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Speech Timing and Pause Structure in L1 and L2 English

A significant portion of our waking lives is spent in conversation. Most linguistic studies focus on the words and sounds used in speech, while few put the spotlight on the silences between words. How do English speakers use pauses in spontaneous speech? Do different speakers use pauses differently? Do native and non-native speakers pause differently? Answers to these questions can have profound implications for our understanding of speech production, and have applications in a number of areas, including determining a speaker's native language, reducing accents, and improving public speaking.

I examined the pauses in the conversational portion of a corpus of digital speech recordings from native and non-native speakers of English, the Wildcat Corpus (Bradlow et al., 2007). In the conversation elicitation task used for this corpus, various combinations of native and non-native speakers compared two similar pictures to find ten differences between them. The interlocutors could not see each other's picture and had to solve this picture puzzle through conversation. I marked and labeled all silent pauses to indicate their quantities, durations, types (e.g. grammatical, articulatory, filled with 'uh' or 'um, or silent), syntactical positions, and immediately surrounding context. Data collected so far show that, in general, native English speakers and Chinese and Koreans speaking English use similar pause types; however, when Korean speakers restart their sentences they exhibit longer pauses than English and Chinese speakers. I explore whether this may relate to basic word order differences which is subject-verb-object in English and Chinese, but subject-object-verb in Korean. There are also signs of accommodation between speakers. English speakers have longer pauses when talking to non-native speakers than to native speakers. The findings also agree with the study done by Clark and Fox Tree (2002) that speakers use 'uh' before short pauses and 'um' before long pauses.