Short-term Accommodation of Non-native English Speakers: A Perspective of Second Language Acquisition

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Short-term accommodation is viewed as an approach to shorten social distances between interlocutors in sociolinguistics (Communication Accommodation Theory, Giles, Coupland and Coupland 1990), or as an automatic processing mechanism in dialogue conversation (Pickering and Garrod 2004). As most of studies focus on accommodation between native speakers with different dialects, there is a gap of research on accommodation between native and non-native speakers.

If acquiring a second language is seen as an accumulative outcome of thousands of short-term accommodation from language learners to native speakers, understanding the mechanism of short-term accommodation of non-native speakers would shed light on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) as an outcome of long-term accommodation.

Present study proposes a new dimension of investigating phonetic accommodation from SLA. It aims to answer two research questions. First, whether and how do L2 English speakers accommodate to two native English accents after one-hour's exposure? Second, would theories developed from SLA (e.g. Speech Learning Model (SLM), Flege 1995) be able to predict the accommodation patterns?

Twenty Hong Kong English (HKE) speakers conducted a Map Task with a native speaker of Standard Southern British English (SSBE) and a native speaker of General American English (GenAmE) respectively. The participants were told to draw a route and fill the missing landmarks on their maps by communicating with the native interlocutors. Their production of two target vowels (/ɔ:/ as in <thought> and /ɑ:/ as in <pass> in SSBE) and four HKE features (final stop deletion, /θ/ is realized as [f], devoicing of /z/ and non-rhoticity) were recorded before, during and after the Map tasks. Each Map task lasted for approximately 1 hour.

Acoustic analysis is carried out to quantify the participants' pronunciation changes from Pre-task to Post-task. For vowels, formant values (F1 and F2) are extracted from the mid-point of the target vowels. For the HKE features, percentages of the final stop deletion and rhoticity are calculated, spectral moments of /θ/ are measured, and duration and intensity of /z/ are calculated. Statistical analysis is then carried out to compare the participants' performances in Pre-task, Map task and Post-task, and the accommodation differences between exposure to a SSBE speaker and a GenAmE speaker.

We expect that the HKE speakers will accommodate to the native speakers on the target vowels. As SLM' predicts, the more similar a target language category is to an L1 category, the more likely it will be equated to an L1 category, which will lead to a less native L2 performance (Flege 1995). If SLM is able to predict the accommodation patterns, the HKE speakers will accommodate more to the accent which is less similar to the participants' own pronunciations. For example, those participants who speak a British-like accent will accommodate more to the GenAmE speaker on the target vowels.

Accommodation to the native accents is also expected on the HKE features; however, as the input is not sufficient for the participants to establish a new category, changes are more likely to be observed on acoustic level rather than on phonological level.

References:

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