Can listeners recognise an emergent accent?
Accent discrimination in the bilingual community of Galicia

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1. Introduction
Minority language communities constitute complex linguistic settings where language choice is not always determined by the environment where speakers are raised, but can also be related to identity. For instance, in the bilingual community of Galicia, there is a group of speakers, neofalantes, whose dominant language is Spanish, but who decide to switch dominance to Galician at a late stage in their development (cf. O’Rourke and Ramallo, 2013, 2015). They are normally unbalanced bilinguals with higher proficiency in Spanish, but they switch to using Galician as their dominant language during adolescence for ideological or cultural reasons, sometimes displacing Spanish altogether.

3. Research questions
1. Are neofalantes’ shifts in production sufficient for listeners in the speech community to identify their accent?
2. Does identification ability depend on listeners’ language background?

4. Methodology
Participants
162 participants were tested (20 excluded).
The remaining 142 participants:
• were between 18-55 years old
• grew up in Galicia
• had not lived abroad for more than 7 years
• were bilingual in Galician and Spanish

Following the same criteria as in Tomé Lourido & Evans (2015), participants were further classified into 3 groups:
- 13 neofalantes (6F, 7M)
- 56 Galician-dominant (34F, 24M)
- 61 Spanish-dominant (34F, 24M)

The remaining 10 participants did not belong to any of these three groups.

Stimuli
• first sentence of “The north wind and the sun” passage in Galician: O vento do norte e mais o sol portablan sobre cal deles era o mais forte
• produced by the 56 speakers (14 neofalantes, 22 GD, 20 SD)

Procedure
Participants completed an accent identification task online where they listened to each sentence and indicated which group the speaker belonged to. They were subsequently asked to comment on whether particular factors had influenced their decision. Finally, they completed a detailed language background questionnaire.

2. Background
Our previous work (Tomé Lourido & Evans, 2015) investigated neofalantes’ production of Galician as compared to two control groups, Galician-dominant and Spanish-dominant speakers. Variables of interest were the Galician front /i/-/e/ and back /o/-/o/ mid-vowel contrasts, the reduction of unstressed word-final vowels, and the /i/-/ɨ/ contrast, which do not exist in Spanish. For mid vowels and fricatives, an acoustic analysis showed that the neofalantes’ production was similar to that of Spanish-dominants, whereas their production of word-final vowels patterned with that of Galician-dominants. Overall, these findings suggest that neofalantes can acquire certain Galician features, but that there are limits to this flexibility. One question that arises is whether these shifts in production are perceptible to listeners. Previous research has shown that native listeners are able to identify different accents (Clopper & Pisoni, 2003) and that listeners’ reactions to language variation can be captured in real-time (Watson & Clark, 2015).

5. Can listeners identify neofalantes?
Results showed that both Galician-dominant and Spanish-dominant speakers were identified above chance level, but neofalantes were identified systematically worse than chance.

6. What are neofalantes identified as?
Neofalantes were not only identified as Spanish-dominant, as might have been predicted from the production study, but also as Galician-dominant speakers.

7. Does identification ability vary depending on listener group?
- Results from logistic mixed models showed no main effect of listener group, suggesting language background did not affect overall identification.
- Neofalantes were better at identifying Galician-dominant speakers.
- Spanish-dominant listeners were slightly better at identifying neofalantes, although their performance was below chance level.
- Neofalantes were identified as Galician-dominant more frequently by Galician-Dominant listeners and neofalantes themselves than by Spanish-dominant listeners.

8. Discussion
Listeners in the Galician community, regardless of language background, can identify Galician-dominant better than Spanish-dominant speakers, but cannot identify the neofalantes’ accent. However, neofalantes show heightened sensitivity to the Galician-dominant variety in comparison to the other two groups. Neofalantes are not only confused with Spanish-dominants, but also with Galician-dominant speakers. This supports the idea of neofalantes having a hybrid variety characterised by the effects of language switch.

References

Stimuli for ideological or cultural reasons (sometimes displacing Spanish altogether).