

Perceived accent in early bilinguals speaking L3 English: What drives transfer from the heritage language?

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In this talk, I will present two studies from my PhD thesis that focus on perceived foreign accent in 21 adult-aged Italian-German bilinguals acquiring English as a third language (L3). Study 1 examines perceived accent in the heritage language (HL) Italian and in the majority language German, relating this to potential correlations with ‘HL use’ and the ‘age of first intensive contact with German’ (which ranges from 0-6 years). Study 2 looks at perceived accent in L3 English, examining the extent to which the bilinguals are perceived as Italian or German-sounding. In addition, the bilinguals’ accent in English is compared to that of monolingual German speakers to ascertain whether there is an advantage for bilingual speakers. The results suggest that the bilinguals are indistinguishable from their monolingual peers when speaking German – regardless of age of onset – and that nativeness in the HL Italian largely depends on HL use. In L3 English, most speakers are perceived as German-sounding, though influence from Italian is perceived in some speakers, whose accents are more ambiguous-sounding. Regression analyses suggest that the extent to which the bilinguals sound Italian when they speak English is predicted by the amount of Italian use, operationalized as a composite score containing weighted use and exposure-related variables from across the lifespan.