LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND PHONETIC SIMILARITY

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In the past, linguistic and phonetic theories have been thought
helpful to interpret language acquisition data, in particular Ll
acquisition. The more sophisticated the model, the more sophisti-
cated the interpretational possibilities offered to students in
language acquisition. This hope seems unwarranted because current-
ly available theories have been developed for fully fledged adult
languages and not for learners, children and/or adults. The in-
adequacy of this approach derives from the fact that learners very
often react to properties of the target language which do not figure
in the linguist's formal description of the particular language at
all, or which do so much less prominently than they deserve in view
of their importance for language acquisition. It is suggested that
language acquisition be explored as to what insights it may offer
for linguistic theorizing. As for phonetics/phonology, it is
suggested that acquisition data, in particular from L2 acquisition,
will throw light on the problem of phonetic similarity, and that,
perhaps, transcription systems should be revised to accord with
such insights. Consider the L2 acquisition of the various types
of "r". In general, L2 learners replace the L2 targets by the
closest equivalent of their Ll repertoire. If not interfered with
by teaching or orthography, such learners will first replace the
uvular [ʀ] or [ʁ] by [χ] or [h], even if their Ll "r" is the retro-
flex [ɽ], the frictionless [ɹ] or the rolled alveolar [r]; and the
retroflex L2 [ɽ] or the frictionless [ʁ] will be replaced by [w],
even if the learner's Ll "r" is [ʁ ʀ r]. Obviously, to the learner
[ʁ ʀ] are more similar to [χ h] than to [r ɽ ʁ], and [ɽ ɹ] more
similar to [w] than to [ʁ ʀ r]. Since such observations are not
anecdotal but systematic in the sense that they are specific to
all learners of a specific acquisitional type, these phonetic re-
gularities should be reflected in the phonetic transcription. As
for the various "r"'s this can easily be done via appropriate
feature specifications. This approach will be extended to other
phonetic elements.