Nativelike attainment in L2 speech processing: The exploitation of acoustic detail at word boundaries
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This talk will explore adult language learners’ sensitivity to non-contrastive phonetic detail and the localization of word boundaries in a second language (L2). The online segmentation of running speech requires that the listener employ perceptual strategies to identify where word boundaries lie. One such strategy is the exploitation of non-contrastive acoustic differentiation that occurs at various prosodic boundaries. For example, Nakatani & Dukes (1977) showed that listeners can use the presence of word-initial aspirated voiceless plosives in English to differentiate potentially ambiguous phonemic content such as *loose pills* and *Lou spills*. An aspirated /p/ in *pills* signals a preceding word boundary, thus allowing the listener to segment accordingly. Since this seminal study, a growing body of work has demonstrated that (native) listeners use extremely fine-grained acoustic detail to modulate lexical access (e.g. Salverda et al. 2003; Shatzman & McQueen 2006; Shoemaker 2010 among others).

Complicating the processes of speech perception and spoken word recognition for L2 learners, however, is the fact that segmentation strategies vary from language to language. The ease of speech processing in one’s native language (L1) stands in sharp contrast to the conscious effort that can be required in the aural comprehension of a L2. Paradoxically, the very segmentation strategies that render L1 comprehension so efficient can hinder the aural comprehension of a L2, and, consequently, learners are thought to be constrained by L1 processing routines in the perception and segmentation of the L2 (Weber & Culter 2006, Cutler et al. 1986, 1989).

However, highly advanced learners have shown sensitivity to L2 non-contrastive detail that is in line with the performance of native controls. In this talk, data from a series of perceptual studies testing both English-speaking learners of L2 French and French-speaking learners of L2 English will be presented offering evidence of nativelike behavior on the part of late learners. Implications for the study of the plasticity of the adult perceptual system as well as the upper limits of second language acquisition will be discussed.