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Previous Mention and Word Duration in Second Language German

The duration of a spoken word depends on many factors such as the number of syllables in the word and the word's frequency in the language. In addition, discourse factors such as previous mention (Fowler & Housum, 1987) may affect a word's duration, although word duration between a word's first mention and its second mention within a conversation is greater for content words than function words (Bell et al., 2009). In a recent study, Baker et al. (2011) found that Korean-English L2 speakers and Chinese-English L2 speakers spoke more slowly overall and showed less durational variance between content and function words than L1 English speakers. This paper expands on the previous research by looking at the previous mention effect for English-German L2 speakers. Although the previous mention effect has been found in both English and German, native English speakers who speak German as a second language (L2) may not reduce the duration of repeated words appropriately. Such aberrations in L2 speech from native duration patterns may lead to accentedness and sound off-putting to native (L1) listeners. This paper investigates previous mention in L2 German by focusing on the additional factors that may affect previous mention on word duration, including word class (i.e., content or function word) and word frequency in German. The German language is particularly interesting for investigating previous mention effects because of the contrastive length distinction in German vowels.

In order to address whether discourse-level factors such as frequency, repetition, and word class have an impact on word duration in English-German L2 speakers, L1 German speakers (n=19) and advanced L2 German speakers (n=18) were recorded reading two page-length stories aloud in German. These stories were slightly modified from their original versions to include a large number of repeated function and content words, with both high and low frequencies. The recordings as a whole were measured for speech rate and pause rate/duration, while target words and their repetitions were measured for duration.

I predict that content and function words will be affected differently by previous mention for both L1 German speakers and English-German L2 speakers, but that the L2 speakers will exhibit more variation in their function word durations than the L1 speakers. In addition, words with lower frequencies are predicted to show more variation and smaller previous mention effects for L2 speakers. Findings from this study have pedagogical implications for the L2 classroom by uncovering how L2 pronunciation differs from L1 pronunciation, highlighting areas where L2 learners may benefit from targeted instruction, thereby improving learners' overall production in the L2.