

A corpus-based study of Croatian standard accentuation

This paper will report the results of an acoustic analysis of the prosodic features of 6 speakers, based on recordings of the regular language-advice series on Croatian Radio 1, *Govorimo hrvatski*. Standard Croatian, like the closely related Bosnian, Montenegrin, and Serbian standard varieties, is traditionally described as having a complex prosodic system with lexical distinctions in the quantity of tonic and post-tonic syllables and distinctive pitch (rising vs. falling) on both short and long accented vowels. Previous studies have confirmed acoustic correlates for these distinctions, although the evidence indicates that the “rising” and “falling” accents are distinguished primarily by the relationship between the fundamental frequency of the tonic and post-tonic syllable, rather than the pitch contour of the accented syllable itself.

However, it should be noted that the published acoustic analyses of lexical prosodic distinctions have often been based on the speech of subjects chosen because their native local varieties correspond closely to the prescriptive accentual norms, and/or because of their special training in the standard accentuation. Most studies have also focused on speakers from Serbia or Bosnia rather than Croatia. Furthermore, the standard experimental design calls the subjects’ attention to the nature of the task and may lead them to alter their normal pronunciation in order to better conform to the prescriptive norm. On the basis of auditory impressions or discrimination tests other researchers have reported several tendencies of modern Croatian usage that deviate from the prescriptive norm: the failure to distinguish rising vs. falling pitch accents on short vowels, the occurrence of falling accents on non-initial syllables, and the reduction or elimination of quantitative distinctions in post-tonic syllables (note also that these characteristics are not exclusive to Croatian).

This study aims to fill in some of the gaps in previous research by examining the production of Croatian speakers in a context that demands careful standard usage, but where their attention is not focused specifically on accentuation. Although they are all professional linguists who are expected to be knowledgeable about the prescriptive accentuation, their speech does not always correspond to this norm. Depending on the speaker and the context, the standard distinctions of pitch and quantity may be completely neutralized, while in other situations we find measurable differences in fundamental frequency and duration corresponding to those reported in previous studies, but that are smaller and may fall below the threshold of discrimination. This could be described as incomplete neutralization, or perhaps incomplete maintenance of phonological distinctions. The paper will consider factors influencing these deviations from the prescriptive norm and their significance for the standard accentual system.