

Can the perception of the sounds of the second language be measured?

Tests of second language phonology and generalizations about prelexical perception

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Learning the pronunciation of a second language is difficult. The reason for this is, according to the dominating paradigm within second language phonology, that learners confuse the sounds of the first and second language, even when these differ. This phenomenon is often investigated by means of phonological tests, in which learners are asked to identify or discriminate between words containing the problematic speech sounds. The aim of such tests is to generalize about the perception of the sounds themselves, even though what participants in such tests listen to is words – not sounds in isolation. The question is whether the perception of individual sounds can be separated from the recognition of the words they appear in. This discussion article argues that existing phonological tests face three challenges: (1) how to exclude word recognition from the test; (2) how to exclude orthographic interference from the test; and (3) how to balance 1 and 2 with how much the test reflects normal speech perception. We argue that commonly used tests, exemplified by studies of Danish learners of English, meet these requirements poorly, which can lead to erroneous interpretations that can distort our understanding of learners' processing of second language sounds.

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