

Keynote Lecture

Social influences on pronunciation

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Outline

Research on second language (L2) pronunciation has long acknowledged the importance of social context, yet social factors are still often treated as peripheral to phonological development. This plenary addresses the central role that social factors play in shaping L2 phonological acquisition and use. It asks four guiding questions: how social factors are defined in pronunciation research, which social factors have been empirically investigated, how and why these factors influence L2 phonological development in both perception and production, and what these findings mean for the teaching of L2 pronunciation.

Social factors are understood here as influences that are external to the learner and embedded in the language learning environment, particularly those that reflect learners' relationships with their social worlds. Research has examined a wide range of such factors, including L2 attitudes, social and peer group networks, L2 contact and exposure, study abroad, gender, identity, and ethnic group affiliation. While these variables are often grouped under the umbrella of individual differences, they differ from traditionally internal factors—such as aptitude, motivation, or age—in that they foreground learners' social positioning and engagement with the linguistic environment. Viewed in this way, social factors offer critical insights into why learners with similar instructional experiences may follow very different phonological developmental paths.

From a social contextual perspective, social factors shape L2 phonological development by influencing both the input learners encounter and the pronunciation targets they adopt. Learners are exposed to multiple varieties of a language across settings, often well beyond the standard models presented in classrooms. Their phonological choices are influenced by speech norms in their L1 and L2 communities, socially and gendered patterns of variation, opportunities for interaction through study abroad or media, and participation in social and ethnic networks. Learners are therefore not passive recipients of phonological input, but active agents whose pronunciation choices are systematic and socially meaningful, often serving to index identity, align with particular groups, or resist features that conflict with desired social affiliations.

The keynote concludes by considering the implications of social factor research for pronunciation pedagogy. Recognizing learners as socially situated language users challenges deficit oriented views of accentedness and invites a rethinking of instructional goals, models, and assessment practices. By placing social context, variation, and identity at the center of pronunciation research and teaching, this talk argues for more socially responsive and theoretically informed approaches to L2 pronunciation, and outlines directions for future research in this growing area.

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