

On the perceptual origin of loanword adaptations: experimental evidence from Japanese

Sharon Peperkamp
Inga Vendelin
Kimihiro Nakamura

Abstract

Japanese shows an asymmetry in the treatment of word-final [n] in loanwords from English and French: while it is adapted as a moraic nasal consonant in loanwords from English, it is adapted with a following epenthetic vowel in loanwords from French. We provide experimental evidence that this asymmetry originates in the way Japanese speakers perceive word-final [n] in English and French. In Experiment 1 we use a forced choice identification task and show that Japanese speakers identify French [n]-final stimuli as ending in a vowel significantly more often than English ones; the identification of this vowel is shown to correlate with the spectral energy contained in the release of the nasal consonant in the stimuli. In Experiment 2 we use an ABX discrimination task and show that Japanese speakers have difficulties distinguishing French forms ending in [n] from corresponding ones ending in [nu]. Given the primacy of perception over production, we conclude that the Japanese loanword adaptations originate in perception and consist of phonetically minimal transformations. We discuss consequences of our findings for models of loanword adaptation.