Transfer of Greek palatals in L2 English

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It is known that first language (L1) affects second language (L2) sounds and that pronunciation errors occur by the transfer of phonological aspects from the mother tongue to L2 (Flege 2009, among others). While extensive literature has appeared on L2 English segmental phonology with respect to many L1 tongues, there is little work on L1 Greek-L2 English interlanguage phonology, see for example, Coutsougera (2007). In our study it is reported that the palatalized velars of the L1 Greek language are erroneously transferred into L2 English in a systematic manner; that is, native Greek speakers of L2 English mispronounce velars of the English language as palatalized ones and the voiceless glottal fricative as palatal fricative. Specifically, when the velar stops /k/, /g/ and the voiceless glottal fricative /h/ precede the front vowels [i, i, e] in English words, they are realized as the palatal stops [ç], [ɟ] and the palatal fricative [ç], respectively. Examples include ‘cake’ /keɪk/ → [ceik], ‘kitty’ /kɪttɪ/ → [cɪtɪ], ‘game’ /ɡeɪm/ → [ɡeɪm], ‘gift’ /ɡɪft/ → [ɡɪft], ‘hill’ /hɪl/ → [çɪl], ‘hen’ /hen/ → [çen]. This realization is due to the obligatory phonological rule of velar palatalization in Greek, that is, /k, g, x/ → [ç, ġ, ç] / − [i, i, e, ], as for example, /ke/→[ce] ‘and’, /ki’taʊ/→[çi’taʊ] ‘I look’, /xerɪ/→[çerɪ] ‘hand’, which transfers in the L2 English utterance. On a related note, we report that the English ‘velar stop-palatal approximant’ cluster /kj/ is realized by L1 Greek speakers either as the palatal stop [ç] or as the velar stop [k] when the cluster precedes the back vowels [u, u], e.g. ‘articulate’ /ɑː’tɪkjuˌleɪt/ → [ɑ’rɪtɪkjʊˌleɪt], ‘document’ /dɒkjʊˈmənt/ → [dɒkʊˈmənt] ~ [dɔkʊˈmənt]. In the [cu] realization, the English cluster /kj/ is opaque and is coalesced due to the dominance of L1 phonetic bias (output: [document]). The realization of the plain velar [k] is due to limited acoustic experience and orthography interference with the L1 allophonic rule (output: [dokument]). The results are supported by a pilot study of one hundred native Greek informants of various degrees of proficiency in English, the minimum being the University of Cambridge LESIE Certificate of Proficiency and the maximum a PhD degree from a USA or UK university. The same six written words were read aloud by all informants for each of the aforementioned eight cases, for a total of forty eight words. For each case, three words were given with the relevant sound appearing in word initial position and three words with the sound appearing in word medial position. Our pilot study showed that a distinct majority of the informants adhered to the phonological patterns described above with phonological awareness proving imperative for near-native articulations. The phonological output is biased (Wilson, 2006) by articulatory habits and lack of perceptual distinctiveness leading to L1 sounds being transferred to L2 interlanguage. We find that gradience, characteristic of the palatalization process (Keating and Lahiri, 1993) is a phenomenon that explains intralanguage variation and L2 interlanguage inconsistency in terms of both production and perception.

References: