Not all tokens are the same: Learning to speak without distinción in the Spanish classroom

Taking an emergentist orientation to language acquisition and learning (i.e. Ellis, 2008; Bybee & Hopper, 2001; Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006; Eskildsen, 2008), this study problematizes the role of token frequency as applied to students’ phonological acquisition by illustrating that not all contexts of use are of equal import during the learning process in the L2 Spanish classroom. Usage-based approaches to phonology (Bybee, 2001; 2010) have revolutionized our understandings of both how and why speakers’ phonological systems and phoneme inventories look and behave in the ways that they do by focusing on how speakers’ experience with language directly shapes language structures. Central to Bybee’s usage-based theory of phonology is the role of frequency, particularly token frequency, in directly shaping via sedimentation particular phonological patterns and regularities that become apparent as speakers use language (Bybee, 2001). Nevertheless, many of the analyses that effectively employ this framework (e.g. Brown, 2004; 2006) inadvertently treat each use of language as having the same statistical value in order to facilitate the quantification of discourse patterns. In turn, the specific socio-cultural environments in which particular pronunciations are appropriated and practiced and their varying import on the emergence of phonological structures and subsequent uses of language often remain under-theorized within studies of usage-based phonology.

In this study, I argue for a conceptualization of token frequency in which extrinsic processes made visible during key classroom events have a primary effect on shaping repetition patterns in pronunciation and thus the sedimentation of particular sounds into learners’ L2 phonological grammars. As such, I illustrate that not all phones and not all uses of language can be treated equally in the development of students’ phonological regularities in the L2. Drawing on a corpus of materials collected during a semester-long ethnographic study of a university Spanish pronunciation class in the U.S., I specifically focus on students’ experiences with one of the most evocative phones in Spanish: the voiceless interdental fricative consonant /θ/. Against a background of larger discourse patterns in the classroom, I link student and instructor interviews with key ‘pronunciation practice’ interactions in the classroom in which this phone is specifically and repeatedly foregrounded. Students evolving conceptions of the kind of Spanish that they want to speak are found to shape the contexts of use in which they sediment language and these same uses help to reciprocate the ideologies they have about the kinds of Spanish that are appropriate for them to speak. Thus, while several students are found to pronounce /θ/ at the beginning of the class and have positive evaluations of this phone, I show that key interactions during the course of the semester lead to it’s universal disuse by these same students four months later.

Overall, the findings from this study encourage a re-conceptualization of the nature of frequency effects in the language learning process. Some tokens of use have the power to both reshape past uses and subsequently recast future possibilities for language use as well. Repetition in language emerges not a straightforward process in which the reduplication of patterns strengthens phonological regularities in the L2 but rather one in which extrinsic socio-cultural factors directly shape and sediment one’s repeated judgment regarding how, when, and with what frequency to perform what one has learned in the past in new situations.
References