

This presentation evaluates the range of methods used to assess cross-linguistic similarity in attempts to predict difficulty or ease in nonnative speech learning. These methods can be broadly classified as being indirect (comparing sound inventories or features across languages) or direct (comparing the acoustic characteristics or the perception of speech sounds across languages). Indirect methods, though still widely used, are inherently flawed for a number of reasons, most importantly because they are based on the assumption that linguistic descriptions reflect the psycholinguistic reality encountered by speech learners. Acoustic methods can also be problematic for a number of reasons which concern the validity of the sources of cross-linguistic comparisons and, perhaps most importantly, the problem that the relation between acoustic measurements and listeners' perception is often indirect. The only class of cross-linguistic similarity measures that appears useful for L2 (and L3) speech research consists of different kinds of assessments which examine how learners perceive the sounds of the language(s) they are acquiring. The conclusion from a review of these perceptual measures is that, even though all of these methods provide insights on potential learning problems, there is currently no method which fully accurately predicts nonnative speech learning.