir tree/the neighbor), *vägen/väggen* [vɛ:gən/vɛgən] (the wall/the road) and *busar/bussar* [bɛ:sar/bʊsar] (hooligans/buses) all the words have a short first vowel when produced by these speakers. Differences between speakers with other first languages are more on an individual bases. The five speakers with Albanian as their mother tongue have no problems with the length contrast or the word stress.

Word stress

Word stress is often language-specific and seems to be quite hard for second language speakers to learn and master. In a compound word the main stress is mostly on the first syllable, or at least the first word in the compound, in Swedish. More than 20 of the read sentences consist of one or two compound words. Again, most speakers with Arabic or Kurdish as their first language, seem to have problems with the Swedish way of stressing a word since they often stress the second element in the compounds. A few examples are shown in Table 3.

Table 3.

Examples of pronunciation of compound words.

Right pronunciation in Swedish	Pronounced by Arabic and Kurdish speakers
' <i>nymålad</i> ['ny: ,mo:lɑd] (just painted)	<i>ny'målad</i> [ny: 'mo:lɑd]
' <i>läroböcker</i> ['læ:ru ,bøkɛr] (textbooks)	<i>läro'böcker</i> [læ:rɔ 'bøkɛr]
<i>tele'fonnummer</i> [tɛlɛ'fo:nʉmɛr] (phone number)	<i>telefon'nummer</i> [tɛlɛfo:'nɛmɛr]

Some of them also have difficulties realizing the differences in the placement of word stress when pronouncing minimal pairs, especially speakers with Arabic and Kurdish as their first

languages. Figures 1–3 show some results from the acoustic analyses, made in Praat. In Figure 1 a female speaker with Arabic as her mother tongue read sentences containing the minimal pair *formel* (formula), with stress on the first syllable, and *formell* (formal), with stress on the second syllable. In both words she put the stress on the last syllable, but there should be a difference with the stress on the first syllable in the figure to the left. For comparison, Figure 2 shows the acoustic analysis of a Swedish male speaker reading the same sentences. It is obvious that there is a difference in stress and vowel quantity between the two words. In Figure 3 the vowel quantity and the word stress are compared between a male Swedish speaker (to the left) and a female native speaker of Spanish (to the right). The stress should be on the first syllable to be correct in native-like Swedish, but the Spanish speaker did not manage to do that. Her pronunciation is a nonsense word in Swedish, which might cause some problems for listeners. She has lived in Sweden for seven years, which is quite a short time compared to the other interpreters in this study.

Female speaker, L1 Arabic

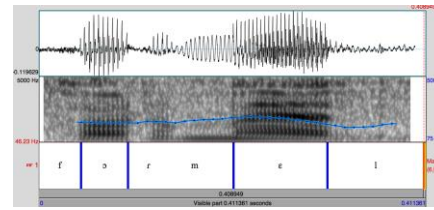
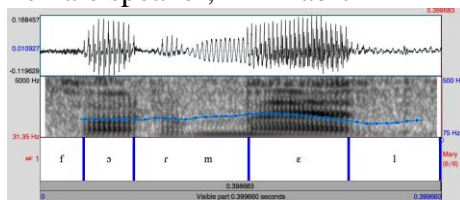


Figure 1. ...en och annan formel (any formula) ...är ganska formell (is quite formal)

Male speaker, L1 Swedish

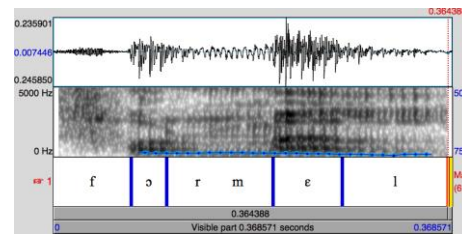
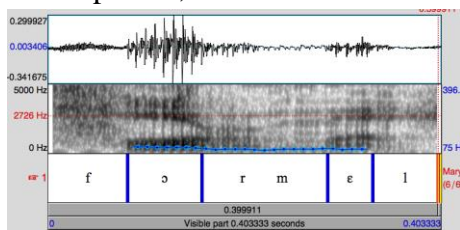
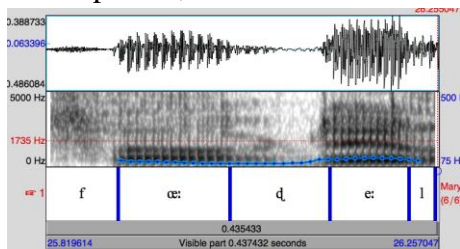


Figure 2. ...en och annan formel (any formula) ...är ganska formell (is quite formal)

Male speaker, L1 Swedish



Female speaker, L1 Spanish

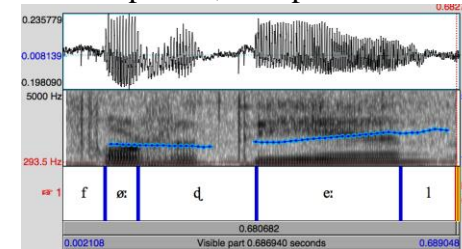


Figure 3. ...en för'del... (an advantage)

...en för'del (nonsense word)

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Understandable pronunciation is important in communication in everyday life. It is sometimes frustrating for both the listener and the speaker when they do not understand each other. Both perception and production are of importance, but this paper focuses only on production. The analysis of the recordings of the interpreters in this study raises questions about their knowledge of Swedish phonology, prosody and pronunciation. There are differences between the prosody in

the Arabic and Kurdish languages compared to Swedish which can explain why these speakers have problems when producing the vowel quantity and the word stress. Referring to Bannert's ranking list (2004) Arabic seems to be one of the languages with quite a long distance from Swedish. The Kurdish language is not analyzed by Bannert. Sometimes the context is a cue for the listener, but if the pronunciation makes a change in meaning, the communication might lead to misunderstandings, which can have consequences for another person, e.g. in court or at the hospital. The results of this study also confirm earlier Swedish studies (Bannert, 2004) showing that vowel quantity and word stress are quite hard to learn for a second language learner, but necessary to control. Different research studies referred to in Field (2005) and Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) show that the prosody, intonation and stress patterns are often more important than an exact pronunciation of segments for understanding. A perception test with naïve Swedish listeners might confirm that in Swedish as well. The results of this study raise a couple of questions about teaching Swedish as a second language and the importance of correct pronunciation. Teachers of Swedish as a second language have to be aware of the phonetic difficulties that often have an impact on the foreign accent, both vowels and consonants, but in the light of the results of this and Bannert's (2004) study, teachers might have to give priority to the vowel quantity and stress patterns. An intelligible pronunciation probably also has a positive effect on the general attitude to different foreign accents.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elisabeth Zetterholm is a senior lecturer and researcher in Swedish as a second language at Linnaeus University, Sweden. Her current research interests focus on pronunciation in second language acquisition and how to learn to speak Swedish with an intelligible accent. When teaching, most of her students are prospective teachers of Swedish as a second language and therefore she wants to develop the teaching methodology. She received her PhD in phonetics at Lund University, Sweden (2003). Her thesis and postdoctoral research were about voice imitation, with the focus on speaker identification and individual features in voice and speech.

Contact information:

Elisabeth Zetterholm, PhD

Department of Swedish

Linnaeus University

SE-351 95 Växjö

Sweden

Tel: +46 70 5354183

Email: elisabeth.zetterholm@lnu.se

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