

Perception of reduced forms in English by non-native users of English

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Due to low degree of formality, less attention (Labov 1994), audience design (Bell 1984, 2001) and high speech rate, reduced forms abound in casual speech, affecting both vowels (centralization) and consonants (elision, assimilation) (Shockey 2003, Johnson 2004). While perception of reduced forms by native users of a language has been previously studied (Shockey and Bond 2007, Warner et al. 2012), insights into perception by non-native speakers are infrequent in comparison. The present study aims to fill the gap by testing three hypotheses: (i) reduced forms with context are recognized more accurately and faster than reduced forms without following and preceding words (ii) gradient reduction in which a segment is reduced (fricativization, assimilation, Yod coalescence) is perceived more slowly and less accurately than the categorical ones where a segment is not realized (deletion) (Ellis and Hardcastle 2002, Hanique et al. 2013) (iii) subjects with musical background and/or a stay in an English-speaking country perceive reduced forms better than those without.

To verify these hypotheses, a perception study on 102 Polish learners of English was implemented in E-Prime (Language and Communication Laboratory). The study was corpus-based in using reduced forms from the Phonologie de l'Anglais Contemporain corpus (Durand and Pukli 2004), containing casual speech. The task consisted in clicking either of two buttons labelled "I recognize the word/phrase"/"I don't recognize it" and writing down what they actually had heard. In addition, the subjects filled in a questionnaire about their musical background and exposure to English. Participants' accuracy and reaction times were measured and compared with a control group of native speakers.

The results indicate that (i) lexical context, unlike phone density, significantly affects perception; however, the learners' low accuracy in recognizing the stimuli with the context (41 per cent) in comparison with the stimuli without the context (31 per cent) suggests considerable processing difficulties. For native listeners, results without context were 44 per cent and 87 with context (ii) category of reduction process (gradient or categorical) seems to be irrelevant (iii) neither music education nor exposure to casual English through stay in an English-speaking country play a role in non-native perception (Pastuszek-Lipińska 2009).

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