

How Dutch high-school pupils cope with German reduced speech

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Natural speech features ‘reductions’, i.e., deletions and assimilations of speech sounds within and across words. For instance, German native speakers may say “*denhama*” for “*den haben wir*” (‘We have that one’). Such reduction patterns are often language-specific and are therefore likely to be problematic for non-native listeners (e.g., for Dutch listeners, who may perceive “*den Hammer*” [‘the hammer’]). We examined how, after almost four years of training in German as a second language, Dutch high-school pupils perceive and understand German reduced speech.

For this, 39 Dutch (and 38 German) adolescents listened to either reduced or unreduced short phrases in a dictation task (48 trials). Accuracies were dramatically lower for pupils presented with reduced phrases than for those presented with unreduced phrases, thus demonstrating that Dutch pupils struggle with non-native German reduced speech even after almost four years of high-school training.

An exploration of error types showed that pupils listening to reduced speech deleted and substituted targets more frequently, and more often segmented the phrases incorrectly. The errors also suggested that most pupils apply multiple ‘listening strategies’. For instance, many of them substituted targets by non-words (indicative of a ‘bottom-up’ strategy) *and* by other words not intended by the speaker (indicative of a ‘top-down’ strategy). Overall, non-word substitutions outnumbered word substitutions. Outcomes will be discussed in the context of practices in Dutch classrooms, as observed in questionnaires among teachers.