What foreign-accented speech can tell us about the units of speech perception

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Listeners are extremely good at adapting perception to unusual pronunciation variants such as a foreign accent. Studying the mechanisms of this adaptation allows us not only to assess the process how listeners come to understand foreign-accented speech but it may also provide insights into the units of speech perception. Whatever perceptual units listeners adapt to better understand an accent are likely to play a role in speech perception more generally. In my talk I will present a series of studies addressing these mechanisms of adaptation to foreign-accented speech and discuss what we can learn about the nature of units used for speech perception. I will show that once adapted, listeners use information about deviant pronunciation variants as early during processing as they interpret the unfolding speech signal. In addition, based on studies using lexical vs. visual (lipread) information to trigger adaptation, I will argue that the units of speech perception are prelexical, sub-phonemic, but at the same time show a certain degree of context sensitivity.