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Speech pause length predicts the attribution of willingness to help in native and non-native speakers

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Abstract

Speech pauses between conversational turns are crucial for assessing conversation partners' cognitive states, such as their willingness to grant requests: Overall, speakers making longer pauses are regarded as less willing to comply with requests. We experimentally tested if the interpretation of pause length was mediated by the accent of interactants, in particular native versus non-native accents. In line with our prediction, in a rating task, participants judged non-native speakers to be equally willing to grant requests, irrespective of their inter-turn pause durations, whereas native speakers making long pauses were regarded as less willing than those making short pauses. This indicates that listeners interpret long pauses by non-native speakers as the result of prolonged cognitive processing needed for planning an answer in a non-native language rather than of a lack of willingness. This may have important implications for intercultural communication settings where topics are negotiated between native and non-native speakers.