

Short-term accommodation of Hong Kong English towards RP and GenAmE

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The interactive-alignment model (Pickering & Garrod 2004) suggests that convergence is an automatic process in a conversation and it occurs not only at phonetic level but also at syntactic and pragmatic levels. Evidence of convergence at phonetic level was found in a few studies (Babel 2010, 2012; Pardo 2006; Pardo, Gibbons, Suppes & Krauss 2012), however, these studies mainly focused on native speakers, convergence between non-native speakers and native speakers received less attention. Present study aims to examine Hong Kong English (HKE) speakers' speech accommodation towards Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American English (GenAmE) during and after 1 hour's conversation with an RP/GenAmE interlocutor.

Nineteen HKE speakers conducted a Map Task with a native speaker of RP and a native speaker of GenAmE respectively. A pre-task and a post-task were also conducted to capture the changes in pronunciation. Two vowels (BATH and THOUGHT vowels) and three consonants (fricatives /z/, /θ/ and rhoticity) were chosen as target sounds. F1 and F2 values at the midpoint of the vowels in the pre-task, map task and post-task were extracted for the calculation of means and Euclidean distance. Percentages of the participants' realisation of [z], [θ] and rhoticity in the three tasks were also calculated.

According to the interactive-alignment model (Pickering & Garrod 2004), convergence between the HKE speakers and the native speakers were expected: (1) for the **vowels**, the HKE participants were expected to converge their vowels to be more British-like in the RP condition; their vowels were expected to be more American-like in the GenAmE condition; (2) for **rhoticity**, they were expected to produce less rhotic words in the RP condition and to produce more rhotic words in the GenAmE condition; (3) for the **fricatives**, they were expected to produce less HKE variants of the fricatives (e.g. HKE variant [s] for fricative /z/ and HKE variant [f] for fricative /θ/) and pronounce more [z] and [θ] instead.

Results supported some of the predictions. The HKE participants converged towards the native accents on some sounds but not on the others. Significant convergence from the pre-task to the map tasks was found on fricative /z/ and rhoticity. The participants produced more fricative /z/ when they talked to the native speakers and changed the percentages of rhoticity depending on the accents they were exposed to in the map tasks. However, the HKE participants diverged on fricative /θ/ from the pre-task to the map tasks and no convergence was found on the two vowels. Significant divergence was found on the BATH vowel and no change was found on the THOUGHT vowel. These results only partially support the automatic account claimed by the interactive-alignment model (Pickering & Garrod 2004).

The selectivity of phonetic convergence observed in the present study was also found in Babel (2010, 2012). The reason might be that for the HKE participants some target sounds were more salient than others due to the influence of their L1-Cantonese. For example, phonetic differences between the native variant and the HKE variant for fricative /z/ (i.e. [z] vs [s]) are larger than the differences between those for fricative /θ/ (i.e. [θ] vs [f]). On the other hand, sounds with higher frequency were more likely to accommodate too. Analysis suggested that the HKE participants in average received more native input on the two target sounds which showed convergence (i.e. rhoticity and fricative /z/).

Another interesting finding of the study was that talker gender/sex did not seem to affect people's convergence. The female and male participants had no differences on their convergence on all the target sounds except for fricative /θ/. This result was in line with Pardo, Urmanche, Wilman and Wiener (2017) and challenges the traditional view of accommodation that females accommodate more than males (Namy, Nygaard & Sauerteig 2002).

References:

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