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ARTICLE



Prosodic Presumptions: Challenging the Monological Bias of Voice Pedagogy and How it Reinforces the Prosodic Somatic Norm

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ABSTRACT

This research questions the lack of critical pedagogy developed for teaching prosody in the field of voice for actor training. Through interviews and literary review, I establish the lack of clear pedagogy around prosody in drama training and coordinate that with the linguistic literature on interactional linguistics. This creates an investigation of the skills voice users need for prosody. Through the lens of Critical Race Theory, my research questions what assumptions are being made through the lack of pedagogy around the skills needed for prosody. In a series of workshops and interviews this research reveals that the current lack of pedagogy reinforces white, upper middle class, Received Pronunciation (RP) or So-Called General American (SCGA) accents, and English-monolingual prosodic patterns. I also argue that this lack of pedagogy stems from the monological traditions of voice pedagogies.

KEYWORDS

Prosody; musicality; pedagogy; linguistics; interactional linguistics; monologue; duologue

Introduction

I first became interested in prosody for my Performing Research project on the Master of Voice course at Central School for Speech and Drama in February 2020. My research group realized that the one thing we had in common was having a voice, accent, or sound that did not fit the “somatic norm” of British Drama Schools. “somatic norm” will be used here to describe “the cultural phenomenon that sees the norm as ‘white, upper middle class, and male,’ creating the perception that such a person is not seen as classed, gendered, or raced” (Oram 2019, 283).

As I searched for voice practitioners discussing prosody, many of the recommended books are focused on accent acquisition, like Edda Sharpe and Jan Hayden-Rowles’ *How to do an Accent* and Knight-Thompson Speechwork’s *Experiencing Accents*. It is generally discussed amongst accent practitioners that prosody is key to sounding authentic in a learned accent. However, if we expand that out to the world of linguists and speech language pathologists many of them would also conclude our understanding of “authenticity” or “genuine” interactions is often based on our interpretation of prosodic cues, vocal changes that indicate emotion, turn-taking, and many other interactional events that are essential to speech (Crystal 1975, 1). By this standard, it seemed to me that prosody was a necessary skill for an

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actor even when not using a learnt accent. I began to question the lack of vocal pedagogy on prosody, and the assumptions that remained unquestioned as a result.

Without specific pedagogy, our teaching can easily fall prey to societal norms and cultural assumptions. Assumptions about prosody can result in asking drama students to subscribe to a prosodic norm or the “single identity” of the English monolingual, upper middle class, Received Pronunciation (RP) (or So-Called General American [SCGA] if training in the USA), white speaker. Not only do students differ vastly in their socio-economic backgrounds, which can inform their relationship to prosodic features such as pitch and rhythm, but it is not “the norm” globally to be monolingual, and speakers have many linguistic identities, many voices (Towarnicky 2020).

I started with the question: What are the presumptions being made about student voices in the current teaching of prosody in drama schools? Through critical analysis of the pedagogy and review of linguistic literature I became curious as to what linked these assumptions. A major theme in interactional linguistics started to reframe the way I was thinking about voice work for prosody. Couper-Kuhlen’s paper on *Prosody as Dialogical Interaction* became a key text in my work. In defining the way in which linguistics can approach prosody Couper-Kuhlen quotes Goodwin: “It is an interactive, dialogic action rather than the expression of something internal to the single individual” (Couper-Kuhlen 2014, 222).

This seemed in stark contrast to the voice practices I had been exposed to during my time as an MFA Voice Studies student at Central and my further reading of voice pedagogy. Voice work over the last twenty years has become a deep and self-reflective exercise. Voice pedagogues Kristin Linklater and Patsy Rodenburg have published books and led workshops that walk you step by step through your voice work (Linklater 2006; Rodenburg 1992). They both explore parts of prosody, such as pitch and rhythm, but mostly with solo exercises. I realized there was a lack of partner work amongst the prominent voice pedagogies. I also noticed that there was very little discussion of prosody amongst any of the voice practitioners, in fact the only book published on the topic is *Rhythm* by Elsie Fogarty, published in 1936. I began to draw connections between these observations and the research I was reading in the field of linguistics. During the last twenty to thirty years, linguists have come to the conclusion that lab study, or single persons reading text in a lab setting, of a voice or language sample only got them so far (Walker 2013, 11). However, interactional linguistics, a linguistic theory that studies conversation or language in interaction, has been a main source of new language information in the last years of research. Linguists realized that pitch, rhythm, and intonation cannot be studied individually but can only be understood in interaction. This may seem like something covered in most voice and text classes, but this is where my investigation began to come up with many instances where voice pedagogy did not overlap with the newer understanding of Prosody in Linguistic Research.

Defining Prosody

For my work I have chosen to use the following definition: “Prosodic patterns are not a single system, but interaction of the systems of pitch, volume, rhythm, time, and voice quality” (Crystal 1975, 11). This definition by David Crystal establishes prosody not as a single system, or definable patterns that are to be executed “correctly,” but as a network of systems. This allows my work to stay away from prescriptive and ultimately reductive explorations of prosody, while also making it clear what vocal features I am working with.

Prosodic Orientation

Humans come into conversation with their own prosodic orientation¹: a set of pitch, rhythm, volume, speed, and rhythmic cues that are a part of their identity. Crystal (1975, 3) refers to this as marking emotional states and personality. This marking is what we might think of as expressing our emotions and sense of self. Rodenburg frames how we use these prosodic markers as listeners to place others, comparing our voices to a fingerprint as “an almost infallible form of identification. Our voice marks us in certain ways. And it can mark us for life” (Rodenburg 1992, 4). Throughout my first year as an MFA student on the Voice Studies course at the Central School for Speech and Drama, I experienced the rhetoric, from many different practitioners, that these prosodic markers of identity are habits that need to be stripped away to “free” the voice and free the actor. Rodenburg and Linklater both reinforce this pedagogy in their literature:

We are so under the misapprehension that vocal habits add color to our speech and zest to our personalities. Generally the opposite is truer: a habit drains our speech of color and usually sets us further adrift from our real selves and voices. (Rodenburg 1992, 29)

Most speaker’s personal prosody confines them to signature patterns of inflection and unconscious habitual rhythms. (Linklater 2016)

This approach to prosodic pedagogy by some of our leading practitioners demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding of what prosodic features are. Prosodic features are not “habits,” but rather a complex network of systems that have allowed students to navigate their social spheres. This approach to teaching prosody is also inherently biased. McAlpine and Jahnke sum up Christina Hammel’s theory on this phenomenon in their article *Why Policing the Way Voices Sound Has to Stop*: “Simply put, seeking to undo all the vocal markers of the way a person’s been shaped by economic, political, and social forces, she says, is a white supremacist theory” (McAlpine and Jahnke 2020).

Approaching current prosodic voice practices through the lens of Critical Race Theory reveals that the prosodic habits voice teachers attempt to strip away are in fact valuable and whole parts of a person’s identity. Further, that a person is their “authentic” or “natural” self in many different situations. The idea of one “authentic” self being buried under all of these “habits” is damaging, especially in an increasingly diverse classroom. I postulate that is also not particularly useful for actor training. This is because an actor needs to become different characters who would then in turn have different “habits.”

Further, I ask here: Who is the judge of vocal “authenticity” or of the vocal “self”? What power dynamic does that create in the classroom? In Stoever’s book *The Sonic Color Line* she outlines the power dynamic of sound aptly:

...one has to listen similarly to power: valuing the same sounds in the same ways and reproducing only certain sounds the listening ear deems appropriate, pleasurable, and respectable. (Stoever 2016, 19–20)

In other words, since it is impossible to strip away all prosodic habits, voice practitioners in drama schools, presume whiteness, upper middle class, and RP (or SCGA) monolingual English-speaking habits as the personification of the “authentic” or “free” voice.

This prescriptive view is embedded in the presumptions of how voice practitioners are currently teaching prosody in drama school. Challenging these presumptions requires

voice practitioners to have “an understanding of listening as ethical involvement” (Stoever 2016, 22). Here, I am attempting to expose in the voice field how many “come to know their power and experience their privilege through listening.” (47) This means that our pedagogy (or lack thereof) reinforces the “somatic norm.” This is not an original observation or conclusion. Ginther’s work further supports my analysis: “Dysconscious racism was apparent in most of the participants’ statements, particularly with regards to notions of what is “classic,” “universal,” “standard,” and “neutral”” (Ginther 2015, 55).

Prescriptivism is not unique to the field of voice, of course, it permeates much of our culture as well as academic endeavors. Many might think prescriptivism is a part of the reason why we as voice practitioners shouldn’t collaborate with linguists, whose work is known historically to be quite prescriptive. However, this misses a massive shift in linguistics research:

From such an approach arises an ultimately prescriptive view that there are correct and incorrect ways of using intonation, often immediately followed by the concession that everyday conversationalists do not always “get it right”. Other approaches to language, including the interactional linguistic one adopted in this book, take a more descriptive view, that is they report back from their observations of intonation-in-use and show how pitch patterns are employed by participants in discourse. (Szczepek Reed 2011, 30–31)

Interactional linguistics is dedicated to reporting what is observed actually happening in language and not prescribing what they believe should be happening in language. It is this descriptive view that I believe could be incredibly useful in designing a pedagogy around prosody for acting students.

Prosodic Pedagogy in the Classroom

Inclusive Practice for Prosody

As the analysis of voice pedagogy through the lens of Critical Race Theory is germinating in the field of voice, it has yet to come to fruition. Few authors have established substantiated pedagogies that act to shift the white-supremacist assumptions that traditional voice work is laden with. One practitioner who signposts a way to start this work practically is Daron Oram. Oram flips the white-supremacist narrative that habits which do not fit the “somatic norm” are inhibiting by allowing his students to embrace their habits as skills (Oram 2020). Further, students from global majority and/or multilingual backgrounds are invited to take a front seat in the classroom as a source of knowledge, as they may have more experience changing their prosodic skills to suit different contexts—also known as code switching or vocal styling (Oram 2019, 287). Knight-Thompson Speechwork also creates a framework for students to explore all speech sounds as important and valid through their panlingual approach, rather than pointing students toward a “standard” set of sounds (Caban, Foh, and Parker 2021). These pedagogies allow for a more equitable space. So, in contrast to most voice practitioner’s beliefs on vocal habits, being “that they atrophy our vocal range and equipment” (Rodenburg 1992, 45), we can begin to recognize historically prosodic presumptions that have been made in the voice classroom and hindered the growth of prosodic skills in voice students.

Accent Work and Prosody

A good portion of work on prosody in the voice field is found in accent work. The most well-known practitioners being Edda Sharpe and Jan Haydn Rowles and Knight-Thompson Speechwork. It is important to note that their main aim for learning prosody is for acquiring an accent, not for overall speech skills. However, a study of their work allows for some understanding of how voice and speech practitioners view prosody as well as providing a foundation of practice to use in voice training generally.

Sharpe and Rowles use Laban as a way to understand the movement of voice by moving the body (Sharpe and Rowles 2009, 53). By letting the body inform the movement of the voice, she brings the unconscious knowledge of prosody to the forefront. Another practitioner who uses Laban in voice work is Frances Parkes. Parkes runs a series of workshops featuring Laban Voice work. When interviewed Parkes as part of my Master's program on March 18th, 2020 about the potential value of Laban for ESL drama students she explained that the movement of Laban seems to create a brain-body bridge for students with pluralistic speech patterns. However, Parkes pointed out that words like "flick," "dab" or "punch," gestures used by Laban, can lead to reductive characterizations of many accents.

Knight-Thompson Speechwork's (KTS) approach is mostly focused on articulation and building speech-system skills for accent work. However, they do cover prosody as part of their Experiencing Accents workshops and new book, *Experiencing Accents*. Their workshops and book encourage focusing on inventory and distribution (Thompson, Seiple, and Caban 2024, 95). They avoid this becoming prescriptive through reminders that there is no need to find an answer for these and encourage a lot of listening. However, it is notable that most accent samples and collection, including KTS's accent donor process, only encourages the collection of a single speaker in monologue. This makes it hard to study the prosodic inventory and distribution without our expectation or bias to interpret what the speaker is doing. Knight-Thompson's practical exercises for prosody are to draw pictures or use the "hand brain," as many practitioners call it (Caban 2020). The "hand brain" is simply using the hand to follow the rhythm and pitch of the speaker one is listening to. *Experiencing Accents*, does offer some fun partner games that focus on practicing a few key intonation patterns (Thompson, Seiple, and Caban 2024, 206). Although this is a physical manifestation, it has the same potential as Laban to lead to a simplistic understanding of an accent, by the actor or coach only embodying a few key intonation patterns. The emphasis is largely on defining specific inventory, which is contrary to how interactional linguistics posits prosody as, "not a question of what individual action a particular turn is implementing, but rather of how that action relates to a prior action, or of what kind of subsequent action it makes relevant" (Couper-Kuhlen 2014, 248).

Accent work provides some exercises to be drawn on, but many exercises rely on listening and moving without much contextualization of what prosody does in a more global sense outside of accents. This means that the actor or student is only listening for what is different from their own accent's prosody. However, these exercises have the potential to be reframed in the context of voice work and to be framed more holistically.

Research in Action

My research designed to bring inclusive practice and some of these accent work exercises into the voice classroom. In my first ten-week session at London College of Music on my teaching placement I took first year students through a voice foundation progression, recognized by some as RABSRAT.² Each principle was covered over the course of two weeks. In the first week, I would lead them through a Linklater-style discovery of the principle and ask them to step out of their habits. The second week, I would do a similar exercise that just asked them to notice their habits in that skill. Students consistently reported that their connection with the work was deeper when they were able to recognize their own habits first (Whitaker 2020). Conversely, they used words such as “disorienting” or “confusing” to describe their experience with practices that focused more on “stripping away” or “stepping out of” habits (Whitaker 2020). When participating in work such as Laban and Knight-Thompson Speechwork’s “Omnish” students reported feeling “more present” in the work because it allowed them to engage with their own habits and skills as a “springboard” to try other vocal skills (Whitaker 2020).

However, this first term of work still had me stumped. Students still seemed to engage with their personal biases around their habits and voices and the habits and voices of their peers. Some students, most notably global majority and multilingual students expressed feelings of failure toward their vocal habits and felt that their vocal habits should be “fixed” (Whitaker 2020). I decided to take the observation of habits a step further by utilizing Oram’s self-verbatim project. Oram establishes this project as a way for students to understand their prosodic habits and their usefulness, approaching prosody in a way that is not making the assumptions of somatic normativity (Oram 2020). I incorporated the self-verbatim project into the second term of classes at London College of Music with positive results. Many students became excited and engaged with their vocal flexibility and ability to code-switch, which they had not been conscious of as a skill before. However, some students still struggled to engage with the project, citing that they felt a recording of them talking alone wasn’t reflective of their prosodic habits (Whitaker 2021a).

This interested me and took me to dive deeper into researching what prosody actually was and how we can teach it as a skill. Reading *Analysing Conversation* by Szczepiek Reed (2011) brought to light several issues with my understanding of how to approach prosody based on my training. I realized that the second part of prosodic orientation is actually “dialogical interaction” or the social action of prosody.

Monological Bias

The Monologueical style of the self-verbatim project only fulfills one aspect of “prosodic orientation.” It certainly helps students to understand the prosodic features they are using, but it does not make conscious the “social action” of prosody. Couper-Kuhlen defines this as the action analysis that makes prosody relevant (Couper-Kuhlen 2014, 248). Students reported feeling confined by the solo aspect of the project, and some students requested that the project be done in a conversational style (Whitaker 2021a). I was surprised by the students’ intuition to suggest that the work be done in a conversational style, because this would allow them to discover the uses of prosody as “social action” which is what make prosody so essential in day-to-day life. Szczepiek Reed describes some of the essential actions of prosody in her book *Analysing Conversation*:

In her seminal book on rhythm, Couper-Kuhlen (1993) demonstrates that rhythmic patterns established by first speakers are frequently continued by next speakers: as a currently speaking participant approaches the end of his or her turn, the rhythmic pattern created by the stressed syllables is monitored by potentially next speakers. They begin their next turn by placing their first stressed syllable on the next rhythmic beat, according to the rhythmic pattern established by the previous speaker. (Szczepk Reed 2011, 14)

For many varieties of English, prosody, along with other interactional resources, has been shown to be used by participants to signal turn-related activities. For example, currently speaking participants employ different clusters of prosodic features to show that their turn is approaching completion or is being continued. (Szczepk Reed 2011, 13)

If students were able to make conscious the “social action” of their prosodic skills, they may be able to discover how prosody allows them to interact and take turns, which is an essential part of their craft as actors.

Traditional bias toward using Monologueical activities, such as poetry and Monologueues, creates a perpetual problem in voice classes. Although solo work and solo texts have their place in drama training, I question why voice practitioners have not brought partner work or duologues into a place of more prominence in the voice classroom. One practitioner who does encourage partner work in the voice classroom is Christina Gutekunst. In her book *Voice into Acting*, she addresses the prosodic pitfalls that actors have and suggests that interaction can help actors find a more organic communication.

We need to interact with other people, creating a genuine, dynamic, and spontaneous responsiveness to create real communication in performance - as opposed to learning how to say lines in a particular pattern without really listening or reacting to others. (Gutekunst and Gillett 2014, 4)

Although the book’s main goal is to bridge voice work and Stanislavski, she touches on a key principle that is in line with what I have been exploring in this research. I believe that allowing students to learn prosodic skills while in relation to each other, an exercise which is linguistically supported, removes the voice pedagogue as the definer of prosody. By allowing our diverse student cohort to learn each other’s prosody through dialogical activity we remove the barrier of the practitioner and heightened texts such as Monologueues and poetry as the authority. I believe that subverting this power dynamic by removing the assumptions of practitioner and text in the classroom will allow for greater prosodic freedom through the development of a repertoire of prosodic skills.

When I tested this in workshops, students responded with positive feedback about the partner-adjusted exercises (available on request). One student commented that the reason the pair-work enhanced his engagement “when we were interacting where you kindly said, ‘you guys take the lead’ that put ownership on us.” (Whitaker 2021c) While his partner reported a heightened sense of listening, stating: “It made me think of just putting more focus on listening to him as well, just really listening to his voice and to the changes and to just what’s coming from him to me.” (Whitaker 2021c) Giving the students responsibility through pair work in the classroom increases engagement, learning of listening skills, and subverts the biases of Monologueical activity that presume whiteness and English-monolingual prosody.

Conclusion

Due to there being very few distinct pedagogies on prosody in drama training, a lot of presumptions are being made about the students' relationships to prosody. These presumptions reinforce white, upper middle class, RP (or SCGA), and English monolingual prosodic features as the "somatic norm." However, it is so deeply ingrained in the methodology that it is not even being named or noted. Although accent classes offer some prosodic exercises, and pedagogies such as KTS are shifting to a more inclusive approach that decenters RP or SCGA, they are still mostly focused on the Monologueic and offer only a basic framework for prosody training that focuses on a target accent and does not contextualize prosody as "social action" (Couper-Kuhlen 2014, 248). The bias toward a "somatic norm" in prosodic training is implicit in the uncritical way we are approaching voice work for prosody. By developing an explicit methodology, we can build prosodic skills instead of reinforcing assumptions about how an actor or character should engage prosodically.

My research shows that the field of linguistics has greatly struggled with many of the same biases. I recommend that the field of voice takes into stride the work modern linguists have done to work past the status-quo. Interactional linguistics favors understanding prosody not as a set of rules that are the "expression of something internal to the single individual" (Goodwin as quoted in Couper-Kuhlen 2014) but as a combination of a speaker's prosodic orientation and dialogical interaction. There is work in the voice field that is making great strides in teaching prosody. From my study, I can point to work in the field that may be the first stepping stones for creating a pedagogy around prosodic training. Such as, Daron Oram's work on verbatim for developing an awareness of prosodic orientation and the interdisciplinary work of Christina Gutekunt's and John Gillet on voice and Stanislavsky for promoting dialogical interaction. Knight-Thompson Speechwork's work generally creates a platform for developing awareness of speaker orientation and most importantly a demonstration of inclusive practice which could be a basis for inclusive prosodic pedagogy. *Experiencing Accents* also touches on the usefulness of partner work in embodying prosody (Thompson, Seiple, and Caban 2024, 206). Although this work is useful, it is apparent across the field that there is little dedicated pedagogy for learning prosody and that the work that is available does not typically conceptualize prosody more broadly as social action, but as a means for expressing an internal world or a set of prosodic inventories that places an accent.

Most notably, Kristin Linklater's work focuses on the expression of an internal world and is taught widely across drama schools. This is not to say that her work isn't helpful or effective, as found in my research it is was typically successful in "warming up" the students voices (Whitaker 2021b). However, my research also established that student's feelings of being warmed up did not correlate with an increase of prosodic skills. When engaging in dialogical activity students reported greater "playfulness," increased "listening," and that their voices held more "detail and nuance" or "specificity" (Whitaker 2021b). My conclusion is that not only would the development of a specific prosodic pedagogy make clear what skills or "social actions" we are trying to teach students about prosody, before they get to text, rhetoric, and acting classes, but it would also help undermine white supremacist, English-monolingual, upper middle class, and RP (or SCGA) narratives in the voice classroom. Furthermore, I assert that it is the Monologueical bias of voice studies traditions that has upheld this pedagogical gap and reinforced prescriptive assumptions about prosody.

My recommendation to the field is that by incorporating more dialogical activities into the voice classroom we can decenter white, English-monolingual, and neuro-normal prosodic features. By valuing all students' prosodic identities all our students will benefit from a wide knowledge of prosodic possibilities and a more detailed and specific understanding of the prosodic skills necessary for an acting career. I also recommend the continuation of interdisciplinary work with interactional linguistics to create a stronger framework for what prosodic skills are most useful for the actor in performance.

Limitations of the Work

My research culminated in the investigation of partner work. However, this was done during the COVID-19 pandemic which resulted in my workshops being online. The online platform, Zoom, presented the limitation of not being in the same space as their partner. Secondly, the research discussed was conducted in 2020–2021 before the publication of Knight-Thompson Speechwork's *Experiencing Accents*, so their prosody exercises with ear-training and partner work could not be used explicitly as part of the study. However, their influence and pedagogy were explored as part of the research due to the dissemination of their work in their various workshops.

Notes

1. Beatrice Szczepek Reed coined the term "prosodic orientation" to describe how speakers orient to each other in *Analysing Conversation* (Szczepek Reed 2011).
2. Acronym for Release, Alignment, Breath, Sound, Resonance, Articulation, Text.

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