The Effect of Perceived Identity on L2 Phonetic Imitation

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Previous studies have investigated how second language (L2) speakers perceive the identity of their interlocutors or model talkers (i.e., whether they are native or nonnative speakers of the target language) affects the degree of L2 phonetic imitation, but the results remain mixed [1,2]. It is also unclear whether the effect of perceived identity can be enhanced by the visibility of the interlocutors, which could modulate social engagement [3], and whether the effect varies with L2 proficiency. This study, therefore, examined how the perceived identity of the model talker affected L2 phonetic imitation and how this effect was modulated by the model talker's visibility and L2 learners' language proficiency. Crucially, one novelty of the present design was examining how L2 speakers imitated the speech recorded by one model talker, whose identity information given to L2 speakers varied as a native speaker or a nonnative speaker of the target language. This was to give a stringent test on the extent to which L2 phonetic imitation was modulated by the top-down influence of how L2 speakers perceive the other's identity.

90 Chinese-English bilinguals (females) from a university in China completed a pretest, an exposure task and a posttest. In the pretest and the posttest, they read aloud words embedded with either the English vowel /æ/ or /ɪ/ (25 words for each). During the exposure, participants heard a model talker's reading of the words one by one, and identified each word from six visually presented words. The reading was recorded by a female native speaker of British English. Yet before the exposure, half of 72 participants were told that the words would be read by a native speaker of English, and the other half were informed of a nonnative speaker, who was a Chinese teacher of English. For each identity condition, half saw the picture of the model talker (a white female or a Chinese female), and the other half saw no picture. 18 participants served as the control group, who did the same imitation task but were not given any identity information or pictures. Lastly, participants rated their English proficiency on a 7-point Likert Scale.

F1 and F2 values of the target vowels in participants' productions were analyzed using mixed-effects modeling in R. Results following the linear combination approach showed that participants imitated the model talker after exposure in general, with those who knew the model talker's language background showing greater imitation than the control group. Also, participants who perceived the model talker as a native speaker exhibited greater imitation than those who perceived the model speaker a nonnative speaker (see Fig. 1). L2 proficiency tended to modulate imitation, where higher L2 proficiency appeared to associate with stronger imitation in the control group but with weaker imitation when the perceived identity of the model talker was Chinese. Visibility of the model talker did not have influence on the imitation. The results lent support for the robust top-down influence of perceived identity on L2 phonetic imitation in a context of minimum interaction, corroborating some recent findings suggesting the effect of speakers' belief about their interlocutors on imitation [4]. The findings of the present study contribute to the understanding of phonetic imitation from a socio-phonetic perspective and carry implications for phonetic training.
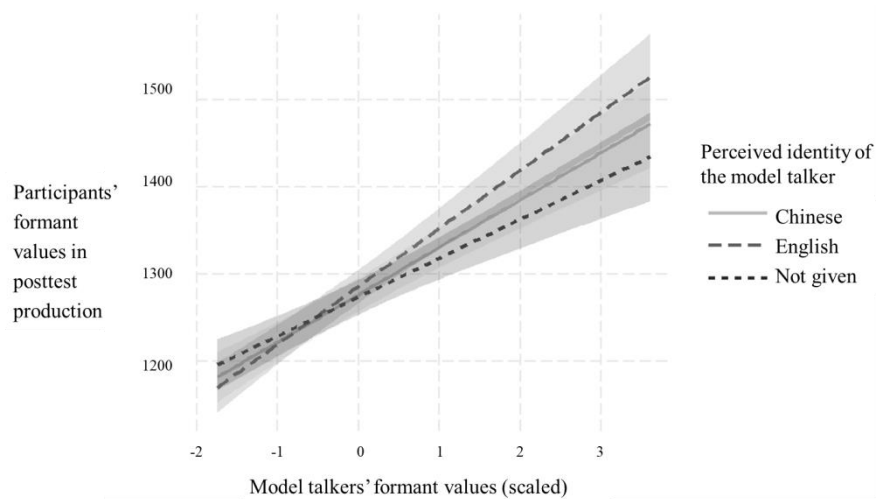
Fig. 1. The degree of imitation, indicated by the influence of the model talker's production on participants' posttest production (formant values), in different identity conditions.

References
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