Bossy is in the ear of the beholder: When L1 and L2 French speakers perceive final vowel devoicing

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Phrase-final vowel devoicing (PFVD), e.g. *mais oui_hhh*, is a phenomenon in which utterance-final vowels lose voicing and produce intense fricative-like whistles (Fónagy, 1989). Although readily observed in Continental French (CF), little is known about what this variable means. Previous work has determined its structural, prosodic and phonological preferences among L1 French speakers (statement-final, low tone, open syllable, high vowel) (Fagyal & Moisset, 1999; Smith, 2003; 2006), but none has empirically studied how this variable is perceived by different types of L1 listeners, how these perceptions translate for L2 listeners, or if differing lengths of PFVD affect these perceptions. In the literature, PFVD is often associated with Parisians and females (Fagyal & Moisset, 1999; Smith, 2006), however, recent work has found it to be produced at statistically similar rates by both genders and speakers of other French varieties (Lyon, Strasbourg, American L2 speakers)(Author, 2014). The goal of this study is to establish the perceptual value of this sociophonetic variable among L1 and L2 French speakers, determine what sociolinguistic characteristics of the listener influence these perceptions, and observe if variable PFVD length plays a significant role in conditioning them.

In a matched-guise task, 75 CF speakers (35 L1, 40 L2) listened to the recordings of four L1 CF participants, whose length of PFVD in constituent-final /i/, /y/ and /u/ had been manipulated in increments of standard deviation, to produce three versions of each recording per participant: (1) with no PFVD (=no devoicing), (2) with speaker mean PFVD (=average-length devoicing), and (3) with speaker mean + 3 standard deviations PFVD (=long devoicing). Listeners heard the 12 recordings and rated speakers on a 1-7 Likert scale for 32 adjectives that had been preselected for their anecdotal association with the PFVD variable by a group of CF natives. These 32 adjectives were then reduced to macro-groupings for each speaker group via exploratory factor analyses, which allowed items receiving similar ratings to form meaningful clusters in an organic fashion (Eckert, 2012). The Likert ratings of individual adjectives placed in larger groups were then compiled and examined via linear mixed-models, to determine the role of PFVD length, gender, age and language dominance in the formation of these perceptions.

Results revealed that L1 and L2 listeners perceive PFVD in similar yet different ways. Among L1 listeners, speakers who exhibited devoicing were rated highly for both *positive* adjectives of ADMIRABILITY and *negative* adjectives of EXCESSIVE EMOTION; among L2 listeners, speakers exhibiting PFVD were rated highly only for *positive* adjectives of TRUSTWORTHINESS and FORMALITY. In both groups, age, gender and PFVD length played significant roles in determining rating behavior ($p < .05$), suggesting sensitivity to both the variable's presence and magnitude.

The present work has implications for sociophonetics and L2 acquisition because it provides evidence to explain the elevated use of PFVD recently observed among advanced L2 speakers (Author, 2014), who likely overuse this feature because they perceive it as a marker of polished French.

References

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