Crosslinguistic evidence for intrinsic vowel duration

Eleanor Chodroff, University of Zurich

Large-scale crosslinguistic phonetic data are increasingly enabling systematic tests of proposed phonetic universals. In this talk, I present recent advances in the development of large-scale phonetic databases and demonstrate how they can be used to evaluate phonetic universals and consider potential explanations for these phenomena.

As a case study, I examine intrinsic vowel duration: the tendency for high vowels to be shorter than low vowels. Although noted in the literature, this pattern has received only limited empirical support. Using new crosslinguistic data, we provide robust evidence for this effect and clarify its distribution across languages. In addition, I argue that intrinsic vowel duration as a speaker-controlled outcome shaped by competing pressures on phonetic realization: that of target uniformity, which can account for seemingly "automatic", biomechanical consequences of articulation and phonological contrast enhancement.