

BREMEN, MARCH 19, 2015: MALTESE ENGLISH IN THE CONTEXT OF LEARNER VARIETIES

NATIVE LISTENER SENSITIVITY TO VARIATION AT THE PROSODIC LEVEL: RHYTHM PATTERNS IN MALTESE ENGLISH

Questions relating to rhythm in a language, together with how it is perceived on one hand, and whether it is objectively measurable, on the other, have long been a source of controversy in linguistics. Languages have traditionally been classified according to three broad categories as 'syllable-timed', 'stress-timed' or also, 'mora-timed', but it has been difficult to identify the acoustic correlates for such classification systems. More recently, a focus on the composite elements of the syllable such as intervocalic and vocalic components (Ramus et al., ;Grabe et al.,) have led to analyses at the phonetic level in an effort to capture how measurements at the local level of the segment, or the syllable, can have an effect on the perceived rhythm patterns of a language. Such interplay between the phonetic and the phonological, or the local and the more global patterns, may in part account for rhythm as a perceptual event (Nokes & Hay, 2012). Maltese English (MaltE) is one example of a variety of English whose listeners often claim to instantly recognise MaltE speakers, even if they display a range of variation, suggesting that at least some aspects of variation operate beyond the segmental level. Variation in durational features, including consonant gemination and vowel duration combine to suggest that rhythm patterns in MaltE are worth further investigation. This workshop will present an analysis of durational features in different MaltE speakers, based on a modification of a model trialled by Grabe and Low (2002), and later used by Nokes and Hay (2012). The analysis will focus on vowel duration and its combined effect on rhythm patterns in MaltE, showing how apparently minimal changes in vowel duration at the phonetic level can combine to yield a change in global rhythm variability. This variability may then be perceived by native listeners as part of a continuum of variation within MaltE.

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