The Role of Dialectal Variation in Second Language Learning

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Dialectal variation & second language learning?

• What role does dialectal (regional, social) variation play in learning a second language?

• (When) are second language (L2) learners exposed to dialectal variation?

• Do L2 learners acquire and use dialectal features in their own speech?
Dialectal variation & second language learning?

• For example, in the case of Spanish...
  – Presence in distributed geographic spaces over several centuries
  – Approximately 400 million speakers
  – Regional and social variation

• L2 learners of Spanish may be exposed to many different varieties:
  • instructors, study abroad, the media, Latino populations in the U.S.
What we know

• Role of dialectal variation in Second Language Acquisition?
  – Little known regarding second language (L2) acquisition and use of dialectal variation
  – Focus on global effects of dialect: listening comprehension, intelligibility, attitudes (e.g., Eisenstein 1986, Major et al. 2005, Forde 1995)

• Effect of dialect on listening comprehension by L2 learners
  – “standard” vs. “non-standard”
  – Dialect familiarity, “model accent advantage” (Tauroza & Luk 1997)
  – Other factors at play?
    • For example: sociolinguistic factors, attitudes toward different dialects, amount of exposure (Fox & McGory 2007, Eisenstein & Verdi 1985)
What we know

- **Do L2 learners incorporate regional and social variants into their interlanguage systems?**
  - Evidence for use of some local dialectal features in L2 production (e.g., Blondeau et al. 2002, Goldstein 1987)
    - Production of Spanish sociophonetic variants by small group of advanced learners (Geeslin & Gudmestad 2011)
  - Others find that all L2 learners do not use dialectal variants even when exposed to them (e.g., Goldstein 1987, Friesner & Dinkin 2006)
    - But not always... (Fox & McGory 2007)
Summary & Objectives of study

Summary:
• Some learners incorporate dialectal features in own speech (but not always)
• Regional and social variation affects global comprehension
  – But...what are the effects of individual dialectal features?
  – And...if effects on comprehension diminish with L2 experience (familiarity), why?

Objectives:
1. To explore the effect of L2 forms that are subject to regional, social, and stylistic variation on listening comprehension
2. To determine how L2 learners perceive (categorize) dialectal variants and if perception changes with increased experience
The dialectal variant

• Weakening of Spanish syllable- and word-final /s/ (Hualde 2005)
  (1) sibilance [s]: [fos.ka] fosca (nonsense)
  (2) aspiration [h] (glottal frication): [foh.ka]
  (3) deletion: [fo.ka]

Aspirated-/s/ limited to certain geographic regions,
including lowland and coastal Latin America, the Caribbean, the Canary Islands (Hammond 2001, Lipski 1994)
• favored by different social groups within these regions (e.g., male speakers, Hoffman 2001)
• [h] more frequent in more informal or conversational registers (e.g., Lafford 1986, Cid-Hazard 2003)
Speech perception: aspirated-/s/

• Spoken word activation – dependent upon legitimacy of variation, not degree of variation (Sumner & Samuel 2005)

• In the case of variants of Spanish syllable-final /s/:
  – Legitimate variants of /s/ in s-weakening dialects: [s], [h], Ø
  – Thus, [kos.ta], [koh.ta], and [ko.ta] (but not *[kof.ta]) should all productively activate the construct costa ‘coast’
The dialectal variant: L1 English

• **Language-specific perception** / perception of non-native sounds shaped by L1 phonology (e.g., Kuhl 1992, Best 1994, Flege 1995)

• English glottal fricative /h/
  – English /h/ is contrastive in syllable-initial position, but does not occur syllable-finally (McMahon 2002)
    "hat" vs. "at"
    • Prediction: English-speaking learners of Spanish may not attend to Spanish syllable-final [h]

  – [h] does not occur as a legitimate variant of English /s/ as it does in /s/-weakening dialects of Spanish
    "dust" *[dʌht]
    • Prediction: The L2 learners may not associate [h] with /s/
Research Questions

1. What is the effect of /s/-aspiration on comprehension of spoken Spanish? Does the presence of the aspirated form affect identification of familiar lexical items?

2. How do English-speaking learners of Spanish perceive (categorize) aspirated variants of /s/?

3. Who are our L2 learners? When and how are they exposed to dialectal variation?
## Method – Participants (N=233)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>L2 Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1 learners</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Elementary Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2 learners</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Intermediate Spanish II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3 learners</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>300-level Spanish literature and culture courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4 learners</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>400-level Spanish literature and linguistics courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5 learners</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>University instructors of Spanish courses / graduate students in Spanish literature</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Native Spanish Control Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Region</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/s/-aspirating</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>La Rioja, Argentina</td>
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Method – Tasks

1. **Categorization (Perception) Task** (A, B)
   – To determine how listeners categorize syllable-final aspirated variants (in nonce words)

2. **Lexical Identification Task** (A, B)
   – To examine comprehension of familiar Spanish words spoken with syllable-final aspirated variants (translation)

3. **Language Background Questionnaire** (3 versions)
   – To measure exposure to /s/-weakening varieties and experience with Spanish

4. **Vocabulary Familiarity Task**
   – To ensure knowledge of lexical items used in Lexical Identification Task (unknown, familiar, known)
Categorization Task Stimuli

• 158 disyllabic nonsense words [CVC.CV] and [CV.CV]
  – Target stimuli (N=14)
    • Nonce items with word-internal s-aspirated coda [CVh.CV] (14)
      \([\text{bah.pe}], [\text{dih.to}]\)
  – Control stimuli (N=64)
    • Nonce items with word-internal full-s coda [CVs.CV] (14)
    • Nonce items with other word-internal coda contexts: lateral, rhotic, nasal, labiodental fricative, no coda
      \([\text{mis.po}], [\text{gal.ka}], [\text{sof.te}]\)
  – Distracter stimuli (N=80)
    • Target different positions and sounds, nonce items
      \([\text{fin.ko}][\text{ne.ro}], [\text{ka.ti}]\)
Lexical Identification Task Stimuli

• 45 disyllabic and trisyllabic real words
  – Target stimuli (N=12)
    • Spanish words with word-internal /s/-aspirated coda
      \[po\text{h}.\text{tre}] \text{ postre} ‘desert’ \quad [eh.kye.la] \text{ escuela} ‘school’
  – Control stimuli (N=12)
    • Spanish words with word-internal full sibilant coda
      \[t\text{fis}.\text{me}] \text{ chisme} ‘gossip’ \quad [ma.es.tro] \text{ maestro} ‘teacher’
  – Distracter stimuli (N=21)
    • Other sociophonetic features (Argentine /ʃ/, Castilian /θ/) (N=16)
    • Nonce words (N=5)
      \[bol.pa] \text{ bolpa} (nonce) \quad [bo.te.fa] \text{ botella} ‘bottle’
RESULTS I

1. What is the effect of /s/-aspiration on comprehension of spoken Spanish? Does the presence of the aspirated form affect identification of familiar lexical items?
Results I: Lexical Identification Task

Figure 1. Mean comprehension scores according to variant of /s/
Lexical Identification

What is the effect of /s/-aspiration on comprehension of spoken Spanish?

• There is a significant effect of the aspirated variant [h] on identification of familiar Spanish lexical items for the L2 learners
  – L2 learners are better at identifying familiar words pronounced with the full sibilant variant [s] than the same words pronounced with the aspirated variant [h]

• However, this effect diminishes with increased experience and disappears by Level 5 (graduate students)
  – Level 5 learners and native speakers at ceiling levels for both variants
RESULTS II

2. How do English-speaking learners of Spanish perceive (categorize) aspirated variants of /s/?
Results II: Categorization Task

Figure 2. Categorization accuracy of aspirated-/s/
Results II: Categorization Task

Figure 3. Distribution of response types for aspirated-/-s/
Perception of aspirated-/s/

How do English-speaking learners of Spanish perceive aspirated variants of /s/?

– Levels 1 and 2 (beginning, intermediate) do not identify word-internal syllable-final [h] as ‘s’
  • “Ignoring” coda [h]? Influence from the L1 phonology?
    – ([h] not contrastive in coda position in the L1)

– At Level 3 (high intermediate), some learners begin to identify [h] as ‘s’

– By Levels 4 and 5 (advanced, graduate students), ‘s’ is the preferred response, followed by ‘f’ (similar to the Argentine group)
Perception of aspirated-/s/

• L2 perception of sociophonetic variation:
  – Evidence of a dynamic L2 perceptual system – changes in how a new (target) sound is perceived
    • Evolving system not just for categorical or ‘standard’ sounds, but also for sounds subject to regional, social, and stylistic variation
  – In second language acquisition research and pedagogy → must recognize that dialectal variation plays a role in language learning and use
RESULTS III: Exposure

3. Who are our L2 learners? When and how are they exposed to dialectal variation?

   a) Region of origin of (native) instructors
   b) Study abroad in different dialectal regions
   c) Exposure to dialects in the Media (TV, film, music)
   d) Explicit linguistic knowledge / awareness
RESULTS III: Exposure

Types of exposure to /s/-weakening dialects across level (% of level)
RESULTS III: Exposure

Figure 4. Types of exposure to /s/-weakening dialects across level
Exposure to dialectal variation

Who are our L2 learners? When and how are they exposed to dialectal variation?

• Exposure to /s/-weakening dialects varies with proficiency level of the learner
  – Lower-level learners (Levels 1 & 2) have very limited exposure
    • Primarily through region of origin of native instructors
  – Many higher-level learners (Levels 4 & 5) receiving multiple types of exposure to Spanish dialectal variation:
    • Study / living abroad
    • Media (TV, film, music)
    • Explicit knowledge

However...
Do instructors use dialectal features in the language classroom?

And what about non-native instructors?

How is this ‘explicit knowledge’ gained?
General Discussion

1. Significant effect of a particular dialectal variant (aspirated-/s/) on comprehension of Spanish lexical items
   - Effect diminishes with increased experience

2. Development in perception of a L2 dialectal variant
   - L2 learners move towards native-like patterns of perception of variable sounds with increased experience
     • Seems to begin (for this population) at Level 3

3. L2 learners not exposed to certain dialects of Spanish (/s/-weakening) until higher levels?
   - study abroad, Media, instruction (explicit knowledge)
   - Is exposure necessary for acquisition of perception dialectal features and to diminish effects on listening comprehension?
Future Study

• Are dialectal features (e.g., sounds, vocabulary) used in the second language (L2) classroom?
  – If so, how often? By whom? Which features? Are they explicitly taught or just present in the input?

• At what proficiency level should dialectal variation be introduced?
  – Are beginning and intermediate-level learners “ready” for dialectal variation?
  – How should it be introduced? What dialects should be included? Should also teach social and stylistic variation?

• How might learner attitudes or reactions toward the social group(s) associated with different dialects affect acquisition and use of dialectal features?
Implications for a Language Program?

• Must recognize language within its sociocultural context
  – One part is regional variation – but what about social and stylistic variation? (For example: gender-specific patterns, language use according to formality of context)

• Benefits of exposure to target language dialects
  – QUESTION: When and how to do so?

• Include instruction on major dialectal features in language courses?
Implications for a Language Program?

• Gutierrez & Fairclough (2006):
  – Call for the incorporation of sociolinguistic, stylistic, and contextual (register) variation in the language classroom
    • From the beginning level → incorporate awareness of other dialects and cultures
    • As advance → productive use of alternative dialects

  – GOAL: for advanced speakers to be prepared to interact in the real world, first focusing on local varieties (U.S. Spanish) and then on other varieties around the world

Implications for a Language Program?

• Further support for the incorporation of dialectal variation in the language curriculum:
  – Chapelle (2009) – argues for greater incorporation of Canadian French content in textbooks, particularly in the northern US
  – Valdman (1988) – pedagogical norms should include “a full range of target language variability, including sociolinguistically stigmatized features”
  – Haddad (2006) – “learners should be exposed to dialects early on” (Arabic)

• HOWEVER – some disagreement concerning goals
  – Auger & Valdman (1999)
    • Not necessarily a favorable reception toward L2 use of colloquial or socially marked accents?
    • GOAL: to recognize or be aware of dialectal features, not to acquire full range of features of one dialect
Questions, Comments, & Discussion

¡Mucha[h] gracia[h]!

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References


• Escudero, Paolo & Paul Boersma. 2004. Bridging the gap between L2 speech perception research and phonological theory. SSLA, 26, 551-585.


