How talker identity affects spoken-language comprehension: evidence from foreign accents

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Spoken language is highly variable. For example, gender of the speaker, size and shape of the vocal tract, speaking rate and speaking style, but also emotional state of the speaker, phonological context, and dialect or accents influence the characteristics of the speech signal. For language comprehension this poses the well-known lack of invariance problem. How is it possible to reliably process and interpret spoken language given the invariance of the signal? In this talk, I will focus on how the language system handles variation in one particular type of speech, and that is foreign-accented speech. Based on empirical findings, I will argue that processing foreign-accented speech possibly differs from processing native speech. Following from this, I will outline a general model of spoken-language comprehension in which the identity of the talker is taken into consideration and modulates the processing mechanisms.