

Are English speakers “deaf” to Serbian Lexical Pitch Accent Contrasts?

Dušan Nikolić
University of Calgary

Previous research demonstrates that listeners often have difficulties distinguishing between word-prosodic contrasts when listening to non-native speech. This difficulty, termed “deafness”, has been mainly observed with stress and tone contrasts (Dupoux et al. 2001, Correia et al. 2015). For example, French speakers could not distinguish between Spanish stress contrasts (Dupoux et al. 2008), while English speakers struggled with Mandarin tone contrasts (Braun et al. 2014). Not many researchers have asked whether “deafness” can be observed when perceiving another word-prosodic unit – *lexical pitch accent*. In the present study, I fill this gap by asking whether “deafness” occurs when the speakers of English listen to Serbian lexical pitch accent contrasts. To that end, English and Serbian speakers carried out a sequence recall task, wherein the stimuli were presented to participants in sequences of four, five, and six non-words that carried Serbian lexical pitch accents. Results reveal that English speakers were not “deaf” to Serbian lexical pitch accents, and that the groups of listeners did not significantly differ on their performance ($\chi^2(1) = .05, p = 0.89$). However, English speakers performed significantly worse on the more memory demanding sequences than Serbian speakers [$\chi^2(1) = 11.82, p < 0.01$]. The findings indicated that English listeners discriminated between Serbian lexical pitch accents by relying on the acoustic correlates of lexical pitch accents. Since there are no lexical pitch accents in English, English listeners could not retrieve lexical pitch accents from their phonological representations to recall the contrast sequences demanding greater memory load.

Keywords: deafness, lexical pitch accents, English, Serbian

Phonetics/Phonology
Either Talk or Poster

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