

Emerging sound change through imperfect transmission:
unreleased final stop place contrasts among Mandarin-Min bilinguals

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Abstract

The speech of bilingual children is often thought to be the locus of synchronic variation, which may eventually develop into a mature sound change at the community level. This study presents a case of transmission failure arising from misperceptions by bilingual speakers of two languages in contact. The specific case examined here concerns changes-in-progress of unreleased final stop place contrasts among young Mandarin-Min bilingual speakers in Taiwan. Phonotactically, obstruent finals are illegal in Taiwan Mandarin, the dominant official language of the island, whereas Taiwanese Southern Min (TSM), a local substratum language, allows obligatorily unreleased /p t k/ finals. In both the identification and discrimination of stimuli modeled after TSM, bilingual listeners were consistently outperformed by Korean listeners, a reference group representing a case of successful transmission. A follow-up production study revealed that final stops produced by the bilingual speakers were prone to substitution and deletion. Furthermore, strong correlations were found between bilingual speakers' perception and production accuracy, indicating that poor perception during acquisition can likely account for their weak production. Taken together, the results demonstrate that a loss of final stop place contrasts is underway due to the imperfect learning of the marked sounds in the target language of acquisition. Based on specific patterns converging between perception and production, we can capture an emerging sound change that echoes the diachronic changes of this class of sounds.