

Auditory Phonetic Assessment of Speech of Croatian Oral Narrators

Karolina Vrban Zrinski¹, Lina Malek²

¹ The Faculty of Croatian Studies, University of Zagreb, Croatia

² The Culture and Tourist Centre Bistra, Croatia

kvzrinski@fhs.unizg.hr, lmalek@fhs.unizg.hr

Abstract

The paper presents an analysis of speech used by Kajkavian oral narrators, in the northwestern region of Croatia (the Bistra region). The analysis was conducted by performing the auditory phonetic assessment of speech. The aim of the paper is to explore speech fluency, sentence intonation, logical emphasis in speech, the rhythm and pace of speech, as well as some sociophonetic features. The research findings indicate that, on average, the oral narrators have medium speech fluency (halting speech has been identified, in the form of pauses, mumbling, repetition, stuttering, and hesitation), a falling and flat sentence intonation (with an occasional rising sentence intonation, associated with the specific topic of narration). These oral narrators occasionally reduce the pace of speech (although the pace of speech is generally appropriate) and speak with interrupted rhythm, while their logical emphasizing in speech is very good. Some discrepancies were also found in their speech, primarily in the pronunciation of the original word accent, as well as a variation in the choice of words with respect to the Kajkavian dialect and the standard Croatian language.

Introduction

In the paper, the auditory phonetic assessment is used to analyse the specific segments of speech used by Croatian oral narrators from the Bistra municipality, which is situated in the northwestern Croatia, in the immediate proximity of Zagreb, the capital city of Croatia. The dialect used in Bistra is Kajkavian, which is one of the three Croatian dialects (along with Štokavian and Čakavian).

In the auditory phonetic assessment, the experts apply the protocol of the phonetic status of speech performance which “takes into account the speech patterns and expressiveness, that is, the manner in which the speech patterns are used” (Varošanec-Škarić, 2010: 101). Guberina (1952) states that intonation, intensity, pauses, sentence pace, facial expressions, gestures, and the real context are the values of the spoken language. They (as well as the use of prosodic features) were a subject of research of many Croatian scientists, such as Škarić (1991; 2009), Vuletić (2006; 2007), Varošanec-Škarić (2010) and Vrban Zrinski (2013; 2022). Bošković-Stulli (1975: 74) points out that it is the very values of the spoken language that make up the unity of a folk tale as a spoken creation of the art of words.

Klein (2006b) states that oral storytelling may be stylistically very complex, due to the pauses, gestures, and other features which the audience frequently fails to notice, unconsciously at least (Young, 2000 according to Klein, 2006b: 10). With regard to research on oral narratives, one of the pioneers in this area was Carl Wilhelm von Sydow (Klein, 2006b: 13), in the first half of the 20th century, in Sweden. According to Klein (2006b: 14), during the narrative process, people tend to express experiences, worries, ideas, and values which they consider important as individuals or as a communi-

ty. They do so by using stylistic procedures, tone of speech, tropes and gestures. Wennerstrom (2001) conducted research on prosody in oral narratives, based on the narrative structure model proposed by Labov and Waletzky (1967) and Labov (1972) (according to Wennerstrom, 2001: 201). She believes that prosody – intonation, timing and pitch, is of key importance for interpreting the spoken language, but, unfortunately, it is frequently neglected in the actual discourse analysis (Wennerstrom, 2001: VII). The usage of such “performance features” depends on the level of emotional engagement of speakers in the text, situation, audience and the norms of the speech community (Wolfson, 1982, according to Wennerstrom, 2001: 200). Furthermore, she states that the pitch and volume of speech, voice quality, and timing “can be manipulated to achieve” an endless diversity of emotional and stylistic effects and attitudes. Such effects are particularly frequent in oral stories, a discourse genre which, by definition, includes the “evaluation” – the presentation of the storyteller’s point of view and frequent emotional engagement (Wennerstrom, 2001: 200).

The research mentioned above confirm that prosodic features are an important segment of the oral narrative, closely tied with the emotional engagement of the narrator, and that as such, they should be considered a relevant and valuable subject of phonetic research.

Oral narrators, whose speech was analysed in this paper, come from Bistra, which is known for its preserved traditional culture. Some recent studies have also been focused on the records of the spoken literature of Bistra, - for example, those carried out by Batina (2014) and Vrban Zrinski & Malek (2022), while the speech of Bistra was a subject of research carried out by Ivšić (1936), Lončarić (1996) and Celinić (2011). Ivšić (1936) stated that the speech of Bistra has the Kajkavian accent and classified it as a segment of an older, conservative group of dialects (according to Celinić, 2011: 31). Lončarić (1996) associates it with the Bednja-Zagorje dialect, that is, the dialect spoken in central Zagorje (according to Celinić, 2011: 31). A more comprehensive description of phonological and morphological features of the Gornja Bistra vernacular is provided by Celinić (2011: 30), who points out that contemporary demographic changes and immigration gradually narrow the space in which the original Bistra vernacular is used. It is now mostly found in the narrow family or generation-specific communication contexts. The features of this speech are: the triple accentuation prosodic system, short stress (˘), mainly phonetically falling accent, long falling (˘˘) and long rising accent (˘˘˘). There is also the torpid accent (˘˘˘˘), a variant of short accent, which can be prolonged to the acute (˘˘˘˘˘) (Celinić, 2011: 32). Apart from the triple accentuation system, other features of speech are keeping the metatonic circumflex, omission of oxytonesis, diphthongs *ie*, *ou* and *uo*

in alternation with monophthongs *e*, *o* and *o*, replacement of the final vowel *o* with the vowel *e*, consonant changes (the ancient Slavic **dj* transformed into *j*, the initial *ń* was reflected as *ń*, *jn* and *ń*, while *l* is often preserved (but in some instances it was de-palatalized into *l*), omission of syncretism and *-mę* ending in 1st person plural (Celinić, 2011: 41). The standard Croatian accentual system consists of four accents – a short falling accent (˘), a short rising accent (˙), a long falling accent (˘˘) and a long rising accent (˙˙). Bistra, according to Celinić (2011: 29), falls into a broader Kajkavian dialectal area with its accentual system consisting of three accents.

The previously mentioned research mainly focused on the phonological and morphological descriptions of the Bistra vernacular. Therefore, the description of speech in this paper is focused on particular speech segments which have not been sufficiently studied so far; speech fluency, sentence intonation, logical emphasis in speech, rhythm and pace of speech, as well as some sociophonetic features such as word accent and lexical variations in the choice of Kajkavian words and words from the standard Croatian language. According to Horga (1994: 15), speech fluency is set by a degree of ease of speech planning and production. The sentence is viewed as a meaningful and syntactic unit, while the intonation unit falls within the phonetic category and it is the part of expression which is found between two pauses, regardless of the semantic and syntactic criteria (Horga & Mukić, 2000: 109). Intonation is a set of changes in the basic tone and it consists of “constant changes in the basic tone of speech” (Vuletić, 2007: 72). Logical emphasis is sentence stress, that is, the emphasized word which carries the information within the given context. The conditions for the rhythm are created by adding the same elements with the same spacing (Škarić, 1982: 180), while the pace of speech is the speed of speech, by which the medium speech pace is 4 to 7 syllables in a second (Vuletić, 2007: 72).

Material and methods

The aim of this paper is to describe speech fluency, sentence intonation, logical emphasis in speech, rhythm and pace of speech, discrepancies in pronunciation of the original word accent and variations in the choice of words from Kajkavian dialect and words from the standard Croatian language by Kajkavian oral narrators from Bistra (northwestern Croatia) by means of auditory phonetic assessment based on the protocol of the phonetic status of speech performance (comp. Varošaneć-Škarić, 2010: 101–107; Vrban Zrinski, 2013; 2022).

The material used in the analysis comprises audio recordings of the conversations about life in Bistra with six native oral narrators. The conversations were recorded during field research on oral literature and traditional culture. The total length of audio recordings is 4 hours, 45 minutes and 20 seconds. The corpus used in this research comprises six edited audio recordings, each lasting about 10 minutes and containing a representative speech of an individual oral narrator. The materials were recorded using a speech recorder. The selected oral narrators from Bistra recite oral lyric poetry (they either recite or sing the poems) and oral prose (stories about supernatural creatures and everyday

lives). The stories or tales about everyday lives, as well as myths, legends, fairy tales, fables, jokes, anecdotes and other marginal forms of literature, fall within the category of oral prose (Botica, 2013: 385).

The speech of 6 oral narrators (3 males and 3 females) was analysed. The first male oral narrator is referred to as ON1, the second as ON2, the third ON3. The first female oral narrator is referred to as ON4, the second as ON5, and the third as ON6. At the time when the audio recordings were made, the average age of the oral narrators was 80.16 years (the oldest narrator was 85, and the youngest 71 years old).

With regard to the age of the respondents, these are people at an older stage of life, so it is expected that they have preserved their native Bistra vernacular, as Celinić pointed out (2011: 30), stating that the Bistra vernacular is “frequently marked by generation, and characteristic of people at the older stage of life”. Therefore, we assume that their speech will contain halting (pauses, repetitions, and hesitation), an occasional interrupted rhythm and slower pace of speech. Variations in intonation due to emotional content are also to be expected. We presume that their speech will contain variations in accent and choice of words, as the narrators were aware that the conversations were being recorded.

The authors of this paper conducted the auditory phonetic assessment of speech (by selecting the answers and recording examples) with respect to 1) speech fluency, 2) sentence intonation, 3) logical emphasis, 4) rhythm, 5) pace, 6) accentuation, and 7) corrections of the Kajkavian dialect into the standard language and vice versa, according to the questionnaire for auditory phonetic assessment (see Figure 1 – The auditory phonetic assessment questionnaire) (comp. Varošaneć-Škarić, 2010: 104; Vrban Zrinski, 2013: 47, 48; 2022: 64, 65). The auditory phonetic assessment incorporated selected segments of the protocol of the phonetic status of speech performance.

Oral narrator:	Date of assessment:
	Assessor:
1. Speech fluency 1 – excellent 2 – good 3 – medium 4 – bad	
2. Sentence intonation a) falling b) rising c) falling-rising d) falling-rising-falling (and vice versa) e) rising and falling f) flat	
3. Logical emphasis 1 – excellent 2 – very good 3 – good 4 – quite bad 5 – very bad	
4. Rhythm a) appropriate b) interrupted	
5. Pace a) appropriate b) slow c) quick	
6. Accentuation _____	
7. Corrections Kajkavian – standard _____ standard – Kajkavian _____	

Figure 1. The auditory phonetic assessment questionnaire.

Speech fluency was analysed in two minutes of speech, taking into account the examples of frequent halting (pauses, repetitions, stuttering, and hesitation) according to the scale: 1 – excellent (completely fluent speech in which only one fluency mistake is allowed); 2 – good (2 – 5 examples of halting); 3 – medium (5 – 9 examples of halting), and 4 – bad (10 and more examples of halting, including mistakes) (Varošanec-Škarić, 2010: 102). Sentence intonation was assessed as a) falling, b) rising, c) falling-rising, d) falling-rising-falling (and vice versa), e) rising and falling, and f) flat (according to Škarić, 2009: 133). Logical emphasis was rated according to a five-point scale (1 – excellent, 2 – very good, 3 – good, 4 – quite bad, and 5 – very bad). In this kind of auditory analysis, it is common to use a five-point scale (Hammarberg et al. 1980, 1986; according to Vrban Zrinski, 2022: 63). The rhythm was assessed as a) appropriate and b) interrupted, while the pace was assessed as a) appropriate, b) slow, and c) quick. Accentuation (which was in discordance with the expected vernacular accent) and corrections (variations in choice) of words from the Kajkavian dialect and words from the standard Croatian language were identified by multiple listening of audio recordings and marking of accents and words.

Both authors carried out independent auditory phonetic assessment and then verified the overlapping of the obtained findings for each oral narrator. Adequate overlapping was determined in the assessments of both authors and for all oral narrators.

Results and discussion

The research results of the auditory phonetic assessment and discussion will be presented in three parts: Speech fluency; Sentence intonation, logical emphasis, rhythm, and pace of speech, and Sociophonetic features.

Speech fluency

The results of speech fluency assessment are presented in the table which illustrates the number of examples of speech halting and the rating of speech fluency according to the scale: 1 – excellent, 2 – good, 3 – medium, and 4 – bad speech fluency (see Materials and methods).

Table 1. Auditory phonetic assessment of speech fluency (the number of examples of speech halting in two minutes of speaking and the rating of speech fluency).

ON1	21 examples of halting – 4 (bad speech fluency)
ON2	8 examples of halting – 3 (medium speech fluency)
ON3	7 examples of halting – 3 (medium speech fluency)
ON4	8 examples of halting – 3 (medium speech fluency)
ON5	6 examples of halting – 3 (medium speech fluency)
ON6	3 examples of halting – 2 (good speech fluency)

The results indicate that on average (3.0), oral narrators from Bistra have medium speech fluency. One oral narrator (ON1) has bad speech fluency (4) with a great number of examples of speech halting (21 in two minutes of speaking), one oral narrator (ON6) has good speech fluency (2) (only 3 examples of halting), while four oral narrators have medium speech fluency (3) (ON2 and ON4 8 examples of halting, ON3 7 examples of halting, and ON5 6 examples of halting).

The most frequent examples of halting are pauses (20), mumbling (12), repetition (11), stuttering (7), and hesitation (3). Thus, in the example *To, to, ovaj, to sam ja pratio kao dijete tamo* (That, that, er, I followed as a kid there) it is evident that there is a repetition of the word “to” (that) and pausing relating to word “ovaj” (er). The sentence *Čujte (mumljanje) one (mumljanje) pa nisu se one mogle nikako ponašati* (Listen (mumbles), they (mumbles), well, they could not behave in any way...) can be considered an example of mumbling in which the words are not clearly articulated and speech comprehension is hindered. In the sentence *Delale nisme po, po, po te tvornice, neg sme doma delale* (We did not work in, in, in those factories; we worked at home) it can be noticed that there is a repetition of the word “po” (in). The sentence *Prije je bile tak, mi sme se tak s, sku, skupljale kaj sme delale, jedna drugoj pomagale* (It used to be like that in the past – we would g, gath, gather, those of us who worked together and helped each other) is an example of stuttering, as the word “skupljale” (gather) is broken (*s, sku, skupljale*) (g, gath, gather). The sentence *Ali kad sem ja, aa ovaj, aa, još malo, aa, već malo bil jači v školu, završil četrti razred, onda sam se primil posla* (But when I, er like, er, a bit, er, got stronger, I went to school, finished the fourth grade and got to work) is an example of hesitation. In this sentence, there are also pauses which are manifested in the lengthened vowel (“aa”) (er), which Horga (1994: 17) describes as a non-phonemic voiced pause.

Speech fluency implies speech devoid of hesitation, pausing, repetitions, stuttering, corrections and spoken errors, but it is clear that at times it can lack fluency, since good speech requires spontaneity and natural expression, as well as speech planning at the moment of speaking, regardless of possible speech preparations (for example, as is the case with speech professionals) (Vrban Zrinski, 2013: 26; 2022: 53). The oral narrators in our research did not prepare their speeches on life in their region. Their speech is considered spontaneous, as it is not simply read based on a scenario (Beckman 1997: 7, according to Hansson, 2003: 25) and their sentences reflect remembrance and emotional engagement. Therefore, halting in their speech does not necessarily reflect reduced speech ability, but rather a desire for authentic expression of a particular situation, emotion or attitude.

Sentence intonation, logical emphasis, rhythm, and pace of speech

In the second part, we present the research results for sentence intonation, logical emphasis, rhythm and pace of speech (see Table 2). The table presents the results according to the selected answers with explanations. The sentence intonation results present the identified intonation variations (abbreviation occ. – occasionally).

Table 2. Auditory phonetic assessment of sentence intonation, logical emphasis, rhythm and pace of speech.

	Sentence intonation	Logical emphasis	Rhythm	Pace
ON1	a (falling) occ. f (flat)	2 (very good)	b (interrupted)	a (appropriate)
ON2	a (falling) and f (flat) occ. b (rising)	2 (very good)	b (interrupted)	a (appropriate) occ. b (slow)
ON3	f (flat) occ. b (rising)	3 (good)	a (appropriate)	b (slow)
ON4	a (falling) occ. b (rising)	3 (good)	a (appropriate)	a (appropriate)
ON5	f (flat) occ. b (rising)	2 (very good)	a (appropriate)	a (appropriate)
ON6	e (rising-falling) occ. b (rising)	1 (excellent)	a (appropriate)	b (slow)

The results in Table 2 indicate that most oral narrators mainly have a falling and flat intonation (3 oral narrators have a falling, 2 have a flat, and 1 oral narrator has both a rising and falling intonation). Logical emphasis is very good (average 2.16), which is important for the listeners when following the oral narrator's story. Good logical emphasis provides clarity and understanding of the oral narrator's speech, distinction between the new and the old components of verbal expression, and has a great impact on the expressiveness in speech. Most oral narrators have an appropriate rhythm (two of them have an interrupted rhythm) and most of them have appropriate pace, but two oral narrators have a slow speech, with one slowing down the pace of speech occasionally.

In the standard Croatian language, the falling intonation is "by large the most numerous" type in intonation units (Škarić, 2009: 133). The falling intonation marks the end of speech as a whole, the rising intonation implies dependence and unfinished units, the high pitch is a sign of engagement, while the flat pitch implies routine and absence of emotions (Ivas, 1993 according to Vrban Zrinski, 2022: 49). In the analysed speeches of all oral narrators, the falling or flat intonation are the most frequent intonation types. However, there are deviations in some thematic contexts. The topics such as one's own childhood memories and memories of school days are occasionally marked by the rising intonation (ON2 and ON6). When the oral narrators list things (e.g., how to make homemade bread – ON5) or describe something (e.g., rooms and objects in the house – ON3 and ON4), in some parts of their stories there is an occasional rising intonation. One oral narrator (ON1) occasionally uses flat intonation, especially when speaking about traditional construction methods and materials.

The rhythm of speech of all oral narrators was mainly appropriate, but in emotionally and cognitively more demanding parts it was occasionally interrupted due to pauses, hesitation, and stuttering, especially when ON1 and ON2 were remembering their childhood, famous people (for example, Countess

Mariedonne Carion), and traditional customs of their region (for examples, *vuglenarenje* (charcoal making) and *prošćenje* (church fair)), and their family lives (e.g., late family members).

When talking about topics such as family, memories of childhood, youth and love, all oral narrators exhibited a greater level of emotional engagement, which was most evident in the changes in intonation, pace, and rhythm. For example, although exhibiting appropriate pace, ON2 occasionally speaks at a slower pace when speaking about his family. Although their speech was rated as having an appropriate pace, it is interesting to note that ON1 slows the pace of speech in the segments associated with love topics, while a slower pace was identified in speech of ON5 when she was remembering living in poverty. ON3 and ON6 generally have a slower pace of speech in comparison with other oral narrators, regardless of the topic.

According to the results of the analysis, prosodic features of oral narrators were changing depending on the topic of their speech. Neutral and descriptive topics resulted in a more stable pace and rhythm and a falling and flat intonation, while emotionally and personally marked topics were associated with variability in the pace of speech, interrupted rhythm and a greater frequency of rising intonation in the central parts of sentences. This is further corroborated by Palmenfelt's (2006: 109) observation that short sentences, tense voice and fast manner of speaking indicate that the descriptions of events delivered by the speaker still have a strong impact on person.

Sociophonetic features

The results of research on sociophonetic features, which, in this paper, are associated with the accentuation, which is not the vernacular pronunciation of oral narrators, and corrections in speech, reveal that the words pronounced with different accents are pronounced in the same way during the entire speech delivered by an individual oral narrator. Therefore, word accentuation, which differs from the expected accentuation (Kajkavian), remains the same in the entire speech and does not change.

It is interesting to note that oral narrators occasionally use a different word accent in comparison with the one expected in their vernacular; that is, the accent is placed on the syllable characteristic of the standard Croatian language. It should also be noted here that the oral narrators did not fully achieve the standard pronunciation of accent; for example, with regard to the tone of the accent. The oral narrators occasionally do not pronounce the accent on the non-initial syllable, but pronounce the words in such a way that the accent is shifted to the initial syllable. So, in words like *domaći* (domestic), *dvorište* (a yard), *napravila* (made), *ostala* (stayed), *potoku* (a creek), *prijatelj* (friend) and *prodati* (sell) they have a falling accent on the first syllable instead of placing it on the second syllable. In the word *rukavice* (gloves), the accent is placed on the second, instead of on the third syllable.

The research has shown that there are examples in which the oral narrators correct themselves either within the same sentence or in some other sentences during their speech. These corrections are made at the lexical

level – from the Kajkavian dialect to the standard Croatian language, and vice versa. It should also be pointed out that such examples are not numerous, but are by all means indicative in the perception of speech and have a great importance in the description of speech production. Tables 3 and 4 illustrate representative examples of the cases when the oral narrators corrected their own words while speaking.

Table 3. Examples of the corrections of Kajkavian words into the standard Croatian language.

Kajkavian dialect	Standard Croatian
<i>embrela</i>	<i>kišobran</i> (umbrella)
<i>Lešnjaki</i>	<i>Lješnjaci</i> (Lešnjak as a surname)
<i>posudicu</i>	<i>zdjelicu</i> (bowl)
<i>striča</i>	<i>stric</i> (uncle)

Table 3 contains examples of the correction of words which belong to the Kajkavian dialect into the ones belonging to the standard Croatian language. One of the narrators used the words *embrela* and *kišobran* (umbrella) in the same sentence, where the second, standard word was used to explain the meaning of the first one. In another sentence, there is also correction of the surname *Lešnjaki* into *Lješnjaci* (hazelnuts), although this surname is typical of the region (such correction was completely unexpected). In one of the sentences, there was correction of *posudicu* into *zdjelicu* (bowl), and the second, standard Croatian word, has a function of explaining the first one. The Kajkavian word *striča*, which was used in one sentence, was corrected by the oral narrator into *stric* (uncle).

Table 4. Examples of word corrections from the standard Croatian language into the Kajkavian dialect.

Standard Croatian	Kajkavian dialect
<i>danas</i>	<i>denes</i> (today)
<i>kruh</i>	<i>hlebi</i> (bread)
<i>nedjelja</i>	<i>nedelju</i> (Sunday)
<i>pjevali</i>	<i>pevali, popevali</i> (sang)
<i>razumiješ</i>	<i>razmete</i> (understand)

Table 4 illustrates the reverse process in the oral narrators' speech when they use a standard Croatian word and correct it to go back to their vernacular (Kajkavian). The word *danas* was corrected by the oral narrator into *denes* (today) within the same sentence (the oral narrator uttered the words one after the other), just as was the case with the word *kruh*, which was immediately corrected into *hlebi* (bread) in the same sentence. The word *nedjelja* was immediately corrected by the oral narrator into *nedelja* (Sunday), but in different sentences in the course of speech. There are similar examples, such as when the oral narrator corrected the word *pjevali* into *pevali* in another sentence, and later on into *popevali* (sang), or when the oral narrator corrected the word *razumiješ* into *razmete* (understand) in different sentences during his speech.

When the oral narrators were relaxed during audio recording, they reversed to their original speech. The corrections or clarifications of Kajkavian words using the standard Croatian words emerged when they felt that they would not be understood well. Klein (2006a) wrote about switching from vernacular to the standard version of speech, describing a conversation she had

with her aunt and her father. She noticed that at the level of speech production, her father had dropped his childhood dialect and started using a more "standard" variant of Swedish which was spoken in the capital, while her aunt Elsa had not changed her childhood dialect to the same extent as her father Gustav (Klein, 2006a: 80).

Docherty (2022) states that sociophonetic research describes "social-indexical phonetic features of speech" which reveal "a wide range of phonetic parameters" relating to the social factors relevant for the speakers and listeners. Thus, the results of research on sociophonetic features (speech corrections which are not the actual spoken errors, as well as fluctuations between two systems at the level of the choice of words and accentuation of the words which do not belong to the oral narrator's vernacular) describe various phonetic perceptual parameters which prove to be relevant for the oral narrators, the surroundings, and local speech.

Conclusion

According to the obtained results of the auditory phonetic assessment, we can conclude that the vernacular of the Kajkavian oral narrators from Bistra in the northwestern Croatia is well preserved, regardless of the identified corrections in speech at the lexical level and in the occasional pronunciation of word accents that are not their original Kajkavian vernacular. In general, the oral narrators have medium speech fluency. The most frequent forms of halting are pauses, while other observed forms included mumbling, repetitions, stuttering, and hesitation. Their sentence intonation is mostly falling and flat, but rising intonation also appears. They occasionally speak with the interrupted rhythm and slow down the pace of speech when greater emotional engagement is evident. Logical emphasis in speech is very good, which contributes to clarity and better understanding of oral narration.

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