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The novel Ventriloquist paradigm: Studying L2 phonetic learning in dialogue with experimental control over phonetic detail

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Abstract

The novel Ventriloquist paradigm enables the study of phonetic accommodation and perceptual learning in dialogue, while allowing full control over the phonetic detail of the input that participants are exposed to. It is being developed to investigate L2 speech learning for production and perception in an ecologically valid yet maximally controlled way. Participants take part in a dialog which they believe to be genuine; in fact, however, their (real-life) interlocutor is a confederate whose speech is not just “scripted” (as in the confederate scripting task), but fully prerecorded. This guarantees control over all characteristics of the speech input, e.g., precluding that a confederate accommodates his/her pronunciation to the participant. The set-up is fully tuned to upholding the illusion that the confederate is actually speaking with the participant. The confederate sits opposite the participant, face briefly hidden when he/she “speaks.” Participants hear the prerecorded speech over closed headphones. In addition to the standard input, to facilitate a smooth flow of the conversation, the confederate can play prerecorded non-verbal interaction markers and stop-gap replies to any unanticipated remarks or questions from the participant. The new paradigm thus reconciles ecological validity with experimental control for the study of (L2) phonetic processing in dialog.