

ADAPTATION TO ITALIAN-ACCENTED ENGLISH: A COMPARISON OF NATIVE AND NONNATIVE LISTENERS

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Introduction

- Foreign-accented speech is characterised by systematic variation in pronunciation
- For instance, Italian second-language (L2) learners of English tend to lengthen the lax English vowel /ɪ/, making it sound more like the tense vowel /i:/ (Flege et al., 1999)
- This blurs distinctions between e.g. *bean* and *bin* and makes e.g. *single* sound like *seingle*
- Both L1 and L2 listeners need to adapt to this kind of pronunciation variance in order to interpret Italian-accented English speech correctly (e.g., /bin/ could mean either *bean* or *bin*)

Research questions

- Does Italian-accented speech interfere with word recognition for native (L1) English listeners and for L2 listeners whose L1 matches (Italian listeners) or mismatches (Dutch listeners) that of the speaker?
- Do L1 and L2 listeners perceptually adapt to accented speech with increasing exposure?
- Are typical-Italian and atypical mispronunciations dealt with in the same way?

Materials

- 80 English words with either /ɪ/ or /i:/ in their canonical pronunciation
- Speaker: native Italian, fluent in English
- Paradigm: cross-modal priming experiment where participants hear a spoken prime and then make a lexical decision to printed targets
- Two versions (between subjects)

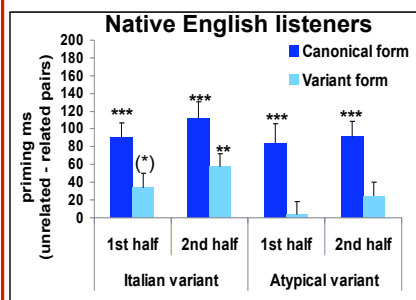
Version 1: typical Italian variants (/i:/ primes)

Canonical form dream-DREAM
Variant form seingle-SINGLE

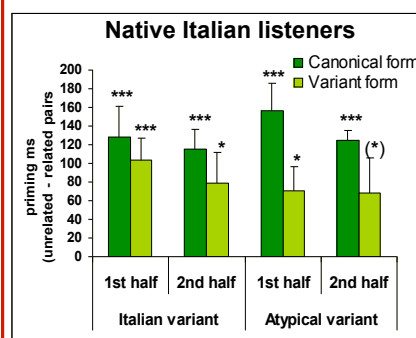
Version 2: atypical variants (/ɪ/ primes)

Canonical form single-SINGLE
Variant form drim-DREAM

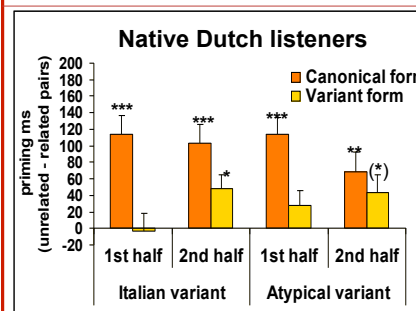
Results



- With Italian variant forms, English listeners showed marginal priming in the first half ($p = .055$), and stronger priming in the second half ($p = .001$).
- Atypical variant forms yielded no priming.



- For Italian listeners there was no advantage of canonical over variant forms ($p_s > .1$).
- Both Italian and atypical variant forms produced significant priming in both halves of the experiment.



- With both Italian and atypical variant forms, Dutch listeners showed no priming in the first half and significant priming in the second half of the experiment.

Discussion

- Canonical forms produce stronger priming than variant forms for both L1 English and L2 Dutch listeners, but not for L2 Italian listeners, consistent with the Italians' perceptual difficulties with the English /ɪ-/i:/ contrast.
- Due to these perceptual difficulties, Italians are unable to distinguish between typical-Italian and atypical mispronunciations, but can interpret both as tokens of the target words.
- L1 English listeners, who are familiar with the typical Italian pronunciation of English words, quickly adapt to Italian primes but not to atypical primes.
- L2 Dutch listeners, who are less familiar with Italian-accented English, are initially disadvantaged and adapt to both types of variant.