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Imitation of Dialects: From South to West

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Abstract

This study reports on imitations of the West Swedish dialect performed by native speakers of the South Swedish dialect. As an alternative approach to traditional dialect studies the imitations teach us more about the most characteristic features of the target dialect and further guide us to the essence of the dialect.

Introduction

Imitating different dialects of a language is often a source of amusement, entertainment and challenge, but is it also a source of knowledge? In comparison to other dialects West Swedish appears to be quite a tricky one to understand. By means of synthetic speech experiments to reproduce the main Swedish dialects have been made through manipulation of the intonation (Bruce and Gårding, 1978). While the experiment was generally successful, the synthetic imitation of the West Swedish dialect was considered to be a failure. Consequently the aim of the present study is to learn more about this dialect from a study of imitations. By analysing the imitations carefully and systematically reducing the characteristic features one by one, provided that the overall impression of the dialect remains, I have hopes that the imitations will guide us to the essence of the West Swedish dialect.

West Swedish and South Swedish - a brief description

The West Swedish dialect in question is *göteborgska*, as it is spoken in the city of Gothenburg. In comparison with standard Swedish the West Swedish long a-vowel is a more close variant while the long ø-vowel is a retracted variant. The i-vowel is sometimes realised as a voiced fricative characterised by its buzzing sound. The intonation pattern is characterised by its two-peaked pitch contour of the word accents. In final words the focal gesture is separately realised and the extra tonal gesture is marked by its glissando-like rising (Andersson, 1994, Andersson and Ralph, 1986, Andersson and Ralph, 1987, Björseth, 1958, Holmberg, 1976).

The South Swedish dialect in question *helsingborgska* is spoken in the city of Helsingburg. Apart from the r-segment (a uvular trill) the diphthongization of most vowels, particularly the phonologically long vowels, is the most significant feature of the dialect. The intonation pattern is marked by its one-peaked pitch contour of the word accents. The focal accent which is realised as a wider range of the word accent is characterised by its falling pitch contour (Bruce and Gårding, 1978, Gårding, 1992).

The investigation

Informants, material and procedure

Four informants took an active part in carrying out the imitations. One native speaker of the standard variety of the West Swedish dialect was recorded as reference. The participants are all male in their 30s. The imitators are native speakers of *helsingborgska*, but two of them

moved to Gothenburg as adults and have lived there for approximately ten years. The informants from Helsingburg are referred to as **H1** and **H2**, the informants from Gothenburg as **G1** and **G2** and the reference as **GG** (Genuine speaker of the Gothenburg dialect).

For the investigation a written text was composed in form of a non-dialectal tale. The imitators were instructed to perform an imitation in accordance with their apprehension of the target dialect. A version in their original dialect was first recorded and then a version of the imitation. The reference speaker was told not to exaggerate or hold back on his dialectal pronunciation.

Method

The imitations were auditorily and acoustically analysed partly in comparison to the reference, partly in comparison to the imitators' corresponding version in their original dialect. Out of every imitation an overall pattern of every phonetic feature was produced and judged as either belonging to the target dialect, the source dialect or to some other dialect and additionally according to its credibility of being native-like or not. The acoustic analysis was carried out by means of the analysis programs Soundscope and ESPS/waves+™. Spectrograms and F_0 contours of relevant speech sequences were studied above all regarding the quality and quantity of stressed vowels and the pitch contour of focally accented words. The vowel formant frequencies, F1, F2, F3 in the spectra of focally accented words were measured as well as the quantity ratio of stressed vowel plus consonant sequences.

Results

The r-segment

In accordance with GG the imitators G1 and H1 strongly articulate the r-segment as an alveolar tremulant. The somewhat forceful pronunciation of the r-segment, independent of its position in a word, is consistent throughout the imitations and judged as a native-like feature of the target. G2 and H2's alternation between an alveolar and a fricative contributes to their failure.

Vowel quality

Perceptually there is no trace of diphthongization of vowels from the source dialect in any of the imitations. G1 and H1 generally pronounce the target vowels in accordance with GG. The most prominent vowels are the a-, i- and ø-vowel, but also the ʌ-vowel in focally accented words. The overall vowel quality in the remaining two imitations is considered to be that of standard Swedish. The acoustic values of the imitations are generally closer to that of the target dialect (GG) than that of the source dialect with the exception of H2's imitation in which the vowel formant frequencies of the i-, ʌ- and ø-vowel in the spectra of focally accented words are close to the formant frequencies of the second element of the diphthong in the source dialect.

Focally accented words

Auditorily and acoustically the realisation of the focal gesture generally follows the pattern of the source dialect in all imitations but one. The acoustic analysis confirms the native-like realisation of the focal gesture in H1's imitation, as the rising glissando-like pitch contour of the target dialect is manifested in all existing focally accented words. In comparison to GG's realisation the F_0 contour in H1's imitation of the non-final word *peruken* (see Figures 1-2) may indicate that this is a far too exaggeratedly imitated feature i.e. a caricature, but

according to the auditory analysis the focally accented word is perceived as typically West Swedish and H1 actually sounds more native than the native!

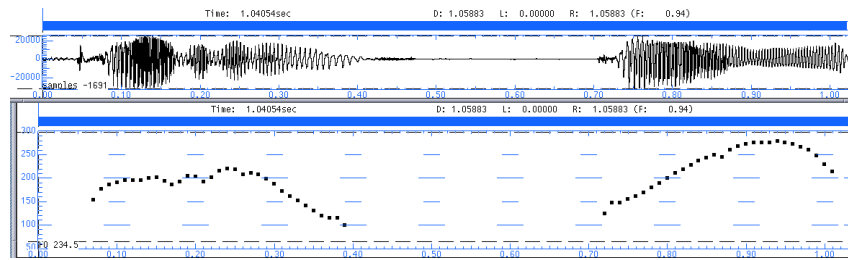


Figure 1. F₀ contour and waveform of H1's imitation of the focally accented word *peruken*.

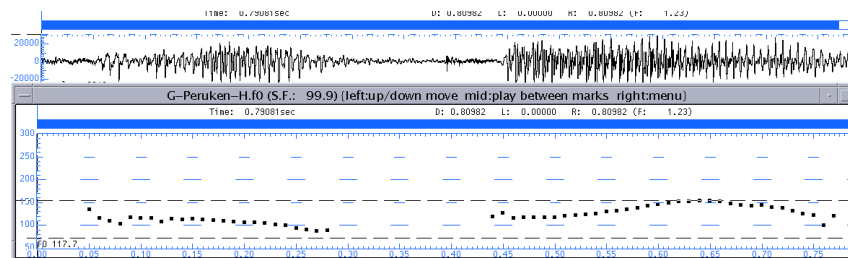


Figure 2. F₀ contour and waveform of GG's realisation of the focally accented word *peruken*.

Vowel quantity

In figures 3 and 4 the quantity ratio of the vowel in stressed vowel plus consonant sequences (in percentage) is accounted for in two of the relevant words: *hackor* and *träffade*. The charts show the results of the imitations (target) in comparison to the source dialect and to the results of the reference, GG. In figure 3 GG's pronunciation of the short a-vowel in *hackor* constitutes 15 % of the sequence and accordingly the following long consonant segment constitutes 85% of the sequence. In figure 4 the vowel constitutes 33% and the consonant 67% of the sequence.

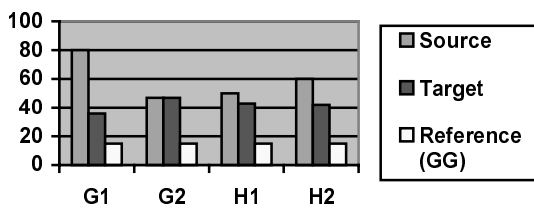


Figure 3. Quantity ratio of the vowel in the stressed vowel plus consonant sequence of the word *hackor* in percentage.

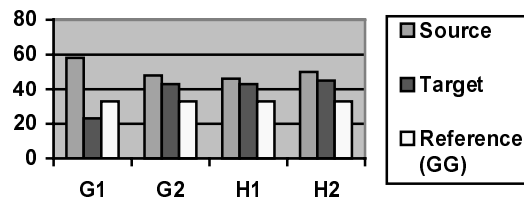


Figure 4. Quantity ratio of the vowel in the stressed vowel plus consonant sequence of the word *träffade* in percentage.

The overall results of the acoustic analysis show that in all imitations the vowel is generally shorter than in the source dialect, but only in G1's case is the difference significant. Additionally the results which confirm the auditorily perceived short vowels in G1's imitation are the closest to GG's and of great importance for the overall impression of a native-like imitation.

Discussion and conclusions

Important features of a successful imitation

While H2 and G2's imitations are considered to be failures G1 and H1's imitations are successful. G1's imitation is successful partly due to the native-like vowel quality of the a-vowel in regularly accented words and the overall vowel quality of focally accented words, partly the consistent pronunciation of the r-segment, but above all due to the vowel quantity. The conclusion to be drawn from the auditory analysis and the results of the acoustic analysis regarding the quantity ratio of stressed vowel plus consonant sequences is that the vowel quantity is of great importance for the impression of the West Swedish dialect. The existing colouring from the source dialect does not interfere with the impression of a successful imitation due to the native-like imitated features. H1's imitation is superior to G1's imitation and judged as genuinely native-like and equivalent to the reference. The quality of the i-vowel in regularly accented words is native-like in addition to the vowel quality of the ɤ- and ø-vowel in focally accented words. While the vowel quantity is the determining factor of G1's successful imitation this feature is not considered to be essential to H1's native-like imitation. In conclusion the focally accented words play the leading part in H1's performance and consequently the focal gesture is the way to success.

The essence of the West Swedish dialect

By comparing the results of the two successful imitations I come to the conclusion that the most essential features of a native-like imitation of the West Swedish dialect are firstly: the realisation of the focal gesture, secondly: the vowel quantity and thirdly: the quality of certain vowels. Regarding the vowel quality I believe this to be an essential feature when the vowel is to be found in a focally accented word depending on the vowel and position of the word in a phrase (Segerup, 1998). Finally, I believe there is something we can learn about the West Swedish dialect from this study of imitation. The identity of a dialect is considered to be within the realisation of the focal gesture (Bruce and Gårding, 1978, Gårding, 1992) which is confirmed by the results of the present study. Accordingly we know that this feature is part of the essence of the West Swedish dialect, but do we know that the vowel quantity constitutes another part ?

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