

Do first-language (L1) phonemic categories play a role in the perception of second-language (L2) phonemic contrasts? A look from the perception of Cantonese codas by Mandarin speakers.

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This study investigated whether the phonological system of L1 or universal hierarchy of perceptual similarities has a larger effect on Mandarin speakers' perception of Cantonese phonemic categories. In Mandarin and Cantonese, there are differences in the distribution of nasals and plosives in the coda position. Both nasals (/m/, /n/ and /ng/) and plosives (/p/, /t/ and /k/) are possible codas in Cantonese while only nasals (/n/ and /ng/) can appear in the coda position in Mandarin. Non-native phonemic categories (e.g. /t/) will be assimilated to a native phonemic category (e.g. /n/) if L1 plays a larger role while assimilation to a non-native phonemic category (e.g. /p/ or /k/) may support the idea that universal hierarchy of perceptual similarities plays a more important role. An AX discrimination task is carried out to see whether Mandarin and Cantonese speakers can discriminate these six phonemic contrasts in Cantonese monosyllabic words. Results showed that Mandarin speakers have poorer discrimination ability in the later type (e.g. /t/ vs. /k/) than the former type (e.g. /t/ vs. /n/). This suggests that the Perceptual Assimilation Model may need to take universal hierarchies of perceptual similarities into accounts when predicting L2 learners' discrimination ability in a second language.