The production of Catalan mid-back vowels by Catalan-Spanish bilinguals

Miquel Simonet (University of Arizona)

The present paper analyzes the production of the Catalan /o/-/ɔ/ contrast by six groups of Catalan-Spanish bilinguals residing in the island of Majorca. A process of phonetic convergence between the two languages is currently taking place, with some Catalan features spreading to Spanish and vice versa (Simonet 2008). Based on previous L2-speech research (e.g. Flege et al. 1995, 1999, Oyama 1976), it was hypothesized that the Spanish-dominant bilinguals would face great difficulties in producing the Catalan vowel contrast, since there is no such contrast in Spanish. On the other hand, no hypotheses were advanced regarding the effects of age and/or gender within the Catalan-dominant group, since none have been reported in previous literature regarding this specific contrast. However, since effects of these factors have been found for other features, the decision was made to investigate this vowel contrast as well.

An acoustic analysis of the Catalan data suggests the following findings. First, the Spanish-dominant speakers were found to maintain a small but significant difference between the two target vowels. This finding shows that some level of phonetic learning had taken place, while it was also clear that /o/ was exerting a strong pulling force on /ɔ/ for these speakers. Second, the younger Catalan-dominant females were found to produce overall higher vowels than the other groups. This was true for both /o/ and /ɔ/, which shows that the raising of /o/ was not due to contrast enhancement. Overall, the results suggest that the Spanish-dominant bilinguals seem to be transparently transferring the features of their first language into their second one. On the other hand, a process of midback vowel raising is currently being initiated by young Catalan-dominant female speakers. This process does not seem to be due to cross-linguistic transfer.

References