Phonetic transfer from the heritage language to the dominant language among heritage speakers of Armenian in California: A sociolinguistic investigation

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Although several studies (Godson, 2003; Karapetian, 2014), have examined Armenian as a heritage language, no studies have considered its transfer effects on the dominant language. Accordingly, this study examines the English phonetic features of English-dominant heritage speakers of Armenian from California. As heritage speakers of Armenian are both diverse and understudied, this study provides many insights about factors influencing phonetic transfer from heritage languages.

The data come from sociolinguistic interviews conducted with 12 heritage speakers and 3 Armenian-identifying non-heritage speakers (2 of whom studied Armenian as adults). Participants range in age from 18-30. The interviews included a conversation, reading portion, and metalinguistic questions about English spoken by Armenian Americans. The interview format was implemented following sociolinguistic studies addressing ethnicity and phonetic variation (e.g., Fought, 1999; Samant, 2010; Wolfram, Carter, & Moriello, 2004).

The acoustic analysis focuses on participants' vowel spaces and consists of qualitative comparison of vowel plots. A lack of the fronted back vowels characteristic of the California Vowel Shift (Eckert, n.d.) suggests transfer from Armenian, as available acoustic data indicate that the vowels /u/ and /o/ do not show fronting in either Eastern or Western Armenian (Godson, 2003; Khachaturian, 1988). The analysis also considers the substitution of stops for /θ/ and /ð/, which was described by many participants, as well as the use of dental rather than alveolar stops. Interdental fricatives are not found in Armenian, so their absence suggests transfer. Dental stops can also be considered transfer from Armenian, whose /t/ and /d/ have been described as dental (Dum-Tragut, 2009). These consonantal features have thus far been analyzed only via impressionistic listening; however, several instances in which participants' perform metalinguistic imitations of stereotypical Armenian-American and mainstream Californian "accents" allow for direct comparison of contrasting consonantal tokens.

Based on preliminary results, the heritage speakers show a great deal of individual variation. This is consistent with previous studies that have found English phonetic variation among speakers from bilingual communities (Eckert, 2008; Fought, 1999; Samant, 2010; Wolfram, Carter, & Moriello, 2004). It was hypothesized that a strong Armenian identity would correlate with phonetic transfer. The preliminary results indeed suggest that factors like dense Armenian networks and strong opinions about the Armenian language correlate with transfer. However, early bilingualism also plays a role, as preliminary comparison of the heritage and non-heritage speakers suggests less phonetic transfer among the latter even in cases of strong ethnic identity and late bilingualism. Participants' metalinguistic commentary suggests awareness of an Armenian-American "accent" that can be used variably to express Armenian identity or solidarity. This suggests that transfer from the heritage language is not part of a homogenous "ethnolect" (Clyne, 2000), but rather is part of an "ethnolinguistic repertoire" (Benor, 2010) whose features speakers deploy variably. Thanks to the wealth of phonetic variation among the participants, this study contributes to the general knowledge of factors that can influence phonetic transfer from the heritage language. The main finding is that social factors (attitudes, social networks, interlocutors, etc.) play a crucial role in explaining variable transfer.
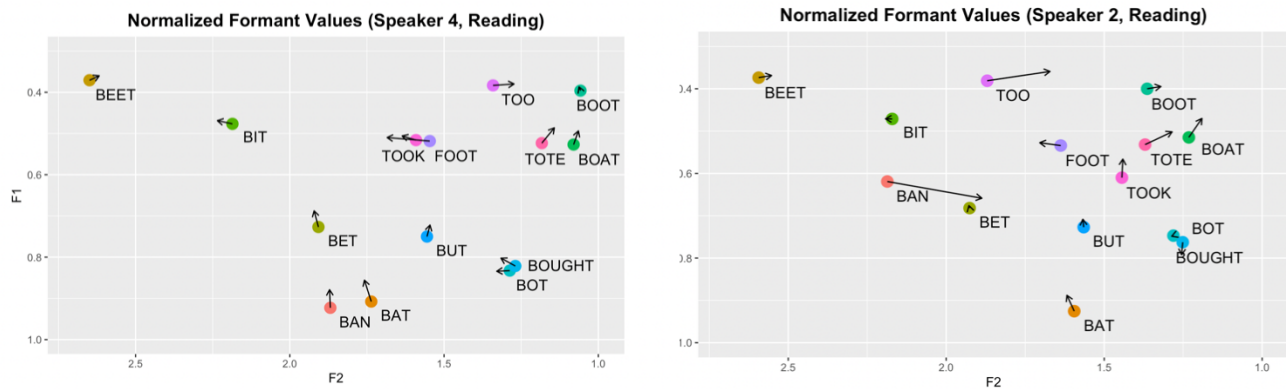
Figure 1. Comparison of a heritage speaker (left) with less fronting of /u/ and /o/ and a non-heritage speaker (right) with more fronting of /u/ and /o/

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