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(Meta)linguistic factors in L3 rhotic transfer

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General: Our ongoing research explores various (meta)linguistic factors influencing the choice of rhotic in L3 (English) with bilingual Russian-Hebrew speakers (for Russian see Halle and Jones, 1971; for Hebrew see Asherov and Cohen, 2019). We attend to metalinguistic awareness (MLA) (Bialystok, 2001; Wrembel, 2015; Kopečková et al., 2023), age of exposure, recency of use, proficiency, segmental proximity and more.

Subjects: 14 bilingual Russian-Hebrew speakers with no reported hearing or speech problems. Six of the subjects were born in Israel to Russian-speaking parents and grew up in a Russian-speaking household with little or no contact with Hebrew before the age of 4. The remaining eight participants arrived in Israel between the ages of 1-8. All speakers currently reside in a Hebrew-dominant environment.

Method: We conducted two experiments. The first experiment was a production reading experiment in which the subjects pronounced stimuli with rhotics in all three languages. The second experiment tested the subjects' level of metalinguistic awareness. This was done via accent imitation and commentary on the differences in Hebrew, Russian, and English pronunciations. In addition, subjects filled out a language background questionnaire.

Results: The productions from the first experiment were judged for accentedness by two native speakers in each language. The judges were instructed to label the rhotic segment either as "native" or "non-native" based on the sound of the rhotic phoneme alone regardless of its environment. For English, seven of the 14 subjects were judged as having produced a native pronunciation of the English rhotic phoneme in all tokens. One subject failed to produce the required phoneme in any token. Half of this subject's English rhotic productions were categorized as Russian whereas the other half were categorized as inaccurate approximations of an English rhotic. Six participants successfully produced the English rhotic in some of the stimuli. Crucially, none of the subjects produced a Hebrew rhotic instead of the English one.

Factors in L3 rhotic transfer: Our study shows that the subjects with the least success in the production of English rhotics also had the lowest levels of metalinguistic awareness. Metalinguistic awareness therefore is a sufficient – but not necessary – condition for native-like pronunciation of L3. Furthermore, the age of exposure also correlates with successful production of the English rhotic – the earlier the exposure, the more successful the production. Crucially, the dominance of L1/L2 does not appear to play a role in successful productions. It appears that segmental proximity (both the Russian and English rhotics are coronal whereas the Hebrew rhotic is dorsal) may play a significant role.

SELECTED REFERENCES

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