

Effects of Foreign-language Learning on Bilinguals' Production in Both Their Languages

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Abstract : Foreign (second) language (L2) learning is highly promoted in modern society. Students are encouraged to study abroad (SA) to achieve the most effective learning outcomes. However, L2 learning has side effects for native language (L1) production, as L1 sounds might show a drift from the L1 norms towards those of the L2, and this, even after a short period of L2 learning. L1 assimilatory drift has been attributed to a strong perceptual association between similar L1 and L2 sounds in the mind of L2 learners; thus, a change in the production of an L2 target leads to the change in the production of the related L1 sound. However, nowadays, it is quite common that speakers acquire two languages from birth, as, for example, it is the case for many bilingual communities (e.g., Basque and Spanish in the Basque Country). Yet, it remains to be established how FL learning affects native production in individuals who have two native languages, i.e., in simultaneous or very early bilinguals. Does FL learning (here a third language, L3) affect bilinguals' both languages or only one? What factors determine which of the bilinguals' languages is more susceptible to change? The current study examines the effects of L3 (English) learning on the production of vowels in the two native languages of simultaneous Spanish-Basque bilingual adolescents enrolled into the Erasmus SA English program. Ten bilingual speakers read five Spanish and Basque consonant-vowel-consonant-vowel words two months before their SA and the next day after their arrival back to Spain. Each word contained the target vowel in the stressed syllable and was repeated five times. Acoustic analyses measuring vowel openness (F1) and backness (F2) were performed. Two possible outcomes were considered. First, we predicted that L3 learning would affect the production of only one language and this would be the language that would be used the most in contact with English during the SA period. This prediction stems from the results of recent studies showing that early bilinguals have separate phonological systems for each of their languages; and that late FL learner (as it is the case of our participants), who tend to use their L1 in language-mixing contexts, have more L2-accented L1 speech. The second possibility stated that L3 learning would affect both of the bilinguals' languages in line with the studies showing that bilinguals' L1 and L2 phonologies interact and constantly co-influence each other. The results revealed that speakers who used both languages equally often (balanced users) showed an F1 drift in both languages toward the F1 of the English vowel space. Unbalanced speakers, however, showed a drift only in the less used language. The results are discussed in light of recent studies suggesting that the amount of language use is a strong predictor of the authenticity in speech production with less language use leading to more foreign-accented speech and, eventually, to language attrition.

Keywords : language-contact, multilingualism, phonetic drift, bilinguals' production

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