Between any two dialects of a language we find various differences. Some of these differences might be more prominent or noticeable than others, that is, we might say that some dialectal differences are more salient than others (Siegel 2010). The purpose of this study is to quantify the perceptual salience of 6 phonetic or phonological differences between two dialects of Spanish (Buenos Aires Spanish and Madrid Spanish) at the individual listener level via a perceptual test.

The 6 dialectal differences included in this study reflect differences in phonemic inventory, differences in the articulation of shared sounds, or differences in the treatment of vocalic sequences. As an example of a difference in inventory, Madrid Spanish (MS) includes the voiceless interdental fricative \( /\theta \) \( / \) in its phonological inventory, while this phoneme is not found in the Buenos Aires Spanish (BAS) inventory (Piñeros 2009). Where MS uses \( /\theta \) \( / \), BAS uses \( /s/ \).

To quantify the perceptual salience of the 6 dialectal differences, 22 native speakers of BAS and MS (11 from each dialect) participated in a perception experiment, run in Praat (Boersma & Weenink 2013). The methodology used in the perception experiment builds on that used in previous experimental studies on the ability of listeners to accurately identify speaker ethnicity, regional dialect, or foreign accent, based on the presence of particular linguistic features (Clopper & Pisoni 2004; Fridland, Bartlett & Kreuz 2004; Graff, Labov & Harris 1986; Thomas & Reaser 2004; Torbert 2004, 2010). Following the logic and findings of Fridland et al. (2004), the prediction was that the participants would perform more accurately on trials involving the more salient dialectal differences than on those containing the less salient differences.

The stimuli included in the perception task were short sequences of sounds that captured only one of the dialectal differences under investigation. The stimuli were recorded being produced by 4 MS speakers and 4 BAS speakers (2 males and 2 females each). In the perception experiment, the 22 participants saw the orthographic form of each stimulus on the screen then heard two recordings of the stimuli being produced. Their task was to decide which of the two recordings had been produced by a speaker of their own dialect. The measure used to quantify perceptual salience was the percentage of the trials involving each dialectal difference that each participant responded to correctly.

Statistical analysis using mixed-effects models finds that the dialectal differences do vary in perceptual salience and that there is an effect of dialect of the listener on how salient the differences are. For the BAS speakers the dialectal differences can be split into two salience groups (high and low), but for the MS speakers there is an intermediate level of salience comprising just one of the dialectal differences (gliding of \( /e/ \) in a vocalic sequence), a difference that was found to have low salience for the BAS speakers. I argue that the intermediate level stems from stigmatization of this particular variable in MS, but not in BAS (Hualde, Simonet & Torreira 2008). Furthermore, significant variation in the perception of salience between the participants was found, indicating that we cannot assume that individual speakers perceive the salience of linguistic variables in the same way.
The methodology and results of this study have applications in investigations of the role of perceptual salience in phonetic accommodation, second dialect and second language acquisition, and patterns of community-level sound change.

References


