Crossdialectal Comparison in L2 Mandarin Tone Perception

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Research on L2 Mandarin Chinese tone perception has produced mixed but consistent results whereby the locus of the perceptual difficulty lies with the L1 (So & Best, 2010). The Functional Pitch Hypothesis is one of many that attempts to explain why and how L2 tone perception is language specific; the more pitch is functional at the lexical level in L1, the easier it will be for that L1 speakers to discriminate nonnative tones (Schaefer & Darcy, 2014). This research aimed to further reinforce the claim by narrowing analysis of L1s to the level of dialects.

Seoul Korean is a standard language of Korea with no lexically contrastive pitch, whereas the Kyungsang dialect that is spoken in the Kyungsang region features a lexical pitch accent system, as Tokyo Japanese does. Conversely, there are “accentless” dialects spoken in some regions of Japan, most notably Fukushima, without the lexical pitch accent. The two Korean groups were shown to possess two distinct perceptual systems in a Thai tone discrimination task, whereby speakers of the Kyungsang dialect performed better than Seoul Koreans, patterning with Japanese speakers (Schaefer & Darcy, 2014). No empirical account exists for the two Japanese speaker groups in the context of L2 tone perception. Given that speakers of the Fukushima dialect were less adept at making use of pitch accent in lexical recognition than speakers of the standard Tokyo Japanese (Otake & Cutler, 1999), would a similar pattern be observed with naive L2 tone perception? The current study attempted to generalize the Functional Pitch Hypothesis, formulated under a Thai tone discrimination task, to the context of Mandarin Chinese with different pairs of dialects.

An oddity task with five different talkers was administered to two groups of Japanese speakers (3 from Tokyo, 2 from the “accentless” dialect regions) and two groups of Korean speakers (7 from Seoul, 10 from Kyungsang). The pilot study indicated a trend in which Japanese speakers of the “accentless” dialects and Seoul Korean speakers patterned together, performing lower than Tokyo Japanese speakers and Korean speakers of the Kyungsang dialect. In particular, Japanese speakers of the “accentless” dialects and Seoul Korean speakers were shown to be lacking in perceptual sensitivity with their mean discrimination (A’) scores lower than 0.5. Tokyo Japanese speakers and Korean speakers of the Kyungsang dialect, on the other hand, showed a moderate degree of tonal sensitivity with A’ scores of 0.73 and 0.67. The results from the pilot study align with the results from previous research whereby pitch functionality in the L1 dialect constrains L2 tone perception and suggests that despite the predominance of the standard language, perceptual sensitivity of nonnative tones is modulated by lexical functionality of pitch in the dialect. The study has implications for methodology in this domain by confirming the need for a detailed description of participants, in that not all native speakers of one language are alike in their suprasegmental systems.