Phonetic Variations between Mid-Vowels in Swiss French and Standard French

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Introduction

What is Standard French?
Standard French is spoken in the Northern part of France, around Paris. It is considered to be geographically unmarked.

What is Swiss French?
Swiss French is spoken in Romandie, the francophone cantons of Switzerland. There are different types of Swiss French. The one investigated here, Vaudois French, is spoken in the Vaud canton.

What are mid-vowels?
Mid-vowels are pronounced with the mouth neither too closed, nor too open. While English vowels only have three degrees of aperture (high, mid, low), French vowels have four (high, mid-closed, mid-open, open).

Are French mid-vowels pronounced differently in France and in Switzerland?

Methods

Formant analysis
- Formants represent resonant frequencies and can be measured in Hz
- The quality of vowels can be described through formant analysis
- Formant 1 describes open/closed; Formant 2 describes high/low

Results

[e] and [e]

[œ] and [ø]

[œ] and [ø]

[ø] and [o]

Conclusion

Dialectal differences
- 4 out of 6 mid-vowels display observable difference across dialects:
  - [e] shown in Figure 2
  - [œ] shown in Figure 3
  - [ø] shown in Figure 5
  - [o] shown in Figure 6

This supports our hypothesis that some mid-vowels are pronounced differently in France and in Switzerland.

Applications

Travel
- Knowing how dialects differ in the francophone world can make international business and traveling more efficient.

Foreign Language Teaching Implications
- By studying dialectal variation in mid-vowels, students can better understand how they are realized and be understood by speakers from the French-speaking world.
- Instructors should thus point out dialectal differences and prepare learners to listen for and identify those features in order to understand and be understood by speakers from the French-speaking world.

Are those distinctions too confusing for learners?
- Should all French dialects be taught to some extent? If not, which ones?
- How should those distinctions be approached in class?

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