Intonation transfer from Mandarin to a second language

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Abstract

Intonation is meaningful variation in the pitch of the voice. It functions as a grammatical marker for different types of sentences. Because intonation systems differ from language to language, it poses a challenge for second language (L2) learners. Native intonation can interfere with the acquisition of L2 intonation.

According to the Similarity Differential Rate Hypothesis (O’Grady & Archibald 2012), speakers learn patterns similar to their L1 slower than dissimilar patterns. The goal of this study is to compare the extent of intonation transfer from a speaker’s first language (L1), Mandarin, to her two L2s, Cantonese and English, in order to address the question: Will a native speaker of Mandarin acquire Cantonese intonation slower than English intonation? English has word stress, Cantonese has lexical tones, and Mandarin has both.

In a field study, I elicited and recorded speech samples from a female, adult native speaker of Mandarin who learned Cantonese and English from age 5-6. The samples consisted of 24 similar pairs of statements and yes/no questions from each of the three languages.

The pitch analysis of the recorded samples revealed near native-like intonation patterns in English. In Cantonese, however, her echo questions reflected the global pitch raising of her Mandarin echo questions. Some of her Cantonese A-not-A (yes/no) questions also assimilated the low boundary tone from the corresponding Mandarin questions.

The results show that the speaker was slower to acquire Cantonese intonation than English intonation. The implication is that lexical tones interact with Mandarin intonation more so than word stress.

References