Realisation of German final syllable /-ən/ as a cue to accent authenticity for French accents in German

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Earlier studies concerning foreign accent imitation (Neuhauser & Simpson, 2007a & b) showed that native speakers of German varied widely in their ability to produce a foreign accent judged by listeners to be authentic. There was also wide variation in the ability of listeners to successfully identify the genuine non-native speaker. Authenticity seemed to be questioned in both imitators and genuine non-native speakers if typical German phonetic/phonological patterns are present, i.e. have been successfully acquired by the non-natives or unsuccessfully concealed by the imitators. Features identified to be crucial for accent authenticity judgements of French and American English accents seemed to be the realisation of /h/, postvocalic /r/, junctural glottalisation and realisation of final /-ən/. So, for instance, it was suggested that a full realisation of final /-ən/ seems to lead to the judgement “authentic accent” whereas accents exhibiting reduction of final /-ən/ by realising a syllabic nasal in most cases were judged to be unauthentic.

In this paper we attempt to verify the realisation of final /-ən/ as one important phonetic correlate of authenticity for a French accent in German.

The following questions are being tested:

1) Is the realisation of final /-ən/ crucial for accent authenticity judgements?
2) Does the preceding consonant affect the importance of final syllable realisation in accent authenticity judgements, i.e. is the reduction of /-ən/ in “haben” more likely to be produced by a genuine non-native speaker of German than in “Vorkehrungen”?
3) Can a manipulation of the data (e.g. elision of [ə] and inclusion of a syllabic nasal) affect the authenticity judgements?

The stimulus sentence used in the listening experiment in Neuhauser & Simpson (2007a) (Die verstärkten Sicherheitsvorkehrungen der Banken könnten Räuber abgeschreckt haben.) contains five occurrences of final /-ən/ and was analysed for twelve subjects, i.e. eight native German speakers imitating a French accent and four native French speakers speaking German. These speakers belong to the following four groups of speakers which arise from the results of the listening experiment in Neuhauser & Simpson (2007a): (1) the most authentic sounding native German speakers imitating a French accent (N=4); (2) the least authentic sounding native German speakers imitating a French accent (N=4); (3) the most authentic sounding native French speakers speaking German (N=2); (4) the least authentic sounding native French speakers speaking German (N=2).

Figure 1 shows that only three out of six speakers judged to be producing authentic foreign accents reduced final /-ən/, and all of them in only one of five possible cases (in the word “haben” each). For the group of speakers judged to be producing unauthentic accents there were eleven cases of reduction of final /-ən/ which were distributed across five speakers (out of six). Interestingly the two speakers judged to be least authentic in fact were native French speakers both producing reductions of final /-ən/ not only in “haben” but also in other cases as well. These findings strongly suggest that not only may the realisation of final /-ən/ have an influence on authenticity judgements but also support the claim that the preceding consonant might be relevant as well.

An experiment is currently underway to verify the findings of this preliminary analysis. Using praat, original utterances from both authentic and non-authentic sounding speakers are manipulated in both directions, i.e. by replacing [-ən] sequences with syllabic nasals and vice versa. Different groups of listeners are being asked to judge the accent authenticity of the original and the manipulated stimuli.
Figure 1 Number of reductions of final syllable (i.e. /-ən/ as syllabic nasal) as a function of judged authenticity. The dotted line represents the 50% border of accent authenticity judgements.

References
