

Prosody and Meaning: The Role of Rhythm in the Classroom

Jacob J. Birtill

Uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination.

(Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 4)

Introduction

In the above epigraph, Wittgenstein uses metaphorical language to capture not only *what* we say and *how* we say it, but also the *effect* our words have on a listener. Conversations, debates, discussions, and presentations each exhibit unique rhythms that reflect the characteristics of those who take part in such activities. This rhythmic aspect of speech – that is, its prosody – is often overlooked in the teaching of a second language, which neglects how language sounds in real interaction. Drawing students' attention to prosody is therefore a meaningful endeavor, particularly in an age of machine translation. What distinguishes one speaker from another is not only *what* they say but *how* they use prosody to communicate and connect with others.

This paper, therefore, explores the value of prosody and its role in the classroom. Its aim is twofold. First, it seeks to complicate the way English is rhythmically presented in the classroom. From a pedagogical perspective, it is understandable that the subtleties of spoken English are often both exaggerated and simplified; however, a lack of nuance can distort speech patterns and potentially lead to misunderstandings outside the classroom. Second, it examines the value of prosody as a means of cultivating students' confidence, motivation, and creativity. In approaching the topic in this way, this paper moves beyond the pragmatics of prosody to demonstrate how students can

actively use prosody to engage listeners and foster meaningful interaction.

The first section provides an overview of prosody, outlining its various functions and its representation in teaching materials. The second section examines the dichotomy of stress-timed and syllable-timed rhythm. I argue that, although outdated, this distinction continues to influence how speech is presented in the classroom. By drawing parallels between language and music, I aim to highlight the rhythmic complexity of spoken prosody in both conversation and oration, contrasting it with the simplified patterns found in teaching contexts. The third section turns to practical applications and considers how prosody can be integrated into classroom activities to build students' fluency and confidence while also serving as a medium for creativity. In doing so, I aim to demonstrate the importance of prosody and argue that it should be placed in the foreground of language teaching. Through an exploration of the interplay between rhythm, meaning, and expression, teachers can engage learners in ways that go beyond controlled production toward more authentic communication.

1. What Is Prosody?

Prosody encompasses a broad range of phenomena in both spoken and written language. Pinker (2014) defines it as “the melody, timing, and rhythm of speech” (p.316). Ward (2019) describes it as “intonation, loudness, timing, and the like” (p. 1). For Romero-Trillo (2012), it is “the stress, rhythm, and intonation of language” (*Pragmatics and Prosody*). Approaches to prosody vary and include phonology as well as syllable stress. This can be seen in pronunciation differences such as *ad-VER-tise-ment* (əd'vɜː.tɪs.mənt) versus *ad-ver-TISE-ment* (,æd.və.'taɪz.mənt) in American English. Stress differences also occur in words used as both nouns and verbs; for example, the British pronunciation of *export* as a verb (ɪk'spɔːt) and as a noun ('ek.spɔːt).

There are also paralinguistic considerations, referring to aspects of language

that are not solely linguistic. This phenomenon is powerfully illustrated at the beginning of *Philosophical Investigations* where Wittgenstein quotes Augustine:

Their intention was shewn by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of the voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something. (Augustine quoted in Wittgenstein, 1958, p.2)

Augustine concludes that, after learning these features, he uses them to express his “own desires.”

The activity of conveying meaning through such features is closely linked with the pragmatics of prosody. In linguistics, meaning can be interpreted in various ways: through the locution of a speech act, through the broader context in which the speech act is embedded (illocution), and through the paralinguistic features that shape the delivery of the speech act. Prosodic features in written English, especially in historical texts, can be particularly ambiguous and are open to various interpretations. For example, the prosody of the uneven double ending of “to be or not to be, that is the question” could be interpreted as a deliberate deviation from strict iambic pentameter in order to create rhythmic dissonance.

In spoken English, however, prosodic features – and therefore illocutionary force – are clearer. For instance, the statement “The taxi arrives in ten minutes” could, in certain contexts, carry the illocutionary force of an imperative – “Hurry up and get ready!” – depending on its prosody. This supralexical layer of speech is often underappreciated in language teaching, and complexities of this kind are frequently reduced to broad generalizations, such as the assumption that intonation always rises when asking a question. Such explanations lack nuance, and the next section examines one of the most common simplifi-

cations.

2.1 The Influence of Stress-Timed and Syllable-Timed Rhythm

Perhaps the greatest influence on classroom prosody is the outdated yet still prevalent dichotomy between stress-timed and syllable-timed languages. The former refers to the rhythmic characteristics of both British and American English, where stress dictates rhythm. The latter, syllable-based rhythm, describes languages in which syllables are distributed more evenly, with little variation in stress (Deterding, 2012). A third category, mora-timed languages, includes Japanese, Latin, and Ancient Greek. While this category is less central to English prosody, it offers insight into how teachers approach pronunciation in the context of a Japanese classroom. For example, in class I often hear the one-syllable word ‘clothes’ pronounced with three morae.

The paradigm of stress-timed prosody has greatly shaped teaching practices. For instance, practical applications of a stress-timed approach to English can be found in Teschner and Whitley’s (2004) *Pronouncing English*, where the opening chapter introduces metrical feet such as the iamb, trochee, spondee, and dactyl. Echoing Boulton’s (1962) *The Anatomy of Prose, Pronouncing English* scans the nested rhythms found in natural speech. And although poetic meters do occasionally appear in spontaneous speech, they are often too complex to serve as a reliable pedagogical foundation. For example, the phrase *I’d like to talk to you about...* can be scanned as iambic tetrameter: *I’d like | to talk | to you | about*. Other colloquial utterances (for example, *what do you usually get up to on weekends?*) can be scanned as two dactyls and two amphibrachs: *what do you | usually | get up to | on weekends?*

Such interpretations demonstrate that, while poetic meter does surface in speech, it is inconsistent and may mislead learners if applied too rigidly. A second example of a more deliberate stress-based approach is found in Carolyn

Graham's *Jazz Chants*, where she explains: "Jazz Chants are the rhythmic expressions of Standard American English as it occurs in situational contexts" (1978, p.ix). Despite their pedagogical appeal, these methods often highlight the limitations of stress-based approaches to prosody when set in contrast to the richer rhythmic patterns of actual speech acts.

2.2 Critiques of Stress-Timed and Syllable-Timed Rhythm

Critiques of stress-timed rhythm can be placed into two categories: first, its lack of appropriateness as a *lingua franca*; and second, the inaccurate impression it gives of how English sounds outside the classroom. The first criticism argues that there are various 'Englishes' with syllable-based rhythms, such as those spoken in France, Nigeria, and the Philippines; therefore, stress-timed rhythm should not be favored over other types of English. If the primary goal of English as a global language is clarity, then there is a strong case for promoting syllable-based rhythm (Deterding, 2012). However, this is further complicated by the fact that syllable-based rhythm also occurs in British and American English in certain contexts. Crystal (1995) notes that syllabic rhythm can be heard in British English in contexts such as air traffic control and public announcements, and in both British and American English when speakers are being sarcastic or signaling irritation (p.175). Furthermore, Deterding (2012) warns that a lack of awareness regarding these nuances may lead to misunderstandings in certain contexts, where sincerity may be mistaken for sarcasm or vice versa.

The second criticism is that stress-timed instruction often produces inauthentic rhythm. Since Pike's *The Intonation of American English* in 1945, many teaching materials have suggested that learners should accent all content words in a sentence. For example, Pike's model renders *It was a cold dark day in the middle of September* with strong stresses on every content word (Pike, 1949,

p.123). Such prosody could be seen as overly emphatic, as Dickerson (2015) observes: “This is why native listeners are sometimes put off by the seeming forcefulness with which learners make their points” (p.193). To address this, Dickerson adopts a “two-peak” approach to conversational prosody, with one anchor peak (often at the beginning of a phrase) and one primary stress. He explains:

Unlike stress timing, a spontaneous phrase has at most only two peaks according to the alternative model. If the phrase has more than two content words, then some of the content words will not carry a peak. (Dickerson, 2015, p.188)

It would appear, then, that stress-timed models lack a foundation in empirical reality. The danger is that, when overemphasized, stress-timed and even syllable-timed paradigms are problematic, as they risk oversimplification and lack authenticity. They may also produce unintended negative consequences. As Diepenbroek and Derwing (2013) observe, “pragmatic competence often requires subtlety; an unfortunate consequence of the simplification of speech acts in textbooks may be that learners can actually be perceived as rude” (p.4). This underscores the need for approaches to prosody that reflect authentic, context-sensitive usage rather than rigid rhythmic models.

3.1 Authentic Prosody in Conversations

While stress-based and syllable-based conceptions of rhythm capture some features of English prosody, when these models are exaggerated, there is a danger of speech becoming either too emphatic or too rigid. And although this dichotomy is considered outdated, its influence can still be found in classroom materials. Depending on the subject, such materials tend to exhibit either the monotonous syllable-based rhythm of test preparation resources or the oversimplified, stress-based rhythms of some speaking and listening materials. One

might argue that this is pedagogically understandable, since learners may have a better chance of grasping what is being said. However, it also could be argued that such approaches fail to reflect how speech actually sounds outside the classroom.

Recent research conducted by Ward (2019) demonstrates that there is indeed a wide range of prosodic constructions used in spontaneous speech, one of which is the *Minor Third Construction*, used to convey immediate action. This can be heard in expressions such as *hang on* and *over here*, the latter contradicting the prescriptive rule that *here* has only one syllable. As Ward explains:

Dictionaries say that the word *here* has one syllable, but that's just the default; communicative needs can override that. Since the first word has no stress to contribute, the Minor Third Construction aligns twice with the stressed word, breaking it apart to do so. (Ward, 2019, p.26)

It seems fitting that Ward adopts not only musical terminology but also musical notation in explaining the rhythm of this prosodic construction. A similar approach, although applied more rigorously, can be found in Sidney Lanier's *The Science of English Verse*, in which he states that musical notation “is adequate to all the phenomena of rhythm” (Lanier, 1880, p.41).

Furthermore, if we were to map out the rhythms of a natural conversation, they would not conform to a strict stress-timed or syllable-timed model. As the late composer Frank Zappa once observed: “People talk with rhythms that go all over the place, so why not have melodies that have the same rhythms that resemble human speech?” (Zappa, *Peefeeatko*, n.d.). Rather than conforming to the swing rhythms of jazz or the regular 4/4 structures of popular music, authentic speech rhythms “go all over the place” and perhaps have more in common rhythmically with the musical styles of free jazz or contemporary classical music.

3.2 The Prosody of Presentations

The question of authentic speech patterns also applies to oration. Aristotle (2020), in *Art of Rhetoric*, asserts that “dictation should be neither metrical nor without rhythm” (p.383). Similarly, Quintilian devotes an entire chapter of *Institutio Oratoria* (Book 9) to rhythm, warning that excessively metrical speech sounds insincere, while lack of rhythm bores the listener. “Nothing,” he writes, “can penetrate to the emotions that stumbles at the portals of the ear” (Quintilian, 1976, p.511). Even dialogues and letters, Quintilian notes, have their “own peculiar rhythms which are perhaps the most difficult to analyse” (Quintilian, 1976, p.517). Using music as a metaphor, he explains that prosody is essential for eliciting “emotions in the hearer” (p.511).

This insight is valuable in formal speech such as presentations, where authentic delivery requires not only an understanding of rhythm but also of rhetoric. For instance, most students are familiar with Martin Luther King Jr.’s *I Have a Dream* speech. Ward (2019) notes how the prosody of King’s delivery “makes it clear that he’s engaging in a work of deliberate imagination” (p.75), with particular emphasis on *I* and *dream*. Yet this interpretation offers a limited hermeneutic for understanding the full prosodic force of his speech. Rhetorical devices such as repetition, alliteration, and anadiplosis also contribute significantly to the overall impact of King’s words.

To recapitulate, the main problem of prosody in the classroom is that it is often presented in an unnatural way, where some classroom materials exaggerate certain features of natural speech. Pedagogically, this may be justified as a way of making speech accessible, friendly, and clear. Yet such approaches do not accurately represent authentic speech in either formal or informal contexts. From an empirical perspective, speech rhythm is varied, unpredictable, and highly complex. Furthermore, a lack of prosodic awareness can lead to both misunderstandings and a diminished ability to communicate ideas both authen-

tically and persuasively. The latter point is particularly pressing in an age when many have access to large language models (LLMs). It would therefore seem crucial to emphasize the human element of prosody in second language learning.

4. Practical Applications of Prosody

The teaching of prosody remains both elusive and experimental. Ward (2019) acknowledges this reality:

Teaching prosody effectively is today more of an art than a science, and will likely stay that way for the foreseeable future. Helping students acquire conversational prosody is likely to require teachers with sensitive ears, good voice control, and patience. (p. 73)

The question is: how should prosody be approached in the classroom? A possible criticism of Ward's research is that it sometimes feels like a language within a language. Teaching all the prosodic constructions Ward outlines would not only require confidence in explaining them but also consistent reinforcement and considerable patience. There is also the potential danger of instruction becoming too focused on prosody – an important but not exclusive aspect of most speaking classes. Furthermore, excessive awareness of prosodic constructions could lead to their use in a self-conscious manner, thereby returning us to the original problem of inauthentic speech. Ward does, however, mention positive results: “the students could readily understand, appreciate their significance, and learn to produce them” (p. 73).

In my own teaching experience, I have observed that students respond positively to learning the rhythm of speech acts, and they enjoy the challenge of repeating the rhythmic patterns of spoken English. This approach has been particularly effective in contexts where students appear unmotivated or reluctant to engage in class activities. This, no doubt, explains why textbooks such as

Jazz Chants and *Pronouncing English* are successful, as learning rhythm can be both empowering and engaging. However, in my own attempts at incorporating prosody, I try to make a conscious effort to present language in a more authentic way.

One place to start is with vocabulary. For each lesson, I assign a word list connected to the class topic. For homework, students map out the syllable and stress patterns for each word (for example, fun-da-men-tal-ly). In class, I model pronunciation, after which students test each other's awareness by asking questions such as: *How many syllables does the word _____ have?* or *Can you form a question using word _____?* Students engage positively in this peer-led activity, as it helps them focus on the segmental features of English words. Moreover, this practice not only raises awareness of the phonological elements of words but also encourages students to use the vocabulary to express their own ideas. When applied methodically, students begin to notice recurring patterns, such as stress differences between nouns and verbs. Students generally respond well to this activity at the start of class, as it directs their attention to English pronunciation. Initially, some students tend to overestimate the number of syllables in English words, since Japanese divides words by morae; however, with practice, I have observed an increase in confidence in pronunciation and a willingness to use the target vocabulary in creative ways.

A second approach to teaching prosody involves adapting textbook discussion questions. As noted by Diepenbroek and Derwing (2013), some questions, while grammatically correct, are awkwardly worded and do not sound natural when spoken aloud. In such cases, I rephrase them to reflect a more natural cadence and provide a model for the class. To help students reproduce the rhythm, I click my fingers to mark the unique stress of the question. Furthermore, embedding these questions into the structure of a conversation allows students to practice discourse markers, hesitation devices, and other conversa-

tional phenomena reflecting a more authentic context. As a consequence, repeated exposure at the beginning of each lesson helps students develop an ear for the rhythms of natural interaction. One student remarked that through consistent reinforcement, they learned how to integrate such rhythms into their own conversations.

I also apply this approach to longer discussions, where students learn to recognize how prosody affects the illocutionary force of speech in debates. In order to achieve this, it is important to provide a realistic model. Although there is a temptation to exaggerate prosodic features, a natural model more effectively demonstrates how speech acts function in authentic conversation. At the beginning of the semester, I often observe students relying heavily on scripted target phrases I provide as a safety net. This often tends to produce a jagged and unnatural delivery. However, with consistent exposure to the function and prosody of speech acts, students begin to internalize natural rhythm and intonation while also acquiring a set of linguistic moves they can make in extended discussions. Furthermore, I have also noticed that students respond more enthusiastically once they have greater prosodic control over the target language.

Finally, prosody also plays a fundamental role in formal speaking tasks such as presentations. As Quintilian observed, an essential element of effective oration is the rhythmic aspect of delivery. This is not only important for engaging listeners but also for instilling confidence in the presenter. Demonstrating the prosody of an introduction, for example, provides students with a clear model they can use, thereby reducing performance insecurity. Furthermore, it is equally important to show how speakers use prosody creatively to capture and sustain the attention of their listeners. In my own teaching practice, I have introduced various rhetorical schemes and provided real-world examples of their use in both the humanities and social sciences. After highlighting the pro-

sodic force of such schemes, I place students into small groups, where they construct their own examples. Students generally enjoy such activities, as each scheme provides a framework in which they can exercise creativity. I have often been struck by students' thoughtful and imaginative use of these schemes, which strengthens both the delivery and force of their arguments.

Conclusion

The integration of prosody in the classroom is no easy feat, and it remains an often neglected yet significant element of language. What we say is important, but how we say it is equally important – whether we use prosody creatively to give force to our ideas or pragmatically to express our intentions. This paper has attempted to illustrate these complexities and to argue that the role of prosody in language teaching deserves more careful consideration. Furthermore, cultivating an understanding of prosodic constructions, rhetorical schemes, and a sense of play is becoming increasingly relevant in an age where the practical use of language risks being eclipsed by the widespread adoption of automated translation. However, the prosody of a moving speech, a lively debate, or a conversation remains distinctly and uniquely human. Therefore, raising awareness of the prosodic elements of speech can not only give students greater confidence in speaking but also provide them with more control over how they present their ideas in a second language.

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