

Foreign accent features in L2-Swedish by L1-speakers of Tigrinya

Mechtild Tronnier¹, Elisabeth Zetterholm²

¹ *Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund university, Sweden*

² *Department of Culture and Society (IKOS), Linköping university, Sweden*

Mechtild.Tronnier@ling.lu.se, Elisabeth.Zetterholm@liu.se

Abstract

In this contribution an attempt is made to highlight some features of foreign accent in L2-speech of Swedish produced by L1-speakers of Tigrinya. It is clear from the gathered material that most individual vowels and consonants are produced without major deviations and that peculiarities in pronunciation rather occur when segments are put together in the flow of speech.

Introduction

Tigrinya has become one of the L1s in classrooms of Swedish as a second language. This contribution aims to point out observed foreign accent features in Swedish L2, based on learners with Tigrinya as their L1.

The foreign accent features were analysed from recordings made with L1-speakers of Tigrinya who could be found in classes of Swedish as a second language and had a good enough command of Swedish to carry out the elicitation task, which consisted of a reading task.

The recordings consisted of read material based on a list of sentences and a text. The sentences and the text contained words balanced for the Swedish segmental phonemes including prosodies. It also contained some minimal pairs.

Some facts about Tigrinya

Tigrinya is a semitic language, which is a first language to about 6 million speakers in Ethiopia and about 3 million speakers in Eritrea.

Due to conflicts in the east of Africa, Tigrinya speaking diasporas can be found in many parts of the world outside of Africa. Also in Sweden, groups of L2-learners of Swedish, whose L1 is Tigrinya can be found in the respective classrooms.

Brief comparative overview over the sound inventories of Tigrinya and Swedish and the observed foreign accent features

Vowels

Tigrinya has seven vocalic phonemes / i i e ə a o u / (Bulakh, 1997), whereas Swedish has nine, / i y e ø ε a o u / (Bruce, 2010), which can be both short and long. Quantity is however not a vocalic feature in Tigrinya.

As can be observed, front-close-rounded vowels do not occur in Tigrinya. As Tigrinya has labialized consonants (see below), vowels following these consonants get rounded. This does nonetheless not affect /i/ and /e/.

Foreign accent observations based on vowel inventory

The sound belonging to the letter <ö> – being [ø:] or [œ] is not recognised and is therefore mainly produced as [ɔ:], as in the words *för*, *mörk*, *sjön*, which become *[fɔ:r], *[mɔ:rk] *[hɔ:n]. Also other Swedish vowels get

pronounced in that way: /a:/ and /o:/ as in *bana*, *ska*, *hår*, which were realized as *[bɔ:na], *[skɔ:] and *[hɔ:r].

The Swedish vowel /y/ is mostly pronounced as [ɪ], so that the word *mycket* becomes *[mɪk:ɛt]. The vowel /u/ sounds similarly to the Swedish/u/. And words like *ut* is produced as *[u:t] and *jul* as *[ju:l]. Vowel nasalisation also occurs in case the vowel is placed between nasal consonants: the words *man* and *min* result in *[mã] and *[mĩ].

Consonants

The consonantal inventory in Tigrinya overlaps to a large extent with the consonantal inventory of Swedish but contains even more consonants. In that way, in addition to the voicing contrast for bilabial, alveolar and velar stops, Tigrinya has a third set, which is glottalized (Bulakh, 1997), sometimes described as ejectives (v.d. Sluis, S. & L v.d. Zijden-Holstvoog). All three velar stops (voiced, voiceless and glottalized) also occur labialised. Tigrinya has voiced and voiceless labio-dental, alveolar, postalveolar and pharyngeal fricatives. There are voiceless alveolar and post-alveolar affricates and voiced alveolar affricates. There are also glottalized alveolar and post-alveolar affricates.

Consonantal length is distinctive for all but pharyngeal and glottal consonants in Tigrinya.

Foreign accent observations based on consonantal inventory

Concerning the consonants, an impression of foreign accent is based on a very strong pronunciation of syllable- or word final consonants. In that way final /r/, as in *papper*, *bor* and *bussar*, is produced as a trill, which makes it a very prominent sound, which usually is not the case in Swedish. In addition, the rule of final devoicing – which in a milder form also applies for Swedish – is carried out with a very strong sound as in *tid*, *ägg* och *stilig* Which result in *[tʰi:t], *[ɛg̊] och *[sti:lɪk].

As with many other L2-speakers of Swedish, the velar nasal [ŋ] in intervocalic position is usually followed by a voiced velar stop [g] so that the word *många* is pronounced as *[mɔŋga] instead of [mɔŋa].

Prosody

Stress placement is fixed in Tigrinya: it always occurs on the final syllable in disyllabic words and on the penultimate in words with more than two syllables. Swedish on the other hand has flexible stress, and placement depends on the word's morphology and origin.

Melodic accents - which occur in Swedish and can be distinctive – do not occur in Tigrinya. Melodic features play a more important role on phrasal and sentential level than on the lexical level.

As mentioned above, length is distinctive for consonants in Tigrinya, but complementary in Swedish.

Despite the classification of complementary length in Swedish, length distinction is mainly noticeable on vowels, as even variation in quality occurs.

Foreign accent observations based on prosody

In the recorded L2-speech occasional stress misplacement occurs, which mostly is observed when there can be a contrasting word, i.e. in minimal pairs, where lexical contrast is mainly based on stress: 'fö^rteckning vs. fö^r'teckning or 'modern vs. mo^r'dern. The word with the chosen stress placement is probably more familiar to the speakers.

No clear melodic distinction is made for the Swedish word accents. The melodic elements are however not very salient and rather flat, so that they do not deviate too clearly from the required patterns in Swedish.

The distinction between long and short vowels is not always maintained, so that the words in the minimal pairs *vägen* – *väggen* and *busar* – *bussar* sound the same. There is however a generally preference for vowels to be long.

Phonotax and other features

A syllable in Tigrinya is usually of a less complex type, like: CV or CVC. Swedish on the other hand allows monomorphemic syllables of the following structure: C₍₀₋₃₎ V C₍₀₋₃₎. In addition more consonants may occur finally if they are suffixes. This makes the syllable structure of Swedish far more complex as for Tigrinya.

Some initial clusters may occur for loan words in Tigrinya, e.g. /sport/, /statistik/ and /kristin:a/ (“*Christianity*”).

Other initial clusters have arisen from reduction processes where an interconsonantal vowel has been elided, as in /timali/ → [tmali] “yesterday”. If a loanword originally had a final consonant cluster, the vowel /i/ would be added at the end, as in /kəlb/ → [kəlbɪ] (“*dog*”).

Foreign accent observations based on Phonotactic differences

Consonantal clusters are divided into at least two units by epenthetic vowels of the type [ə ɛ ɪ u] e.g. in the words *control*, *ganska*, *fruktsallad* and *finns*, which are produced as *[kəntərəɪ], *[gənɪska], *[fruktsal:əd] and *[fɪn:əs].

Discussion and conclusion

As no rounded front vowels occur in Tigrinya, those are replaced by unrounded vowels in L2-Swedish and for some vowel front articulation has also become back, as

for /ø/. This may coincide with unfamiliarity of the Swedish letter <ö>, where the trema is left unnoticed. The same seems to be the case for the letter <å>, where the diacritic on top is neglected. Similarly to other back non-close vowels, these letters get pronounced as [ɔ:].

It is interesting, that although consonantal length is distinctive in Tigrinya, in the minimal pairs, which contain the complementary quantity contrast in Swedish (e.g. *busar-bussar*): no contrast is made and a pronunciation with a long vowel is preferred. This might mean that variation in consonantal length in the complementary setting of quantity in Swedish has not been noticed by the L1-speakers of Tigrinya, which further suggests that vocalic length variation together with vowel quality variation is primary in Swedish.

Complex consonant clusters are broken up in L2-speech by vowel-insertion. This is however not done by adding the extra vowel after the last consonant in e.g. at word end as shown in the example above about the integration of loanwords with final consonant clusters (Bulakh, 1997), but a vowel is inserted between the last two consonants in the cluster. In addition, different types of vowels were inserted, not only /i/ as presented by the literature (ibid.).

It should be pointed out, that the recorded speakers were quite successful in their production of L2-Swedish. Foreign accent features, which can lead to comprehension difficulties by Swedish L1-listeners are most likely to be based on phontactic peculiarities and the preference of long vowels over short vowels, both aspects inhibiting the expected flow of speech.

Acknowledgements

The Authors would like to thank all participants who helped us to gather the necessary data for this study.

References

- Bruce, G. (2010). Vår fonetiska geografi : om svenskans accenter, melodi och uttal. Studentlitteratur.
- Bulakh, M. (1997). Tigrinya. I: Kaye, Alan S. (red.) *Phonologies of Asia and Africa, Vol. 1*. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 607-640.
- v.d. Sluis, S. &L v.d. Zijden-Holstvoog. Tigrinya Language Overview and Phonology. <https://www.scribd.com/document/823526739/Taalinformatie-Tigrinya-EN> (retrieved 24/04/2026)