

Perception of palatalization contrasts in child heritage speakers of Russian in Italy

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Some phonological contrasts are systematically harder to acquire in a second language even beyond the effects of first-language transfer, although how to formalize their difficulty remains an open question. From the perspective of heritage phonetics and phonology, such contrasts are particularly interesting because they are expected to be more vulnerable to variable input and other characteristics of heritage speakers' developmental trajectories. One example is the contrast between consonantal velarization and palatalization, attested in several Slavic languages. In Russian, prevocalic palatalized consonants additionally contrast with sequences of a palatalized consonant followed by /j/, yielding a three-way opposition of the type *Ca* vs. *C^ha* vs. *C^hja*.

In this talk I report preliminary results of an ABX discrimination task with pseudowords testing perception of this ternary opposition. The study I am conducting with Anna Menukhova (independent researcher) and Irene Gassino (Ca' Foscari University of Venice) investigates the perception in two groups of children aged 6–12: monolinguals residing in Russia, and heritage speakers of Russian whose dominant societal language (including schooling) is Italian.