Perception of Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian sibilants by heritage speakers in the United States

Kristina Mihajlović and Małgorzata Ćavar (Indiana University)

In linguistic research, sibilants have garnered much recent attention. In the language continuum Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian (BCS), a merger is taking place in two pairs of sibilants, pre-palatal [tʃ] /ʃ/ and post-alveolar [tʃ] /ʃ/, as well as potentially pre-palatal [dʒ] /ʒ/ and post-alveolar [dʒ] /ʒ/, though only in certain registers and dialect regions. The prescribed standard preserves this distinction, but other language varieties including those used in main urban centers show often different levels of merging between these two sounds (Škaric 2009, cf. Ćavar 2011). Some preliminary research on the acoustic cues and their variation has been conducted, but to our knowledge no results are available on the perception of these sounds (Ćavar et. al. 2016).

This research presents a pilot study of the perception and production of č, ć and d, dž in twenty native and heritage speakers of Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian who have lived in the United States for five or more years. This preliminary work looks at the categorization of BCS sibilants by speakers who have had an extensive exposure to American English in which only one posterior affricate series exists, [ʃ] as in ‘cheese’ and [dʒ] as in ‘jacket’. Subjects were first recorded reading a BCS text written in the Latinica orthography, and their production analyzed for the ability to produce model-like sibilants, i.e. to retain a distinction between the pre-palatal and post-alveolar. Then the same subjects were given a forced discrimination perception task of VC, CV, and VCV syllables and asked to distinguish between ć/š, đ/dž, and c/s as distractors. Results are still being analyzed at the time of writing this abstract, but we are expecting interesting findings.

The study addresses a number of issues. One is the impact of the phonology of the dominant language on the phonology of the native language in a situation where a categorical contrast is disappearing both under the pressure of the tendencies from the native language and the dominant one, English. Further, we look at the “evolution” of the language in second generation immigrants given the impact of English. We investigate the amount of merger in relation to the length of stay in the U.S., dialectal background of the speaker, generation (i.e. whether the speaker is a first generation immigrant born in Bosnia/Croatia/Serbia or a second generation heritage speaker), and other factors. In this particular case, although the contrast is categorical, the acoustic difference between the categories forms a continuum (for example, in terms of Center of Gravity). Another issue is the correlation or its lack thereof between the merger in perception and merger in production.

The study contributes to our better understanding of the merger processes and language change in general but also informs us of the strategies that native speakers adopt when in close contact with a dominant foreign language with conflicting phonological patterns.

References: