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Does social identity influence the acquisition of L2 French pronunciation?

This study examines how social groups among second language (L2) learners may influence the acquisition of particular speech features due to accommodation, a process by which speakers adapt to each other's communicative behaviours, often in order to converge on the production of linguistic features due to underlying shared norms or values (Giles & Coupland, 1991). In particular, we investigate whether L2 Anglophone learners enrolled in a Canadian French Immersion (FI) program constitute a social group and, if so, whether this contributes in part to the distinctiveness of the French accent of these L2 speakers.

FI programs provide a unique language learning environment for L2 acquisition, in which French is the primary language of communication for teaching learners who do not speak French as a first language in English-majority communities (Lyster, 1987). Poljak (2015) found that native speakers (NS) of French were able to identify and distinguish between the oral production of FI and Core French (CF) speakers, indicating that FI speakers have a particular non-native accent distinct from that of other L2 speakers. To date, research has found differences between FI and NS productions of voiceless stop consonants (Netelenbos et al., 2015) and the realization of optional schwas (Uritescu et al., 2002). However, the particular phonetic structures that distinguish the L2 speech of these speakers from other L2 learners remain virtually unexplored and the sources of these phonetic differences have yet to be identified. One such potential factor, namely, a social-group-based accommodation effect, has been shown to influence the speech of classroom peers and high school social groupings (Eckert, 1989; 2008) as the result of pressures to accommodate to the normative accent of the speech community. We seek to investigate the possibility that such an effect underlies, at least in part, the distinct FI accent because, as highlighted by Lyster (1987), close-knit social groups form within FI programs as students primarily have contact with their same-program peers and are separated from students enrolled in other programs during class time.

Our study has two primary objectives, namely, to (i) identify and describe the phonetic features unique to the pronunciation of FI speakers; and (ii) investigate the potential role of a social group effect in the acquisition of these particular features due to speakers' potential tendency to converge on the non-target-like productions of their same-program peers in order to create a normative, within-group accent. Of the different variables included in the study (rhotics, French vowels, stress placement and realization and intonation contours), the present paper examines the production of French intonation contours of declarative sentences which proves problematic for English learners of French for utterances containing more than one accentual phrase (Lepetit, 1989).

The productions of ten learners of French having completed either a FI or CF program and having similar levels of overall L2 proficiency as evaluated by the University of Toronto Test of French were examined. During the experimental production tasks, speech samples were obtained through 1) a short reading task; 2) a sentence repetition task; and 3) an interactive map task. Then, participants completed an in-group identification questionnaire (adapted from Leach et al., 2008) consisting of fourteen 7-point Likert scale questions targeting participants' in-group identification towards their French program (either FI or CF). Lastly, participants completed a linguistic background and learning experience questionnaire to help account for any within-group individual differences in the production of the target structures.

In order to ascertain features particular to FI speech, multilevel modeling will be used to determine whether there are significant between-group (FI versus CF) differences in the productions of the target structures under investigation and to evaluate whether the results of the in-group identification questionnaire serve as a predictor of such differences, should they exist. Preliminary results indicate that French Immersion speakers produce French sentences with higher peaks in fundamental frequency and a lower range of fundamental frequency their CF counterparts. The results of the in-group identification questionnaire also indicate that French Immersion students demonstrate greater in-group membership to their French program than CF speakers.

If these results are confirmed, then we can stipulate that the distinct accent of FI speakers, with particular reference to unique intonation patterns, is influenced, in part, by social-group-based accommodation. The results of this study will provide an empirical contribution to the current understanding of the role of socio-psychological factors in L2 speech learning, particularly as it concerns non-target-like pronunciation.

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