Setting the Tone: Acquisition and processing of lexical tone in East-Limburgian dialects of Dutch

This thesis provides a cross-linguistic investigation into the developmental perception and lexical representation of word-level pitch differences. The focus is on Limburgian dialects of Dutch, a group of closely related restricted tone languages spoken in the south of the Netherlands. Compared to typically studied tone languages like Mandarin Chinese, word-level pitch in Limburgian has a relatively low functional load. Moreover, the Limburgian lexical pitch patterns show an intriguing amount of phonetic variability as a function of the prosodic context.

Results from a series of behavioural experiments provide insights into lexical tone discrimination in Limburgian infants and adults, as well as into the role of pitch during word learning and recognition in child and adult speakers of Limburgian. By studying the processing of tone in Limburgian, we are able to address the potential influence of functional load and phonetic variability on the developing perception and representation of lexical tone in a restricted tone system.

Throughout the thesis, speakers of Limburgian are compared to control groups of speakers of non-tonal Standard Dutch, in order to investigate whether the different functions of pitch in the two languages cause differences in pitch processing.