

An exotic vowel in bilingual context: An acoustic study of sound change in progress

Zita McRobbie-Utasi (Simon Fraser University, Canada)

The low back rounded vowel represents one of the special features of Hungarian pronunciation. In Maddieson (1984), out of the 918 languages surveyed, only five are identified as containing this vowel in their vowel system. It is difficult for non-Hungarians to produce, and it appears to be vulnerable in a languages-in-contact situation. The pronunciation of this vowel in accordance with standard Hungarian speech constitutes a challenge even to first generation Hungarians.

On the basis of universal tendencies it was hypothesized that pronunciation variations favour tongue movement toward the center of the vowel continuum, i.e., approximating the quality of the vowel [a]. Thirty-six speakers (eighteen female and eighteen male) participated in the experiment for the present project. The pronunciation of twenty words containing the vowel in question in a stressed syllable was recorded three times in a carrier sentence, followed by acoustic analysis aimed at quantifying divergencies from the articulation associated with Standard Hungarian. The acoustic correlates of three articulatory parameters were examined: tongue height, tongue backing and degrees of lip rounding. Two variables were considered: year of immigration and degree of contact with the Hungarian community.

The results of the analysis indicate that the above hypothesis can only be partially upheld. Only the pronunciation of second generation speakers favour tongue movement toward the centre, producing a vowel similar to the English [a]. Pronunciation variations observed in the speech of first generation bilinguals are produced with a tongue position approximating that of the lower-mid back rounded vowel. The degree of approximating the pronunciation of that vowel appears to be inversely proportional with the speakers' degree of involvement with the Hungarian community.

Reference:

Maddieson, I. (1984). *Patterns of sounds*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.