INSPECT: Innovating Speech Elicitation Techniques

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Publication date:
2015

Citation for published version (APA):
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Corpora of spontaneous monologues and dialogues are of increasing importance in phonetic research. However, the task of describing and understanding speech communication also places certain requirements on the acoustic quality and experimental control of speech signals and moreover involves a number of instrumental approaches. Thus, as Xu (2010:329) puts it, "lab speech is indispensable in our quest to understand the underlying mechanisms of human language [...] although spontaneous speech is rich in various patterns, and so is useful for many purposes, the difficulty in recognizing and controlling the contributing factors makes it less likely than lab speech to lead to true insights about the nature of human speech".

Despite this inevitable fact, we know surprisingly little about the social, environmental, and task-specific factors that shape speech production inside the laboratory, apart from the fact that read speech differs in many respects from spontaneous speech (e.g., Mixdorff & Pfitzinger, 2005; Dellwo et al., 2015). In the recent words of Wagner et al. (2015:1): "we need a much better understanding of the extent to which our methods and our ways of collecting speech data influence our results". INSPECT is a research initiative that was started in 2013 and takes up the long neglected challenge of investigating if and how all the various aspects and elements of recordings inside the laboratory affect speech production in general and prosodic constructions in particular. On this basis, INSPECT pursues three long-term goals: First, to understand the differences between lab speech and everyday conversations outside the laboratory so that we can better evaluate to what extent and in which respects lab-speech findings should or should not be generalized to everyday conversations; second, to gain control over the factors that shape speech production inside the laboratory in order to keep these factors constant and allow more accurate comparisons between the results of different studies; and third, in an effort to bridge the gap between lab speech and everyday conversations, to exploit the factors that shape speech production inside the laboratory in order to trigger or support certain speaking styles. In this context, one crucial question is how emotions and/or expressive speech can be enforced inside the laboratory without using actors or explicit instructions.

So far, the INSPECT initiative dealt with effects of reading lists, elicitation tasks, day time, font type, text type, text highlighting, musical/voice training, and the simulation of noisy everyday environments, see Niebuhr & Michaud (2015) for a summary. Factors to be investigated in future studies include, amongst other things, light color and light intensity inside the laboratory, eye contact with the dialogue partner, the type of dialogue partner, and the communication channel.

The presentation will give an overview of prosodic findings within INSPECT and other related findings in the literature, with special emphasis on the effects of elicitation tasks on pitch-accent (focus) production, fluency, expressive functions, laughter, breathing, and changes of prosodic patterns over time.

References