

Production and perception of geminate consonants in Italian as a foreign language: Czech, Finnish, German and Spanish learners in contrast

Andrea Pešková
apeskova@zedat.fu-berlin.de
(Freie Universität Berlin)

In this talk, I will outline the main goals, theoretical background, and methodology of my project on geminate consonants in Italian as a foreign language (<https://italiangeminates-project.com/>). Funded by the DFG, German Research Foundation, the project (Jan 2024 – Jan 2027) is conducted at the Institute of Romance Languages and Literatures at FU Berlin.

From a linguistic perspective, Italian not only has a specific melody that makes it sound very unique, but also belongs to the relatively small group of the world's languages that have long consonants (geminate) in their sound systems. Since geminates represent very common sounds in the Italian phonemic system and can create differences in meaning (e.g., *nonno* 'grandpa' vs. *nono* 'ninth'), their pronunciation is an important part of phonological competence and crucial for the learner's intelligibility. Perhaps unsurprisingly, geminates are reported to be very tricky to learn. What are the sources of these difficulties seen in production? Is this a purely articulatory phenomenon or is it due to phonologically driven perceptual differences? To answer that, we need to test perception and production and compare languages with and without phonological length contrast.

The first goal of the project is to contribute to the research on second language acquisition by exploring how Czech, Finnish, German and Spanish adult (literate) learners acquire (word-internal) consonant length in L2 Italian. This multi-linguistic approach is not random. Spanish has no quantity as a contrastive feature, Czech and German include vowel length in their systems and Finnish possesses both distinctive vowel and consonant length. Since L2 speech is characterized to a large extent by features transferred from the first language (L1), it is expected that the four different groups of learners will differ in production of Italian geminates. Moreover, it will be tested how the groups contrast in perception. It is well known that L2 learners perceive sounds differently than L1 speakers do and have difficulties to "hear" unfamiliar patterns. The project hopes to contribute to the current debate on the quite complex relationship between perception and production regarding the acquisition of consonant length.

The second main goal is to bring the linguistic knowledge gained with empirical methods into the language classroom. It is surprising how many learners and teachers are not aware of the importance of phonetics and phonology, let alone the increasing relevance of such knowledge and data based on L1 and L2 sounds in modern speech recognition technologies and AI-based pronunciation apps. The combination of theory and practice should be essential for training L2 speakers, be they future teachers or experts in different professions.

