Dialect Imitation Across Typologically Distinct Prosodic Systems

During the process of second language acquisition, both L1 phonemic and prosodic categories might be subject to transfer from the L1 to the L2. Among prosodic features, the early-acquired metrical and intonational properties of the L1 might shape L2 prosody and be partly the basis of the perception of Foreign Accent (FA). On the production side, speakers attempting to imitate an unfamiliar system must learn which factors govern the variability present in the target speech. This is expected to be more difficult when the speaker's native system and the target system are typologically distinct (Best 1995). Nevertheless, speakers can adjust phonetic details of their own segmental pronunciation so that they can narrowly resemble other speaker's productions, which they have just heard (Goldinger 1998, Nielsen 2007, 2010, inter alia), though studies of prosodic and intonational imitation have presented mixed results. On one side, it has been argued that speakers are only able to reproduce gross phonological patterns (Cole & Shattuck Hufnagel 2011) or else that both phonological and fine phonetic detail (such as tonal alignment and scaling) can be successfully reproduced (D’Imperio, Petrone & Cavone 2014).

Both metrical and intonational typology can also vary among varieties of the same language, as in the case of Southern and Standard French (Selkirk 1977). At the foot level, languages such as English and Italian are trochaic, while a language such as Standard French shows an iambic structure (Hayes 1995). Also, at an intonational/typological level, while American English is a head language (Jun 2005), Singapore English is an edge language. Given that learning an unfamiliar dialect or an L2 can be thought of as a process of long-term imitation, the studies reviewed here will be based upon the direct-imitation paradigm (German, Carlson & Pierrehumbert 2013). Hence, in this talk I’ll summarize 3 studies concerning learners’ imitations of either metrical or intonational properties of a typologically different language (French vs. Italian) or a different variety of the same language (Singapore vs. American English and Southern vs. Standard French).

Given that the amount of L1 use can directly impact perceived FA, at least in segmental production in late and advanced L2 learners (Flege et al., 1997), in study 1 we tested whether L1 use would also result in greater prosodic FA both at the production and the perception level (Cavone & D’Imperio, submitted). We also know that larger exposure to speech productions can lead to stronger episodic traces (Goldinger, 1998), hence we might hypothesize that increased L2 exposure can lead to better target productions on the part of the learners, which was tested in study 2 (D’Imperio & German, 2015, submitted).

Our results show that, despite the structural difference, speaker of typologically different languages can rapidly imitate fine phonetic detail either related to metrical structure or intonational structure. Specifically, for the French L2 study, we show that L1 use is a predictor of how well the Italian learners’ imitation process will apply as well as their generalization performance. Also, speakers of Singapore English are able to rapidly adapt and shift from an edge-based system to an accentual system within the time of the experiment, as well as finely tune intonation phonetic detail of tonal
alignment so as to imitate a model American speaker’s pronunciation. Finally, the degree of variability in successfully reproducing the target values appears to be also dependent on amount of exposure to the non-native, L2, dialect. I’ll then discuss the results in terms of a general model of L2 prosodic acquisition.

REFERENCES


