

Vowel Plots as a Diagnostic for the Nature of Loanword Integration in Montréal French

Michael L. Friesner

The integration of segments in loanwords that are not part of the inventory of the recipient language has been described in the literature as a choice between adaptation to a native phoneme or importation of a foreign segment. Within the category of adaptation, there is much debate as to whether the nature of this adaptation is phonological (cf. Paradis and LaCharité 1997), phonetic (cf. Peperkamp 2004), or some combination thereof (cf. Broselow 2004; Yip 2006).

Most studies that assess the importance of various factors in loanword adaptation consider categorical variables, such as consonants and suprasegmentals, for which it is relatively easy to determine whether the pattern observed in loanwords matches that of the native vocabulary, that from the source language, or something in between for which an account can be provided by invoking phonological or phonetic factors. If vowels are examined, the researcher typically assigns them to a preexisting vowel class impressionistically or according to prescriptive pronunciations from dictionaries. This paper explores how these particular types of adaptation can be defined in continuous vowel space, through the examination of F1/F2 vowel plots of native words and loanwords in Montréal French drawn from interviews.

Vowel plots are frequently used for the purposes of vowel categorization in studies of sound change in progress and dialect characterization. Specifically, they help assess whether certain mergers have taken place and whether the distribution of a vowel exhibits clear allophony or minor phonetic variation according to environment.

In the field of language contact, researchers are only beginning to use such methods to determine the adaptation patterns of foreign-origin words (cf. Boberg 2007). Vowel plots can show us not only whether two classes of sounds share the same F1/F2 space, but also whether they share the same distribution according to environment. This helps to determine whether two sets of sounds are truly the *same* for a speaker, and if not, what differentiates them.

Taking these notions as a starting point, this paper considers what findings in vowel plots would be indicative of segment importation, phonological adaptation, and phonetic adaptation, as well as what other possibilities might arise given further examination. The findings point to the necessity of looking at vowels more closely in continuous space to improve our understanding of the ways in which loanwords are integrated.