

## Processing strategies in L1 and L2 liaison

Ellenor Shoemaker ([ellenor.shoemaker@univ-paris3.fr](mailto:ellenor.shoemaker@univ-paris3.fr))  
CNRS / Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle  
Sophie Wauquier ([sophie.wauquier@orange.fr](mailto:sophie.wauquier@orange.fr))  
CNRS / Université Paris 8

Liaison, a phenomenon of external sandhi in spoken French, is without a doubt one of the phonological concepts which has most inspired contemporary phonology. However, while attempts to formalize the phonological phenomenon of liaison have been the focus of a vast body of work (see Côté 2005 for in-depth reviews), the developmental aspects of liaison in the phonological grammar of both children and adults have received considerably less attention.

In this paper, we present an overview of existing data on the acquisition of liaison in both in a first and second language (L1 and L2). We examine the hypothesis put forth by Wauquier (2009) that there exist differing acquisitional strategies, and therefore differing processing strategies, in the L1 and L2 development of this phonological phenomenon. Based on patterns of production errors in both L1 and L2 acquisition, Wauquier suggests that L2 learners process liaison at the lexical level based primarily on surface (and orthographic) forms, while L1 learners make use of a phonological strategy allowing them to create abstract generalizations based on the particular prosodic position of the liaison consonant (LC) and on the well-formedness constraints which regulate its surface realization. L1 production errors suggest that French-speaking children acquire liaison through grammatical generalizations based on obligatory liaison contexts (e.g. determiner (Word 1) + noun (Word 2), *un éléphant* 'an elephant'). For example, Wauquier cites errors such as the insertion of the wrong LC at the boundary between Words 1 and 2 as in \*[le.ne.le.fã] instead of [le.ze.le.fã] for *les éléphants* 'the elephants'. This error suggests that the child has erroneously segmented the input *un éléphant* [ẽ.ne.le.fã] 'an elephant', analyzing /n/ as the onset of Word 2 instead of encoding it as a resyllabified LC belonging to Word 1.

Much less data on the L2 acquisition of liaison is available. What data are available suggest that the phonological opacity of surface forms in spoken French initially constitutes a major obstacle for L2 learners. Unlike L1 learners, L2 learners largely approach acquisition with representations of segmented lexical units already in place. Observed L2 errors include a lack of resyllabification of the LC and the use of the orthographic, as opposed to the underlying, consonant as the LC (e.g. *un grand ami* 'a great friend' produced [ẽgrãdami] instead of [ẽgrãtami]), suggesting lexically-constrained processing. However, Wauquier proposes that while L1 learners without exception eventually acquire stable, immutable representations of liaison consonants, L2 learners, even at advanced levels, may not encode, or may erroneously encode, the prosodic position of linking consonants in their phonological grammar of French.

We present more recent data from psycholinguistic experimentation suggesting that, while acquisition strategies may initially follow different paths in L1 and L2 development, L2 learners can indeed establish abstract generalizations of liaison that are in line with those of native speakers (see for example Shoemaker, 2010; Tremblay, 2011). We will present data exhibiting nativelike behavior in both the production and perception of French liaison in late learners, attesting to the establishment of abstract constructions in advanced L2 learners and calling into question the existence of a critical period for the acquisition of this phenomenon.

## References

- Côté, M.-H. (2005). Le statut lexical des consonnes de liaison. In J.-P. Chevrot, M. Fayol & B. Laks (Eds), *Langages*, 158, 66-79.
- Shoemaker, E. (2010). The exploitation of fine phonetic detail in the processing of L2 French. In *Research in Second Language Processing and Parsing*, by VanPatten, Bill and Jill Jegerski (eds.). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Tremblay, A. (2011). Learning to parse liaison-initial words: An eye-tracking study. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 14(3), 257-279.
- Wauquier, S. (2009). Acquisition de la liaison en L1 et L2 : stratégies phonologiques ou lexicales ? *Aile...Lia*, 2, 93-130.