

Development in the identification of sociophonetic variants by L2 learners

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Overview: This study examines the development of the identification of sociophonetic variants of the Spanish palatal fricative /j/ by adult English-speaking learners of Spanish. Specifically, the study aims to: (1) determine how non-native listeners identify (categorize) a regional variant of the target language and (2) explore how identification of the regional variant might change with increased experience in the target language. The role of different types of exposure to regional variation is also examined, as previous studies have found that experience with different regional varieties of a second language may lead to differences in how sociophonetic variants are perceived (Baker & Smith 2010, Escudero & Chladkova 2010, Smith & Baker 2011) – although not always (Fox & McGory 2007).

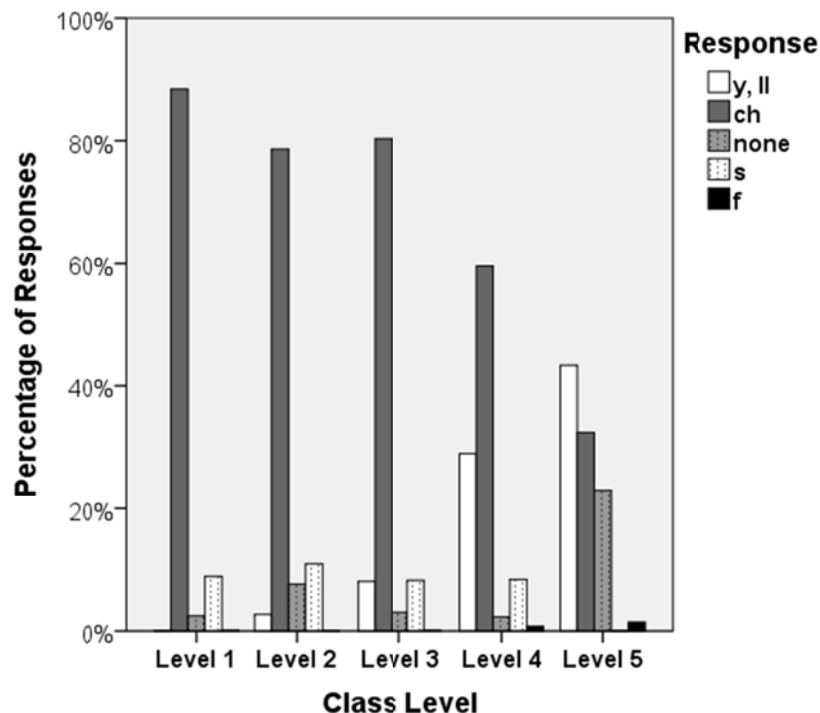
Methodology: The targeted variant in this study is the Rioplatense assibilated palatal [ʃ] (also known as *rehilamiento*, as in *calle* ‘street’ [ˈka.ʃe]). The post-alveolar sibilant fricative [ʃ] as a variant of /j/ (and its voiced precursor, [ʒ]) is limited geographically primarily to the Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Montevideo, Uruguay, regions (Lipski 1994). Throughout most other regions of the Spanish-speaking world, orthographic <y> and <ll> are typically produced as a “voiced palatal consonant of variable constriction” (Hualde 2005: 164), which includes the voiced palatal fricative or approximant (*calle* [ˈka.je]) and the affricated stop (*calle* [ˈka.ʃe]).

Five levels of English-speaking learners of Spanish in a formal instructional setting (North American university) completed an Identification Task with Praat software (Boersma & Weenik 2009), in which they categorized different consonants and vowels embedded in disyllabic nonce words. The targeted sounds included the Rioplatense assibilated palatal [ʃ] as well as the palatal fricative [j], which served as a control. Following the perception task, participants completed a written language background questionnaire to determine individual linguistic experiences.

Results: Results find that although at the earliest levels of L2 experience (beginning learners), the Rioplatense assibilated palatal [ʃ] is never identified as a variant of the Spanish palatal fricative (represented orthographically by <y, ll>), as experience with the target language increases, [ʃ] is more frequently accepted as <y, ll> (see the Appendix). In fact, by the most advanced level (graduate students of Spanish), the most frequent identification response for the assibilated palatal is <y, ll>. The changes in response patterns across level and the effects of different types of exposure to Rioplatense Spanish (immersion, Media, instructors, personal contacts) on identification of [ʃ] are also explored. Interestingly, the majority of L2 learners who identified [ʃ] as a variant of <y, ll> also reported awareness of this specific dialectal feature in the background questionnaire. As such, explicit knowledge of regional variation of the second language may play an important role in how sociophonetic variants are identified by second language speakers, at least under these task conditions.

Appendix

Figure. Development of categorization responses for the Rioplatense assibilated palatal [ʃ]



References

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