

## Presentations on business topics in L3 Russian: What should we learn from the evaluation by natives?

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**Abstract** The paper focuses on oral presentations for business purposes in a foreign language (Russian). As an audio-visual discourse type, presentations require general communicative skills, presentation techniques, language proficiency, and the knowledge of culturally embedded, pragmatic practices which meet the expectations of the auditory. Against this background, this paper examines how native speakers of Russian perceive presentations by Russian speaking foreigners. This perceptual approach allows us to analyze a large complex of linguistic and non-linguistic features of presentations and to shed light on the expectations built up towards the realization of this discourse type within a certain language culture. Special attention is paid to linguistic characteristics of spoken communication that lead to the perception of a non-native accent, and towards the qualitative and quantitative impact of different types of linguistic errors on the evaluations by a native auditory.

**Keywords** Presentation, oral language proficiency, speech perception, accent, error hierarchy, Russian

### 1 Introduction

Oral presentations are becoming increasingly important. In many professional and social spheres, presentation skills are now regarded as an essential requirement. For example, they are being included in school curricula; companies spend a lot of money on courses that promise to improve the skills of their staff; universities offer special programs; politicians are being supervised by professional mentors; and a wealth of handbooks are available for the interested reader. However, oral presentations have not yet been widely researched in linguistics and communication studies (cf. Dynkowska/Lobin/Ermakova 2012), which is surprising, given their communicative relevance.

While it could be argued that classical rhetoric provides people with the necessary skills in informing, persuading and motivating audiences, the globalization of economic, social and cultural relations raises new questions. A look at different handbooks suggests that they seem to impart a “global” presentation style. However, one of the most important demands – especially in economic contexts – is that of cultural suitability. What does this mean for the teaching of presentation techniques that should be applied in cross-cultural contexts, be they scientific, economic, or political? Specialists in teaching foreign languages for special purposes are faced with the question to what extent they teach behavioral scripts, in addition to language skills, specific to a certain target culture.<sup>1</sup> One important aspect of this issue is asking whether there are specific, culturally determined demands on the manner and verbalization of presentations.

This paper will focus on presentations for business purposes. Their clearly persuasive aim determines how and how much information is delivered as well as which communicative strat-

<sup>1</sup> ‘Culture’ should not be seen merely in terms of ethnicity; cultural differences also emerge among different professional, social and communicative domains (Hansen 2011).

egies are used. The realization of these aspects also depends on the level of language mastery, which holds especially true for presenting in a foreign language.

The interplay of general communicative skills, presentation techniques, language proficiency and knowledge of pragmatic, culturally embedded practices greatly influences the success of presentations, particularly in a foreign language auditory. Against this backdrop, this paper will examine how native Russians perceive presentations on a business topic by Russian speaking foreigners. This perceptual approach allows us to analyze a large complex of qualitative features of presentations and to shed light on the expectations that people build up towards this specific form of communication within a certain language culture. Special attention will be paid to linguistic characteristics of spoken communication that lead to the perception of a non-native accent, and towards the change in evaluations by native speakers in relation to different types of linguistic errors.

This focus on oral proficiency corresponds to the demands of daily business practices: according to a survey conducted amongst 2017 firms, foreign language speaking skills are the most sought-after (used very often or often in 70 % of the firms), followed by reading (60 %) and writing skills (53 %) (Archan/Dornmayr 2008). Consequently, the findings of this paper promise to offer important insights for teaching Foreign Languages for Special Purposes (FLSP).

One of the most tangible aspects of oral foreign language communication is accent. We know that some kinds of accents are more accepted, even loved, than others, and a fair amount of research has been run on the social meaning of “foreign” accents. Summing up the findings of numerous studies, Munro/Derwing (1999: 287) state that “native speaker (NS) listeners tend to downgrade nonnative speakers [...] simply because of foreign accent”. Various studies have been conducted on the relation between accents and perceptions of status (Kalin/Rayko 1978, Hellwig-Fabián 2007), competence (Giles/Powesland 1975), credibility (Lev-Ari/Keysar 2010), and employability in general (Lippi-Green 1998, Carlson/McHenry 2006).

I will therefore begin with a short discussion of the phenomenon of foreign accent and its implications for the construction of social meaning (Coupland 2007). I will then offer a description of the empirical study, its material and methods as well as its results. Finally, I will discuss the results and their relevance for teaching FLSP.

## 2 Accent in oral presentations

The term “accent” is usually restricted to oral communication and described as “the cumulative auditory effect of those features of pronunciation which identify where a person is from, regionally or socially” (Crystal 2008: 3). Accent emerges as a result of language contact. It occurs in contexts in which an individual comes into contact with regional and/or social variants of a language (Chambers 2009). However, the concept of accent is most often seen in relation to so-called foreign accents which emerge in a second or further foreign language (L2, L3, ..., L<sub>n</sub>). Additionally, the first, family language (L1) of so-called “heritage speakers” may exhibit the influence of a more dominant language, be it a second L1 or an early acquired second language (L2).

Generally, foreign accent is attributed to processes of interference in articulation, intonation and prosody. For example, segmental and non-segmental characteristics may be automatically transferred from one language to another; if the parameters of the affected languages do not match, this can lead to deviations from a certain speech target. Accent can be seen as a global phenomenon having a “total effect”, as Spencer (1957) puts it:

Rhythm, stress, intonation, vowel and consonant quality, vowel system and distributional usage, all contribute to the total effect. The ‘secret’ [...] lies at none of these levels in particular, but rather in them all, and this is undoubtedly true of all accents in some degree or other. (Spencer 1957: 28, cit. from Hellwig-Fábián 2007: 20)

However, the fact that accents are a complex phenomenon should not deter us from searching for salient components that might determine the perception of accent strength.

While most linguists reduce accent to the phonetic-phonological level, empirical data indicates that people who evaluate accents in naturalistic settings include errors on other linguistic levels in their evaluation even if they are instructed not to do so (Lennon 1990, Rossiter 2009). A pretest of the present study revealed similar results (Krause/Loos 2008) and gave us a better understanding of accent by lay listeners: in many cases, the evaluation of accent seemed to be related not only to phonetic deviations, but also to inflectional, lexical, or other ones. In research that addresses the perception of accent these different understandings of accent by linguists and lay people should be kept in mind.

Some efforts have been made to discover the interaction between different levels of linguistic competence and the perception of an accent and its strength. However, as one of the latest studies (Hellwig-Fábián 2007) showed, the results are not satisfying, primarily for methodological reasons. There are two methodological challenges: the systematic variation of different error types and the perceived naturalness of speech. As the present study is based on naturalistic settings, errors are distributed according to students’ abilities in coping with the set task, considering that they were allowed to prepare themselves at home by using any accessible sources within a realistic time frame. Consequently, a balanced distribution of errors along different linguistic levels could not be achieved: phonetic-phonological errors prevailed in all presentations. However, an attempt was made to control the distribution of deviations (cf. figure 2). Additionally, a special experimental task was used to determine the extent to which particular error types interfere with listeners’ understanding. As this study follows a rather ecological, holistic approach in studying the impact of accent, the perceived interference of accent and the relative gravity of different linguistic error types were analyzed in connection with the general communicative competences that are activated during presentations: the ability to interact with the audience verbally and non-verbally in order to create interest, manifest involvement, inspire and, finally, persuade.

Against this background, the present study aims at answering the following questions:

- (1) How does communicative competence in different domains of oral communication affect the evaluation of presentations by native speakers?
- (2) Which impact do different domains of competence have on the evaluation by native speakers?
- (3) Which effect (in the sense of interference potential) do linguistic deviations (errors) on different levels of the language system have?

### 3 Data and method

As mentioned before, the material of our investigation stems from video-taped presentations that students had prepared at home and then recorded autonomously in a speech laboratory. The topic – tourism – as well as specific linguistic means for presentations had been intro-

duced and practiced in the language course. The Russian language students were asked to present a tourist destination in Austria of their own choice – be it an area, a town or a hotel – at a tourism fair. The presentation was supposed to aim at creating interest in visiting the destination. The students followed recording instructions that were aimed at ensuring high audio and visual quality and comparability of the records. That way, presentations of 26 students with a background of about 200 teaching hours in Russian for special purposes were available for analysis.

Our research included the following steps:

- a) transcription of all video tapes, identification of errors and calculation of error rates and error type frequencies;
- b) analysis of error type distribution and selection of five presentations for the test;
- c) presentation of the selected material to Russian native speakers;
- d) statistical analysis of the evaluation data and correlation with the error data.

The video tapes were transcribed with the annotation software EXMARaLDA (<http://www.exmaralda.org/>). This software integrates visual and auditory stimuli and provides the transcriber with the opportunity to mark different information on different tiers that are aligned to the signal. In our case, this possibility was used for marking the following error types: errors in segmental pronunciation, errors in word stress placement, deviations in intonation, errors in inflection and in verbal aspect usage, in lexis, word order and in marking text coherence. Furthermore, pauses were annotated and speech rates were calculated. This procedure led to the selection of five presentations with a duration from 3:12 min to 4:26 min. The selected presentations had to meet two demands: first, a clear differentiation in overall error rates, that is the ratio of the number of errors to the number of tokens (cf. figure 1); and second, a control for the distribution of different error types (cf. figure 2). Figure 1 shows the distribution of overall error rates: 10 % (A), 22 % (B), 30 % (C), 54 % (D) and 70 % (E).<sup>2</sup> These error rates can be seen as expressing different levels of language proficiency. We furthermore introduced a second parameter, the relative amount of incomprehensible and unclear speech segments. For speakers D and E, this parameter was relatively higher than it was for speakers A, B and C.

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<sup>2</sup> The overall error rate is defined here as the ratio of tokens realized with deviating linguistic features to the total number of tokens given in percent.

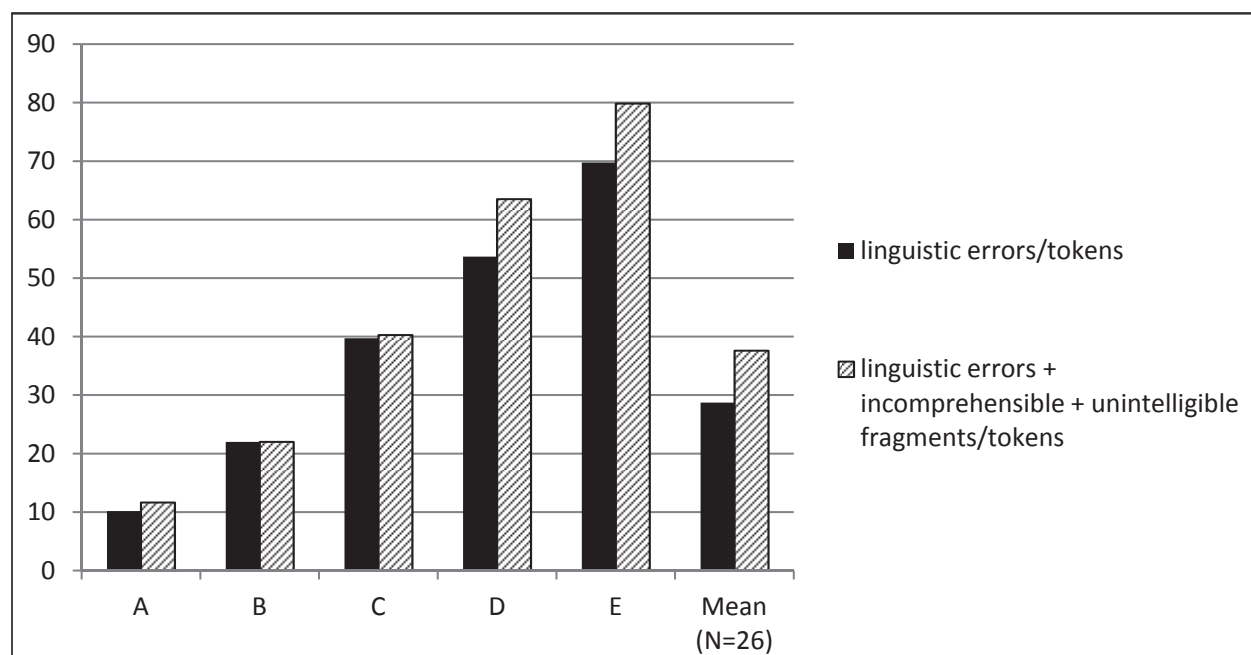


Fig. 1: Overall error rates (errors/tokens, in %) for presentations A–E in comparison to the mean error rate for N = 26

The distribution of error types within and between the presentations A to E is illustrated in figure 2. Unfortunately, there is no presentation with a more or less balanced distribution of all error types in the whole sample of 26 tapes. The high proportion of phonetic errors shows that pronunciation seems not to be the presenters’ main focus and does not receive as much attention in the students’ preparation process as other aspects. Students seem to be more proficient on other levels, including the complicated Russian nominal and verbal inflectional system. Two presentations show visible deviations from this overall picture: presentations A and B are characterized by higher rates of inflectional errors (relative to their overall error rates); in presentation B, morphological errors even exceed the share of deviations in pronunciation. These two presentations allow us to look at the impact of both error types more closely. However, it should be kept in mind that with 10 % resp. 22 % the overall error rate is rather low in these two presentations.

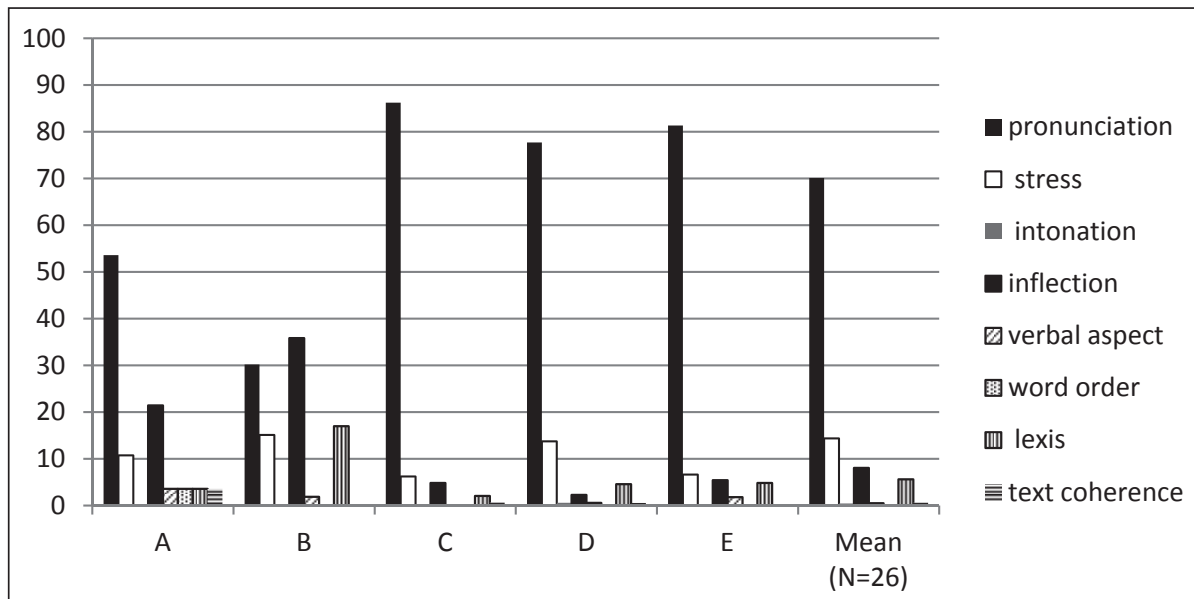


Fig. 2: Distribution of error types (in %) in presentations A–E in comparison to the mean values for  $N = 26$

In the next step (c), the selected video tapes were presented for their judgment to Russian native speaker (NS) listeners. 25 young Russians from St. Petersburg attended the experiment. All of them were students of philology or linguistics at the St. Petersburg State University aged between 17 and 25 with a mean of 21.0 years. 21 out of 25 test persons (t. p.) were women. 80 % (20 out of 25 t. p.) confirmed that they were familiar with presentations as a form of communication, of which 95 % (19 persons) declared that they had first-hand experience in presentations at least in educational contexts. Only 2 of all t. p. had passed a special presentation training. The NS listeners were asked to fill in a written questionnaire with open and closed questions and tasks immediately after watching a presentation.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Comprehensibility vs. intelligibility

A first question is whether the presentations were understood. Therefore, following Munro/Derwing (1999: 289 f.), a distinction was drawn between two parameters: the comprehensibility of speech and its intelligibility. The former points to a general understanding of the content, the latter to the manner of speech, its clearness and discriminability. The Russian categories of *ponjatnost'* and *razborčivost'* used in the evaluation task convey this distinction transparently. A clear prevalence of comprehensibility over intelligibility was observed (cf. figure 3; here and elsewhere, linear diagrams are used to better illustrate tendencies; the distinctiveness of parameters is not questioned). In 76 % of all answers the t. p. agreed or agreed strongly with the statement that they fully understood the presentation while presenters' speech was perceived as relatively less intelligible: 57 % of all reactions agreed or fully agreed with the assertion that the presentation was intelligible. As can be seen in figure 3, the relation between comprehensibility and intelligibility becomes inversely proportional with higher agreement. This result should be interpreted as strong evidence for cooperative behavior of the Russian L1 audience: native speakers deal with linguistic difficulties of non-native speakers in a constructive manner



and process information actively by filling the gaps between intelligibility and comprehensibility.<sup>3</sup>

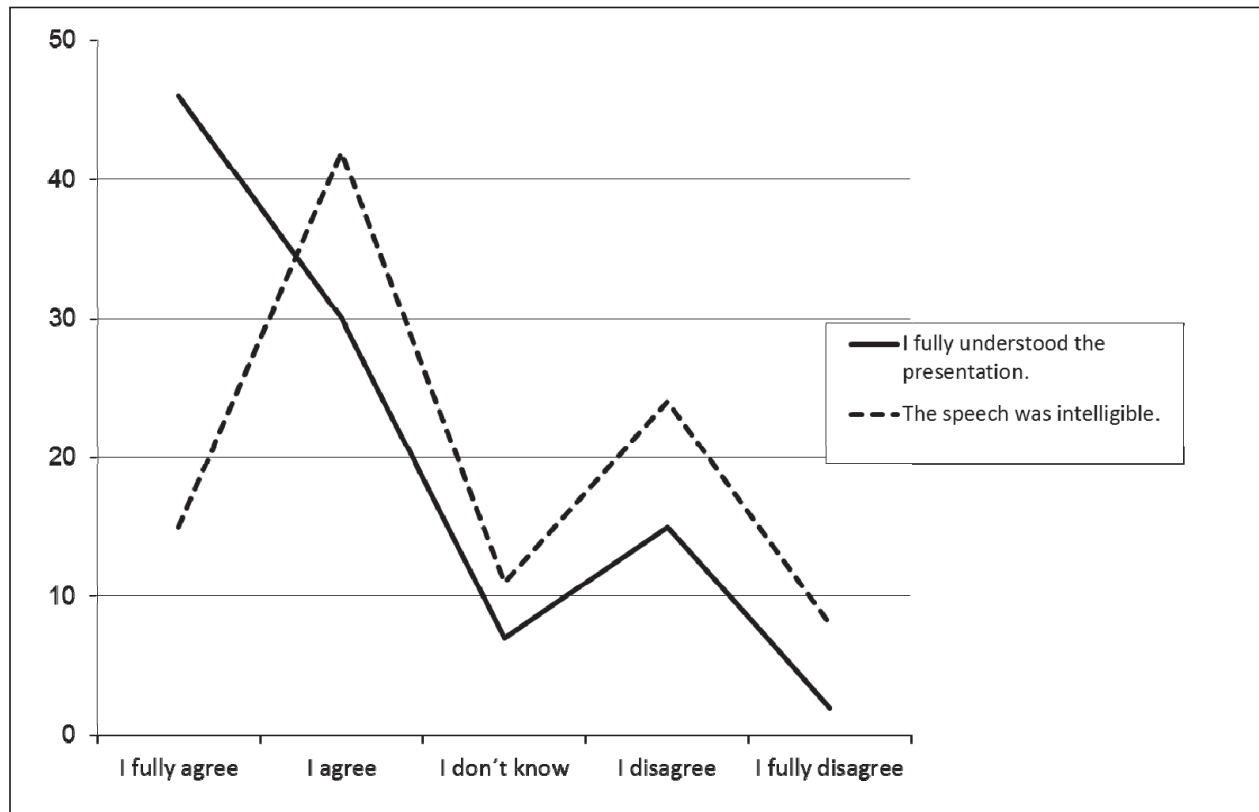


Fig. 3: Judgment of comprehensibility and intelligibility (presentations A–E, in %)

#### 4.2 Qualification of the foreign accent

A similar perceptive tuning is observable in the accent ratings. The L1 t. p. were asked to perform the following tasks: (1) to determine whether there was an accent at all, (2) to rate the strength of the perceived accent and (3) to decide to which extent they were confused by the perceived accent. Figure 4 shows the mean results of these three tasks for all five presentations.

<sup>3</sup> These data confirm the results of our previous pilot study (Krause/Loos 2008).

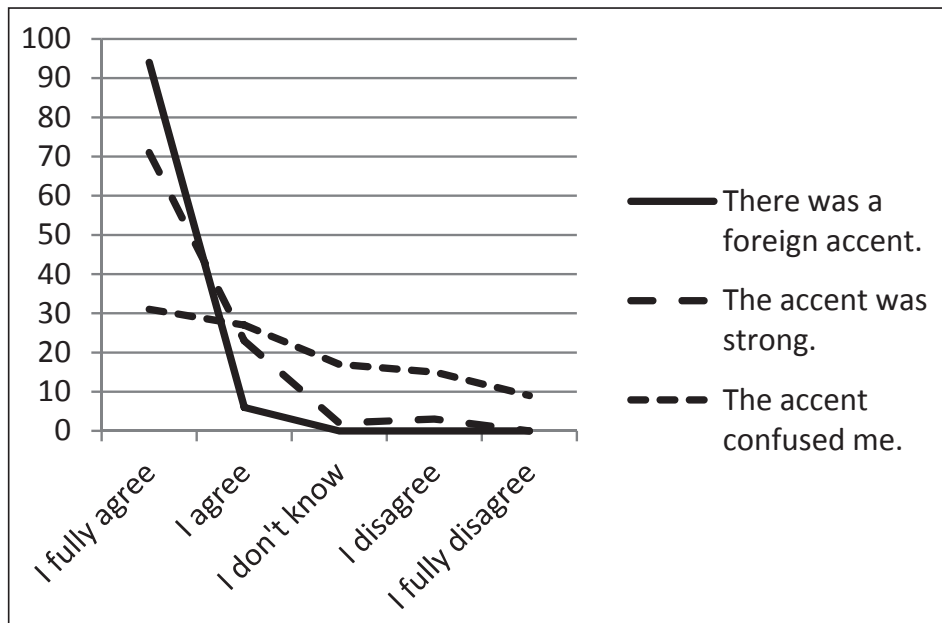


Fig. 4: Results of accent ratings: mean data for presentations A–E (in %)

A closer look at the different presentations shows that all five presenters are perceived as having an accent: the values range from 100 % for presenter B to 88 % for E (cf. figure 5). However, the perceived strength of accent shows much more variation between the presenters, with the lowest value for A (42 % of the t. p. assessed a strong accent) and the highest for B and D (92 % perceived a strong accent). But as can be inferred from the data in figure 6, the confusing (interfering) potential of the accent does not correlate directly with the ascribed accent strength: while such a correlation can be found with A and C, this does not hold true for B and D, which were both assigned a strong accent, but with different effects on perception.

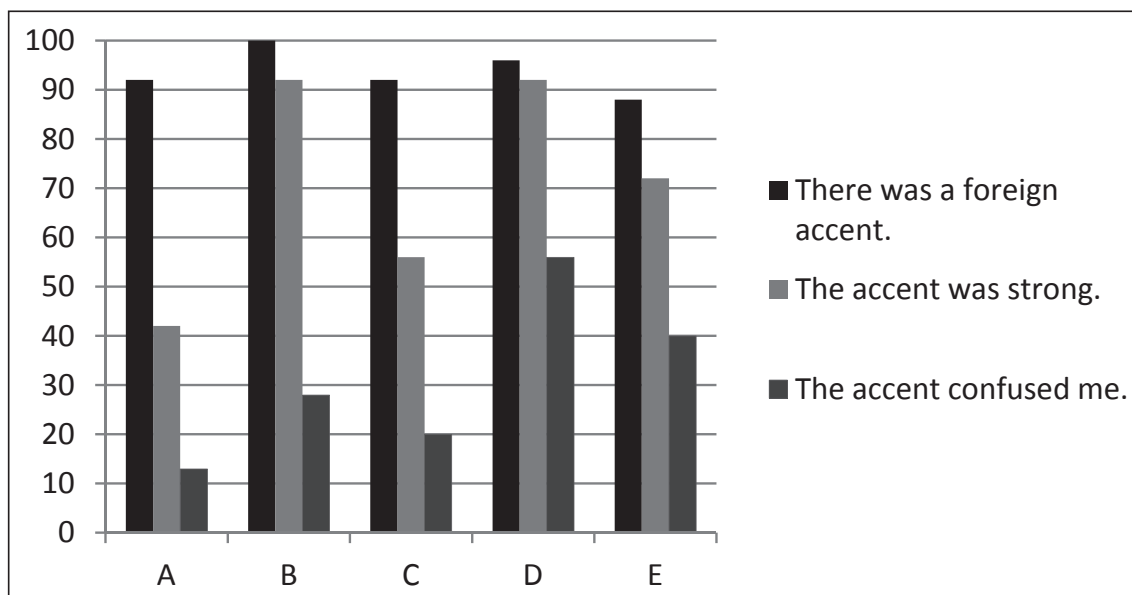


Fig. 5: Accent ratings: distinct data for presentations A–E (in %, based on the answer: "I fully agree.")



If we compare accent ratings to the individual frequencies of error types on the phonetic level, again, it becomes clear that the perception of an accent cannot be reduced to deviations in segmental pronunciation, intonation, and word stress alone but apparently also involves other parameters of speech (cf. figure 6). This provides an explanation for why, for example, the accent in presentation C was seen as less interfering than in D or E even though the error rates in pronunciation are at nearly the same in all three presentations (86 %, 78 %, 81 %).

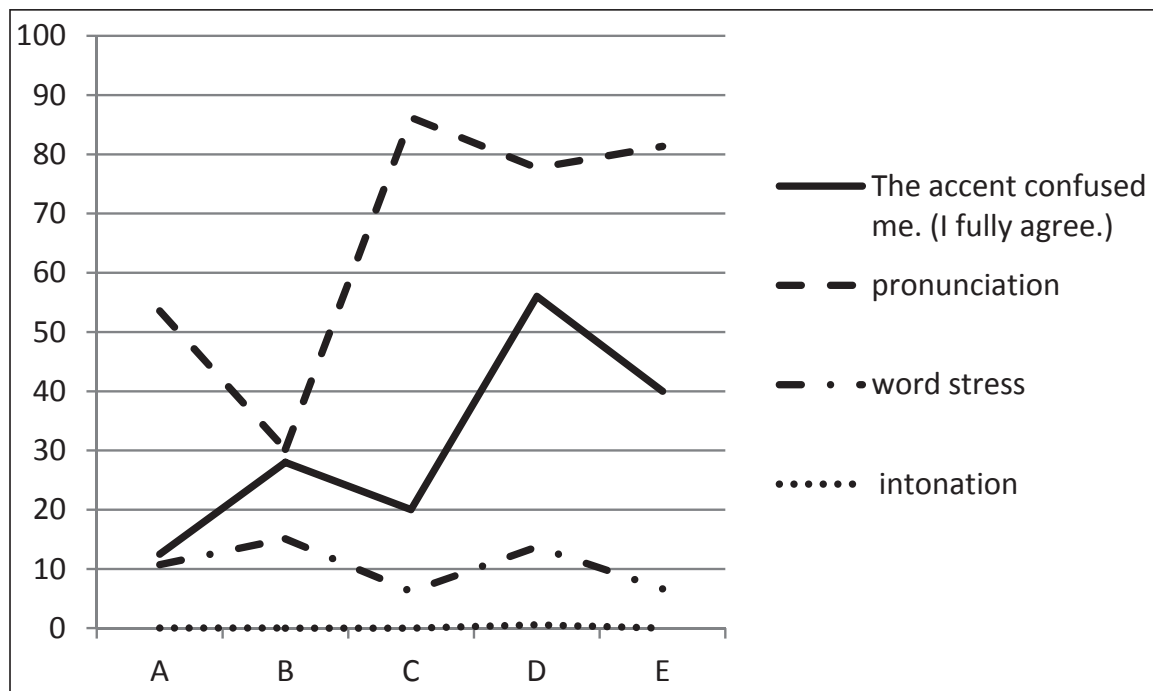


Fig. 6: The interference impact of foreign accent in relation to the relative share of phonetic errors

The correlation between an accent’s interference potential and the general error rate in figure 7 provides additional insights into the psycholinguistic structure of accent rating. The boxplots illustrate the median values and the dispersion of interference judgments against the general error rates. As can be derived from both figures 6 and 7, neither the error rates nor the share of phonetic deviations within them lead to a clear-cut picture. Additional factors seem to be at work. For example, different error types that may be attributed to the same linguistic level could be analyzed in more detail to model the salience of certain linguistic variables and their combinations. However, a closer look at the salience of linguistic features is beyond the scope of this paper. Furthermore, general presentation skills as well as presenters’ personality may also have affected the accent ratings. This aspect will be addressed later (see 4.5).

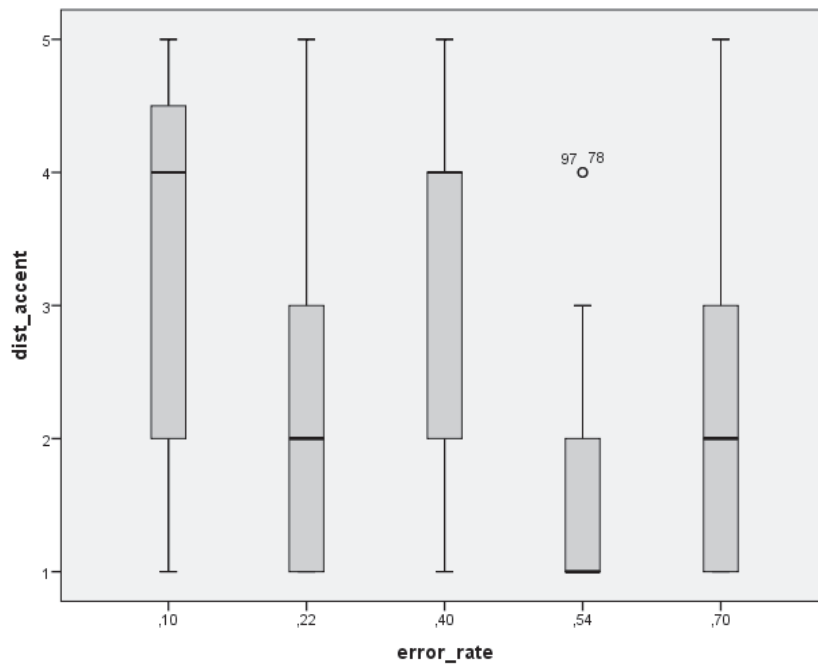


Fig. 7: The relation between accents' interference rating and general error rate (x-axis, from left to right: error rates of presentations A–E, y-axis: median and dispersion values of the interference ratings)

#### 4.3 The impact of error types: error gravity

This assumption leads to the next question. It concerns the impact of different error types on perception and understanding. In this context, we need to keep in mind that the error types could not be balanced within the material and no orthogonal distribution of them could be reached (cf. figure 2). Nonetheless, the high frequency of phonetic-phonological deviations should be seen as arising from specific issues in the teaching of Russian as an L3. First, it points to the difficulties that Russian L3 learners with German as their L1 encounter in relation to Russian phonetics and phonology. Second, it indicates a specific weakness in the currently practiced way of teaching Russian: a considerable amount of time is devoted to teaching the complex morphology of Russian that is applied to a growing vocabulary; pronunciation and word stress play a minor role in this challenging process. This practice is reflected in the students' presentations: the presenters paid more attention to linguistic levels other than pronunciation and were, obviously, better prepared for them. Therefore, further research on this topic should include more material not prepared in advance in order to force a more natural and, maybe, equal distribution of error types in speech. Keeping these remarks in mind, we will turn to the results of the following task in which the t. p. were asked to assess the potential of given error types for each presentation. T. p. were asked to rate specific error types according to three categories: (1) *interfered strongly*, (2) *interfered, but not very much*, (3) *didn't interfere*. The following deviation types were at issue: deviations on the phonetic level, i. e. deviations in pronunciation, in word stress placement, in intonation, slowed speech rate and frequent pauses; on the morpho-syntactic level, i. e. inflectional errors, erroneous use of the verbal aspect, non-standard word order; on the lexical level, i. e. inappropriate use of words regarding meaning as well as style; and on the text level, i. e. disruptions of text coherence.

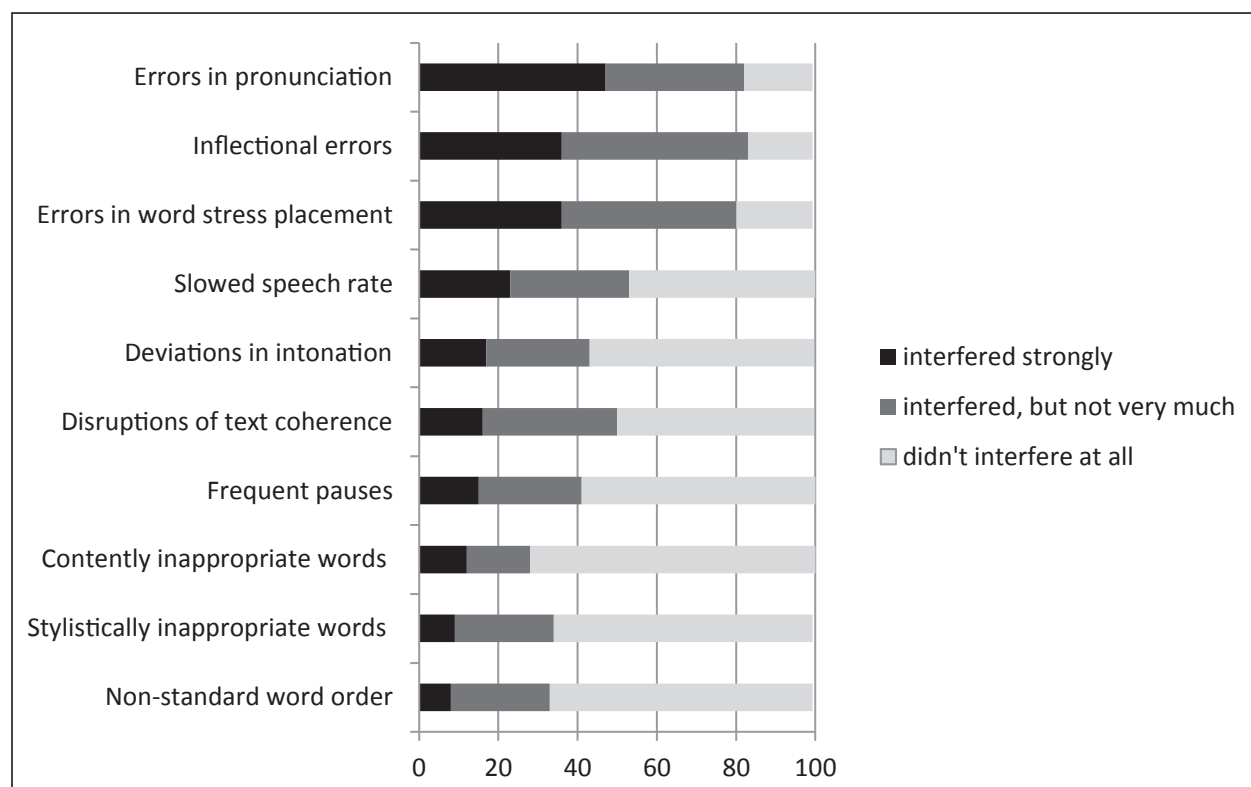


Fig. 8: Interference potential as an indicator of error gravity

As shown in figure 8, according to their interference potential, the error types fall into three groups. The picture becomes even clearer if the answers (1) *interfered strongly* and (2) *interfered, but not very much* are merged. Errors in pronunciation, in inflectional morphology and in word stress placement were judged to be most interfering. They were followed by speech rate and intonation, disruptions of text coherence, erroneous use of verbal aspect and frequent pausing. Semantic mistakes – be they in terms of content or of stylistic appropriateness – were of less importance, as was word order. By and large, the scale replicates the results of the pilot study (Krause/Loos 2008), the only exception being that inflectional errors and deviations in word stress placement switched positions.

#### 4.4 Persuasive power

But what influence do accent and linguistic errors exert on the achievement of the communicative aim of each presentation, e. g. persuasion? To answer this question, a conative question was included. The t. p. were asked to declare if the presentation had increased their interest in visiting the presented destination. In figure 9, the results are matched with the error rates. It becomes clear that a high error rate – as in D and E – corresponds with less persuasive power; however, surprisingly, the lowest persuasive power was observed in A, the presentation with the lowest relative number of errors. B and C were seen as most persuasive. B is characterized by a quite low error rate (22 %) with fewer phonetic errors than the other presenters (cf. figure 2). The fact that presenter B has the highest relative number of inflectional errors seems to be of minor importance for the t. p., probably due to the small general error rate. In the case of C, the share of phonetic errors is quite high (86 %), but the accent itself was assessed as less irritating; only A achieved better evaluations. These observations lead to new questions

that should be answered in a future study. For instance, the quality of within-level deviations should be analyzed in more detail.

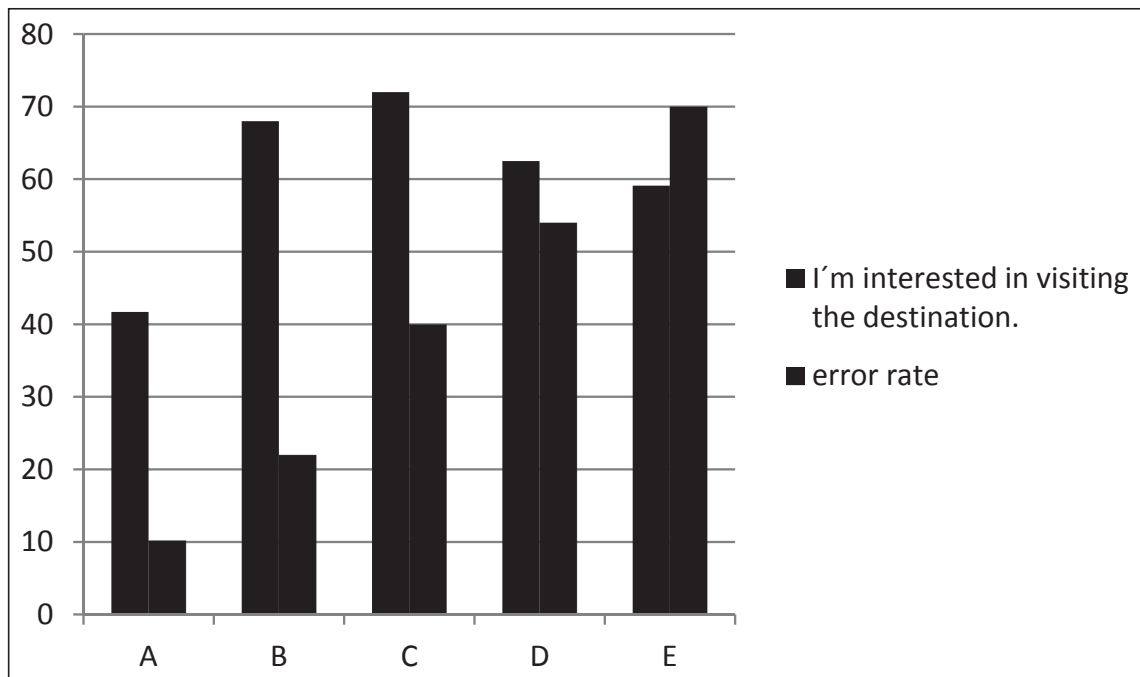


Fig. 9: The conative achievement of the persuasive aim (based on the answer "I'm interested in visiting the destination.") related to the general error rate (A-B, in %)

However, why does A perform so badly? One reason might be that the presenter spoke with a different accent than the others which, maybe, transfers a different social meaning than the Austrian-German accent does. To try to answer this question would require another experimental design and is therefore beyond the scope of the present study.

#### 4.5 General communicative skills

Essentially, general communicative skills concern communicative abilities on the whole, especially pragmatic competences and presentation skills. According to the open answers of the Russian t. p. at the end of every questionnaire, the following features had positive effects on the persuasive power of a presentation: a clear structure of the presentation, accuracy and diversity of information, natural and free speech avoiding lengthy and complex constructions, verbal and visual attention towards the audience, e. g. through eye contact, normal speech rate, appropriate use of gestures, personal involvement of the presenter, his or her openness and liveliness, self-confidence and charisma. Smiling and humor also had a positive effect. The following features had a negative effect: monotony in speech and content, the use of clichés and hyperbolic, unnatural constructions, reciting or reading a prepared text, a slowing down of the speech rate, frequent gestures, moving during the presentation and the impression of a tense look and unnatural, obtrusive behavior.

Obviously, these parameters play an important role in the assessment of a presentation as a whole. Being aware of them provides presenters with a helpful toolkit for presentations and seems to allow them to compensate for linguistic shortcomings.

## 5 Summary

The present study examined the assessment of oral presentations on a business topic held by L3 learners of Russian to a Russian audience. The main part of the paper discussed the aspect of foreign accent, its structure and influence on the evaluation of the presenters' speech and of the presentations on the whole. Summing up our findings, we arrive at the following results:

The Russian audience showed a general tolerance towards the foreign accent. It adapted to and compensated for presenters' accents and linguistic errors. The relation between different types of accent rating provides evidence for this pro-active, constructive behavior of the audience.

The data shows a high number of errors on the phonetic level, especially in pronunciation and in word stress placement. It is not surprising that L1 auditors ascribe a high interference potential to those deviations. We can conclude from the data that L1 listeners have difficulties in coping with these errors due to the linearity of spoken language processing.

Special attention should be paid to word stress that in Russian is free and flexible, distinguishing not only lexemes like *múka* ('pain') and *muká* ('flour') but also word forms like *gorý* ('mountain', gen. sg.) and *góry* ('mountain', nom. pl.). In our data, word stress placement errors were not as frequent as pronunciation errors. Nevertheless, they are seen as having a high interference potential and should be accounted for in language teaching. Generally speaking, the results of this study suggest that more attention should be paid to phonetic aspects in FLSP courses, and that foreign language students' awareness of these aspects should be raised. This conclusion also corresponds to the practical needs of organizations as reported by Archan/Dornmayr (2008), highlighting the relevance of oral proficiency in foreign languages in everyday business communication.

A second conclusion can be derived from the evaluation of general communicative skills that provide a successful tool for convincing an audience. Apart from general communicative skills, special knowledge about cultural requirements should be used to avoid clichés and the impression of being unnatural, obtrusive and tense. The question is not whether means like gestures, smiles, or humor should be used, but which means are accepted to what extent in a certain (sub-)culture. As for Russian, it seems that less is more. This holds true for linguistic means, too. Of course, FLSP learners should be provided with the linguistic knowledge that is needed for structuring presentations and filling them with content. But, as suggested by our research participants, the naturalness of structural choices comes with great benefits. Hyperbolic, inflated constructions should be avoided; especially in Russian culture, they would be correlated with the clichés of advertising which some of our test persons explicitly associated with dishonesty. Consequently, material for language instruction should always be evaluated considering its cultural and linguistic appropriateness in the target culture.

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