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Linguistics

Tentative Title of Dissertation:

Acquisition of Subset and Superset in Vowel Production

Dissertation Abstract:

The observation that native speakers typically notice foreign accents of even the most advanced non-native speakers suggests that mastering second language pronunciation is a complex process. While existing research provides a variety of theories concerning the language learning process, there is a lack of work focusing on the acquisition of the sound system of another language, i.e., second language phonology. Specifically, prior work has not yet addressed how the presence or absence of certain sounds found between a native language and a second language affect the language learner's ability to learn and produce the sounds of the second language.

This research revisits language learnability from a phonological perspective by comparing vowel productions of second language learners of English and Russian, languages with diverging vowel inventories. Ultimately, this study examines whether second language learners prioritize vowels from their native language or their second language and how their selection affects their production of the second language vowels. We also assess how second language vowels develop during language acquisition by examining the speech production of speakers of different proficiency levels. The results of this study will contribute toward a better understanding of the discrepancies between native and non-native speech, possibly explaining whether the full acquisition of vowel inventory of another language is attainable. This research has a potential to influence improvements to teaching methodologies of the second language phonology by emphasizing the simultaneous instruction of both native and second language phonology and the use of speech analysis tools in pronunciation training.