

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Second Language Mysteries

Dr Michael Tyler from MARCS Auditory Laboratories is exploring how adults learn second languages through a three year Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project.

'The majority of the world's population speaks two or more languages, yet we know little about how multiple languages are accommodated within a single speaker. One of the great mysteries of the human capacity for language learning is why people who learn a second language (L2) later in life tend to speak with a foreign accent' says Dr Tyler. 'Less obvious, but even more intriguing, is the fact that non-native listeners also hear with a foreign accent. That is, just as non-native speakers sometimes have trouble producing certain L2 sounds, non-native listeners have trouble distinguishing between closely related L2 sounds. Based on recent theoretical and empirical advances, this project will investigate the development of this perceptual accent.'

Dr Tyler will use innovative laboratory-based techniques that will compare native English speakers with Japanese students learning English, to focus on how people discriminate between different sounds, or the extent to which different sounds for native speakers are judged as similar or the same by L2 learners. Other tests will determine whether immersion (the amount of experience learners have in speaking and listening to English while immersed in it in Australia), makes a difference to their ability to tell the difference between similar sounds. The techniques and results in these tests have the potential to be generalised to other languages and other language learning situations, for both adult learners and children.



In an increasingly multilingual Australian society, this project will increase our understanding of the human capacity for language learning. This will assist in strengthening Australia's social and economic fabric by leading to improved educational practices, work prospects for migrants, and, most importantly, understanding between the different cultures that make up the Australian community.

Project Title: Development of second language phonetic and phonological categories
Funding has been set at: \$219,983
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