

Determinants of variability and consistency in prosody perception

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Prosody provides important cues for speech segmentation and lexical access, and it is a well-established finding that listeners make use of prosodic information during speech processing (Cutler, Dahan, & Donselaar, 1997). However, prosody in the speech signal is variable: First, it is subject to cross-linguistic variation. Moreover, it is acoustically highly variable, both within and between speakers. This raises the question of how listeners deal with this variability in language acquisition and speech perception. Are there determinants of consistency in prosody perception?

In this talk, I will present a series of prosody perception experiments we have carried out with different populations (infants and adults, mono- and bilinguals, with or without (a risk for) developmental dyslexia) to explore these questions. Results of our studies suggest that there is individual variability in prosody perception that relates to both external factors such as language experience, but also to internal factors such as musical acuity. Beyond this variability, we find consistency that can be explained if we assume an influence of innate perceptual biases.

I will discuss how the interaction of these determinants of variability and consistency may influence the process of language acquisition and settle individuals' speech perception routines.