

UNIVERSITY of **HOUSTON**

College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences
Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders

October 22, 2022

RE: Assessment of Naeimeh Afshar's written doctoral dissertation

To Whom It May Concern,

Naeimeh Afshar has submitted a revised draft of her dissertation on the production and perceptual representation of American English vowels by monolingual Persian-speaking and early Azerbaijani-Persian-speaking adolescents. The work constitutes a meaningful contribution to scientific inquiry in the field of second language phonetics and phonology.

The manuscript represents an improvement over its predecessor, and in my estimation, it is sufficient to meet the standards for a written doctoral dissertation. Therefore, **I recommend that the draft be considered to meet the requirement for a written dissertation in partial fulfillment for a doctoral degree.**

Sincerely,



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Specific Comments

1. Overall, the manuscript is an improvement over its predecessor. Some of the added sections (such as 5.2.4 on pp. 62-64 and 6.2.3 on p. 84) help the reader understand the study better and improve the manuscript. Added clarifications are also welcome and improve the readability of the document.
2. I appreciate the candidate giving more thought to and including more discussion of the idea of tenseness, and adding information on peripheral versus non-peripheral vowels.
3. Although the manuscript has improved, there is still insufficient theoretical motivation for the study. Having a theoretical framework would provide a considerably stronger justification for the study than currently exists in the manuscript. It would also improve placing the study in the larger context and would provide more clarity on the contribution of the findings to the field.
4. Adding the section on “statistical considerations” (4.4 on pp. 49-50) is useful, but it reads more like a response to a criticism than part of the narrative.
5. The phrases “phonetically tense” and “phonetically lax” (pages 14, 67, 69, and 140) are still of concern, because **tenseness is a phonemic feature** with some phonetic characteristics, but it is most definitely NOT a single phonetic property, and it is not a “phonetic” feature. Moreover, some of the tense/lax contrast is functional in nature from a linguistic point of view and not just phonetic in nature, so claiming the contrast as purely phonetic is a mistake. In English, tense versus lax is an underlying **phonemic** contrast. I still think this distinction is not handled with the care it deserves, but the presentation has improved.
6. Pages 15 – 16: Stress-timed versus syllable-timed languages

While the division of stress-timed versus syllable-timed languages is valid from a linguistic (i.e., functional) perspective, Abercrombie’s (1967) and Pike’s (1945) proposal in its original form that relies on isochronous units as the basis of such differentiation has not stood up to experimentation. One of the candidate’s own references (Dauer, 1983) refers to this problem. Moreover, the section oversimplifies the issues a bit by stating that “[s]yllable-timed languages have simple syllable structures such as CV, V, VC and VCV. They have no length contrast, no diphthongs, and no vowel reduction in unstressed syllables. These properties conspire to keep syllables of (roughly) equal length.” This is a gross overgeneralization. While such tendencies may exist, plenty of classic syllable-timed languages have diphthongs and allow for more complex syllable structures than CV, V, VC, and VCV. I agree that the continuum from more syllable-timed to more stress-timed languages exists, but a more nuanced approach would have been welcome.

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I am not sure what to make of this statement: “In English, only the two shortest vowels, /ɪ/ and schwa (/ə/), are permitted in unstressed syllables, while full vowels and diphthongs can only occur in stressed syllables.” Maybe I am misreading the sentence, but this is simply not accurate. Consider the word “window” where /ɪ/ is stressed and the diphthong is relatively unstressed. In fact, the second syllable may undergo vowel reduction, but regardless of that, the final syllable is relatively unstressed. The entire section would benefit from further revision and clarification.

7. There are additional imprecisions as well as style and mechanical issues. For example, on page 6, the term “undesirable accent” has really negative connotations, which may not have been the author’s intent. On page 8 and elsewhere, the use of the first person plural pronoun is really unusual considering that the work is supposed to be the candidate’s own. On page 15, “Abercromby” should be “Abercrombie”. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list, and there are other examples that would warrant attention, so I recommend a careful final editing of the document.