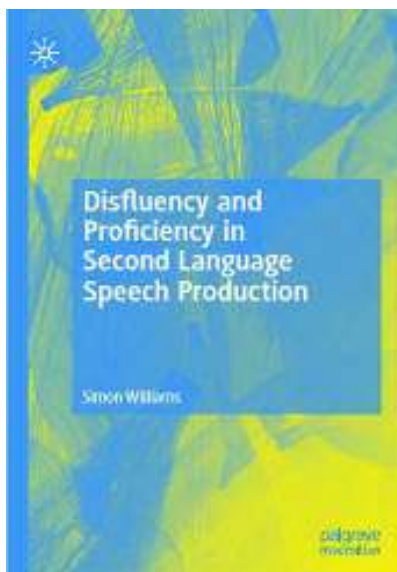


## BOOK REVIEW

### SIMON WILLIAMS' DISFLUENCY AND PROFICIENCY IN SECOND LANGUAGE SPEECH PRODUCTION

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A recent release (January 2023) of Palgrave Macmillan, under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022, the volume *Disfluency and Proficiency in Second Language Speech Production* is an intriguing and captivating approach on the subject matter of attempting fluency in a foreign language. Written by Simon Williams, the work presents the author's research, observations and findings, with respect to various 'techniques' or 'helpers' employed by non-native speakers, in order to attain or, at least, to aim at a fluent discourse when speaking a foreign language learned as a second language. The author is a native speaker of English and an academic, from the School of Media, Arts and Humanities, University of Sussex, Falmer, UK, bringing his life experience and academic expertise into his writing.

The volume follows a straightforward structure. It begins with XX preliminary pages comprising acknowledgements, transcription symbols, tables of contents, acronyms, list of figures and list of tables. Then the 286 pages of the volume develop, with the main contents organised as follows: a thirty pages introductory

chapter, six main chapters of about thirty-fourty pages each, and a half-long conclusive one. These eight chapters come up to page 261, to be followed by 4 pages of appendix, references along 3 pages, and then the index on the last 18 pages.

The first chapter introduces the concepts of fluency, disfluency, proficiency, with extensive analysis of the state of art, through numerous references from the literature of speciality. The author briefly depicts here the six disfluencies that will next be each the topic of a chapter. The own words of the author are best to shed light upon the concepts presented and the notions operated with:

"If a central notion associated with fluency is keeping the talk going, then disfluency is the opposite, a temporary interruption to the flow of speech. The speaker is faced with an ongoing tension between planning and production: keep going and hesitate from time to time to plan the next stretch of talk or carry on regardless and repair the inevitable errors and breakdowns. Thus, fluency has become synonymous with speed, and disfluency with forms of hesitation and repair. Four recognised forms of hesitation are silent pauses, filled pauses, prolongations, and repetitions. Two forms of repair are self-corrections and false starts. These six disfluencies are the subject matter of the central chapters." (p.6)

The impression of listeners rating speeches, the categories of disfluency data according to their collection environment and the fluency 'standards' of CEFR test descriptors are touched here as well and announced to feature, if relevant, in the economy of each following chapter, in separate subtitles or within others.

Also, the strategy of organising the text within the next chapters is disclosed now in this first chapter entitled *Introduction*.

"Common to each chapter is a general introduction to the disfluency, its formal description, effect on listeners, relation to speaker proficiency, significance in international language tests, and a final comment." (p.6)

As the six chapters on disfluencies each have initial parts all bearing the subtitle *Introduction*, this first chapter might have benefited from a more inspired title, still in line with the content provided, of initial steps, approach to the matter, preliminary considerations, setting up or other of the kind; but this is just a personal and very subjective thought. Moreover, even the final chapter, *Conclusions*, follows a similar structure beginning with the subtitle *Introduction* and ending with a subtitle of *Comments*, which again may seem a bit superfluous, but acceptable as long as it makes sense in the flow of the given discourse.

In a subtitle of the same introductory chapter, the usual method of the survey analysis, of the experiments underlying the study is explained:

"Listeners rate speech recordings of L2 learners for fluency. The recordings are subsequently analysed for acoustic measures such as speed and pauses and the results compared with the ratings. Inferences are made about the features that listeners responded to in making their judgements on fluency." (p.13)

Several studies undertaken into each of the main areas of interest for this volume are presented, referred to and thoroughly discussed within the individual chapters following, on Silent Pauses (SPs), Filled Pauses (FPs), Prolongations(PRLs), Repetitions(RPTs), Self-corrections (SCs) and False Starts (FSs). Acknowledgement of other works is realised by proper and extensive references and adequacy of literature review is proven all along these six chapters as well. Each chapter contains its own quite broad list of references in the end.

The numerous experiments constituting the basis of this volume's analysis and discussion, undertaken and coordinated by various researchers in the field, are laid out in details along the main chapters, with thorough information regarding steps and conclusions. Assessing, comparing them and putting together their results, Williams provides a highly comprehensive synthesis and, besides, brings a great deal of own interpretation and comments.

In *Silent Pauses*, after analysing and comparing results of several studies, the author identifies two basic functions of the silent pauses in spontaneous speech, i.e. a rhetorical one, marking the syntactic unit, and a psychological one, showing hesitation of the speaker when planning what to say next. He also remarks that pauses tend to be "noticeably longer and more frequent in the environment of words lacking cohesion and shorter and less frequent in the environment of words more strongly connected." (p.35).

A general conclusion that comes here, after plenty of examples analysed, is rather straightforward and common sense:

"Higher proficiency speakers produce fewer SPs than lower proficiency speakers; and, regardless of speaker proficiency, a higher probability of SPs is found before lower frequency words." (p.65)

In *Filled Pauses*, where the material for exemplifications is taken mostly from L1 studies, even the structure of the chapter shows an analysis more into the depth, with third level subtitles introducing for instance a more detailed categorization of this type of disfluency, accounting for location, position, frequency, length, duration, and pitch. Then again, for the effect on listeners, the analysis is broken down into studies of *uh* and *um* with L1 (pp.78-84) and respectively L2 rater studies. Among other fillers mentioned along the chapters we find: *well, but, and, so* (p.75), *y'know, I mean* (p.86), or even *mais, alors, donc* - the French for *but, then, so* - (p.93), then *innit, to be honest, er, ah* (p.94), *eh, ok, ja, also, erm* (p.97), and *euh, eum* (p.105). An interesting observation is given in the end of the chapter, namely that FPs tend to be rare in speech, or maybe rarely noticed or marked as disfluency, partially because they might have an interactional significance, a communicative role. To contrast between producers, it is noted that:

"While in fluent speakers an FP can alert the listener to the approach of less familiar lexis, on hearing a large number of FPs from a less fluent speaker, listeners may interpret the FP as a sign of general disfluency with no special significance such as approaching low-frequency lexis." (pp.106-107)

*Prolongations*, the next chapter, also shows elaborate search into their main types of data, with third level subtitles, bringing into light corpora studies, natural language processing, classroom interaction, and elicited data. Found as

lengthened pronunciations of diverse monosyllabic prepositions or of the definite and indefinite articles (in forms as *aye*, *thee*, *ay:e*, *thi:y*, *thuh*) (pp.132-133), prolongations also appear with common fillers (*u:h*, *u:m*) (pp.133-134) or as *ja-a* ('yes') and *nä-ä* ('no') (p.135), and can be formed to longer words, as well:

"Prolongations may be a speaker strategy to maintain fluency without the more explicit marker of a filled pause or the potential breakdown of a silent pause. Conjunctions, determiners, and other function words are the preferred sites for prolongations, especially the long vowel nucleus of the last syllable, or otherwise a sonorant in the coda."  
(p.141)

Chapter *Repetitions* is a little shorter than the others and from its very beginning the author notes a somewhat paradoxical situation:

"Of all the disfluencies, repetition in speech might seem one of the most straightforward to define, yet few fluency studies that include repetitions in their data analysis offer a formal definition, and few give examples." (p.147)

From the 4 pages of reference titles for this chapter alone, the most cited in the first part of this chapter is Maclay & Osgood's work, then Hieke's, Levelt's, Temple's and Olynyk's exemplifications are put forward. Bosker's and Bortfeld's studies are also mentioned often.

In the final comments of the chapter comes the explanation that repetitions are considered to occur mostly because of the specificity of the English language, with phrasal constructions, lacking inflections, using pronouns and prepositions as function words, and thus "pronouns are notably repeated the more complex the noun phrase of which they form a part; and prepositions are repeated the more complex the constituent." (p.174)

*Self-corrections* is the next chapter and it discusses this form of disfluency that is considered very relevant because it can be seen as an indicator of the process of learning, of the conscious effort and concern of the speakers to repair their recognized errors:

Learners themselves apparently internalise the notion of standard forms and monitor and correct their production to mould it more closely to the target language. (p.179)

Again, third level titles are used to better structure the main types of data categorizing into in or outside the classroom interactions and task effect in elicited data.

The author's conclusion of this chapter is that self-corrections are functional linguistic activities deliberately aiming to check and fix problems identified.

"Evidence shows that self-corrections are indicative of fertile cognitive work in the speaker and probably reflect a fast-changing and developing interlanguage through monitoring and repair." (p.207)

The same structure as in the previous chapter is found in the final of the six chapters on disfluencies, *False Starts*. Relatively from the beginning we are announced of the dual function of this type of disfluency, i.e. "enabling speakers to express themselves more precisely and improve fluency; and enabling the listener to accommodate the speaker's utterances and clarify the speaker's message."

(p.214). Levelt's examples are discussed at first to then have analysis of McAllister's or Tree's examples, then Wong's, Walsh & Li's, Buckwalter's, Jung's, Kasper's, Rylander's, Simpson's, Shehadeh's a.s.o., backed up by diverse studies of many researchers referenced along the chapter, from Kormos to Schegloff, from Hellermann to Lee, from Seedhouse to Foster and Tavakoli and many others. The final remark about false starters is that they are only few with advanced learners and are more likely to be found with lower-level learners and most commonly in tasks that are open-ended or less structured:

"At this level of speaker proficiency, false starts may also be more salient to listeners as they are less likely to be well-formed, or perhaps because a greater percentage may occur at the middle, end, or prefaced by *and* at the start of an utterance, or (because lower-level learners are less confident of lexis) more likely to interrupt wrong words before their completion." (p.242)

The final chapter, *Conclusion*, offers an overview of the disfluencies discussed along the six main chapters, presenting them together, in a synthesis, on a structure similar to the one already well established in the previous chapters: introduction, formal description, effects on listeners, classroom interaction, proficiency levels, and public language tests, ending with comments.

At the very start of this conclusive chapter, readers are provided with a very clearly explained main idea:

"Disfluencies are a misnomer for a necessary range of techniques that speakers employ to maintain the flow of talk, albeit by temporarily interrupting it. Speakers can select from a repertory of silent pause, filled pause, prolongation, repetition, self-correction, and false start, or a compound selection, e.g. PRL—SP—FP—RPT—FP—SP, as in a false start." (p.247)

In the beginning of the final title *Comments*, the author promotes the doubtless relevance of all these more or less conscious strategies employed by learners and speakers of a foreign language in general so as to prove fluency or to pass for a satisfactorily fluent speaker of that language. At the same time the author puts forward a quite valid observation regarding the mimetic character of speech production with second language learners:

"Disfluency in L2 learner speech is increasingly accepted as a necessary stage and a by-product of the learning process, e.g. often used to buy time while the speaker prepares the next utterance. Further, because disfluencies are understood to be a product of spontaneous speech whether in L1 or L2, a realistic ambition for L2 learners is to produce disfluencies in a similar way and circumstances to L1 speakers rather than to attempt to reduce or eradicate them altogether." (p.259)

No other conclusion can better synthesize the results of the analyses and discussions in this volume than the authors own remarks given in the final part of this conclusive chapter:

"No human who reacts spontaneously to their environment can escape the production of disfluencies. Disfluencies are a response to the unpredictability of real-world input and reflect the fact of a physico-

electrical mismatch in speech production, in which the thought process is much quicker than its assembly into syntactic and lexical units and thence their motor articulation in utterances. The system is imperfect but good enough, a state that probably reflects much of human and other living organisms' existence and preserves the possibility of future adaptation better than a notionally 'perfect' system."(p.261)