Where accommodation to non-native speakers doesn’t happen

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Foreigner-directed speech (FDS) is a classic example of clear speech, and studies have demonstrated accommodation effects like hyperarticulation (Uther 2007), slower speech (Scarborough et al. 2007) or pitch differences (Smith 2007) when addressing non-native speakers. However, earlier work suggests that FDS accommodation does not always occur (Zuengler 1991). This may be because previous work used laboratory settings, often with imaginary interlocutors (Bradlow 2002, Picheny et al. 1986, inter alia); FDS accommodation was found primarily in task-oriented genres, such as giving map directions (Scarborough et al. 2007, Smith 2007). It thus remains an open question whether FDS generalizes to other situations like casual conversations.

In this study we examine FDS in an ecologically valid setting. We used a spoken corpus of 991 4-minute speed-dates, creating a balanced sample of over 20 female speakers, each interacting with 4 native speakers of English and 4 non-native speakers. We compared the speech directed to each group; our measurements included rate of speech (words and phones per second, and words per utterance), f0, and word frequency. Controlling for individual variation, all analyses showed no significant difference between the two groups.

We then focused on contexts particularly conducive to accommodations, by extracting all the reprisals from the corpus (e.g., “I’m from Oregon”; “What?”; “Oregon”). We measured the duration and f0 of the repeated word and its final syllable. Once again, no significant effect was found.

Our results suggest that FDS may occur in task-oriented genres, but not in casual conversation such as dating. Individual differences may also play a role; our speakers were graduate students in a US university, and may have been more accustomed to non-native accents than average speakers. It appears that FDS accommodation is more limited than has been assumed, and like other accommodation, is dependant on the speakers and communicative setting.

References