The acquisition of the standard German fortis/lenis distinction in word-initial labial and velar stops by speakers of the non-standard variety Upper Saxon

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Traditionally, the non-standard German variety Upper Saxon is reported to have only lenis stops /b d g/ since the fortis stops /p t k/ were lenited to /b d g/ as a consequence of Central German Lenition. In standard German, fortis and lenis stops still have a contrastive function. Words like <Kasse> (cash register) and <Gasse> (alleyway) differ word-initially and are thus distinct in the standard variety, whereas they are homophones in the Upper Saxon region. In my dissertation, I suggest that Upper Saxon speakers have to acquire the standard German distinction, assuming that the contrast is not implemented in their native dialect (D1). As language processing has been found to be not just language- but also dialect-specific, it has been suggested that speakers acquiring an unfamiliar variety of their native language (D2) are comparable to L2 learners acquiring typologically similar languages. However, systematic investigations into this claim are still lacking.

In this presentation, I describe three pilot studies that investigated (#1) if Upper Saxon speakers produce a fortis/lenis distinction in word-initial position when they speak their D1, (#2) if Upper Saxon speakers perceive any distinction between word-initial fortis/lenis stops in their D1, and (#3) if and how D1 Upper Saxon speakers acquire the contrast in their D2, standard German.

Because there are currently few acoustic investigations into the Upper Saxon dialect, pilot #1 investigated 7 Upper Saxon speakers’ D1 utterances. The analysis of word-initial /p/ and /b/ revealed that most speakers do not distinguish the stops by means of aspiration, through which they are usually distinguished in standard German. However, some speakers did produce a difference in aspiration, suggesting an effect of individual differences.
Aspiration was not used to indicate a distinction by most speakers in pilot #1. Therefore, pilot #2 investigated if there are potentially subtler cues in the Upper Saxon signal, which Upper Saxon speakers might use to distinguish word-initial fortis and lenis stops in their dialect. It was also hypothesized that those subtle cues would not be perceivable to naïve listeners, i.e. non-Upper Saxon speakers. The performance of 6 Upper Saxon and 6 standard German speakers on three different perception tasks (lexical access, free classification, discrimination) indicates that word-initial Upper Saxon stops (here: /p/, /b/ and /k/, /g/) are not perceivably different to either group. That is, neither group indicated hearing a difference between those stops, supporting the account that the contrast is absent in Upper Saxon phonology.

Based on those results, I suggest that the Upper Saxon speakers have to acquire the standard German distinction in a manner similar to L2 learners whose native language also does not implement a fortis/lenis contrast through aspiration. Pilot #3 investigated if and how Upper Saxon listeners perceive the standard German fortis/lenis distinction. In a second session, the participants from pilot #2 completed the same perception tasks with standard German stimuli. In this condition, both groups’ performance was very high, yet several Upper Saxon speakers were less accurate and had slower reaction times than the standard German listeners. Thus, the results suggest that some D2 learners might be less efficient in processing the standard German stops and that individual differences seem to play a role for the acquisition of this contrast.

My dissertation will include larger speaker samples, expand the data collection to include participant production, and investigate sociolinguistic factors and effects of regional consistency (“movers” vs. “remainders”) to tease apart input- and usage-related effects on the acquisition of the D2, i.e. standard German, contrast.