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Category creep in second language vowel and VOT production

Research in second language phonetics and phonology has long been concerned with the question of how representations of sound change—How do learners establish a “new category” for an L2 sound, especially one that holds considerable similarity to an L1 sound? What helps a second language learner develop more L2-like pronunciation? What holds them back? A key player in explaining some of the observed patterns has been the L1—we “know” L1 can have a strong seemingly restrictive influence, at least in adult second language learning, and we observe many cases in which L1 and L2 sounds seem to interact in a shared “sound space”. Yet, there are persistent puzzles associated with long standing views of how this works (e.g., as characterized in various versions of the Speech Learning Model (e.g., Flege 1995, 2007,)). Various patterns in production or perception are explained as being the result of a “new category” having been established for L2, and yet there is no definition of what counts as evidence for category formation. In this talk I suggest we will gain more insight into sound representations by focusing on the nature of “performance” in this complex linguistic situation than on assuming there is a watershed quantal moment when a “category” is “established”. Based on data on vowels and VOT from very new and very experienced second language learners, I suggest that L2 categories don’t form, they develop, in a gradual process more like “creep” than cell division. This creep appears to be motivated in part by a drive for distinct L1 and L2 forms, but this happens long before we can plausibly say a new category has been formed, and it can dictate different types of “creep” in different L1:L2 matchups and learning stages. I will also suggest that the gradual development of distinction in the L1 and L2 space has analogs in the processes which govern speech adaptation to other speakers of the “same” language who belong to different groups, different ages, families, regional and social groups, etc, Beginning to learn another language may start as just another case of learning the “sounds” to expect from a new set of people.