

ənʌf is not mʌf for Delhiites: Variation in vowels in Delhi English

The present paper investigates the variability in the phonetic realizations of vowels of English as spoken in urban Delhi. It is argued in this exploratory study that Delhi English (DeIE) with the distinct pattern of variation in use of vowels is emerging as a different and new urban dialect of English in its own right. Additionally, despite exhibiting variability in the realization of vowels, speakers show remarkable agreement in evaluation of the variant forms and show a pattern which is indicative of presence of new internal norms operating in DeIE. One of the larger aims of the study is to explore whether Delhi forms a single speech community despite the presence of multiple linguistic groups and languages which are learnt as first languages.

Two sets of variables were examined as shown below:

- Reduced Vowel: Schwa (ə) which shows three types of variants (1) a reduced vowel schwa, (2) fully pronounced vowel and (3) null variant.
- Front Vowels: (ɪ), (e), (ɛ), (æ) including (ɑ) also show multiple variants which can roughly be grouped as high variants, low variants and the reduced schwa.

As far as schwa is concerned, alternation between schwa and full vowels is attested across Englishes. However the reduction processes operating in DeIE are different. DeIE does not follow the reduction rule, guided by stress alternation patterns, of standard ENL (English as a native language) varieties. Reduced variants also undergo variable deletion which is indicative of progressive weakening.

As far as the front vowels are concerned, overall results suggest that in general there is a preference for lower variants. High vowels show maximum variation as compared to low vowels. The variability exhibited by vowels in DeIE is conditioned by a number of phonological constraints such as word position, syllabic structure, length of a word, syllable in which the variable occurs, following sounds and preceding sounds. There are also lexical constraints. Some lexical words belonging to certain sets show significant split and reassignment. For instance *enthusiastic* (KIT set), *engineer* (DRESS set), *analysis* (TRAP set), *sample* (BATH set) show realignment with DRESS, KIT, BATH and TRAP lexical sets respectively. On the other, stylistic factors and social constraints such as mother tongue effect, gender, school background did not turn out to be significant. Results of perception tasks show that despite the presence of variability in the pronunciation, speakers have single norms for evaluation of variants. Neutralization of mother tongue effects and uniform norms for evaluation are indicative of emergence of a new variety of English. The findings indicate that Delhi is emerging as a single speech community in spite of the presence of various linguistics groups.

This study is based on data provided by ten middle class speakers belonging to 22-25 age groups. They all were pursuing post graduate degree from the University of Delhi. They were chosen as by the time one earns first college degree the normative influence of high school on English (if any) gets neutralized given the exposure to presence of diverse population. They had Hindi, Bangla, Punjabi and Sindhi as their mother tongues. Data came from two sources: (1) various reading tasks and (2) spontaneous speech. Data collected through various methods yielded a total of 7071 tokens. In addition, perception tasks were also developed to explore the social meaning of the variants. For analysis data was coded for 7 linguistic factors, 1 stylistic factor and 3 social factors.

enʌf is not mʌf for Delhiites: Variation in vowels in Delhi English

Language details

Language investigated: Delhi English

Language location: Delhi, the capital city of India

Total area of India: 3, 287, 263 sq. km.

Total area of Delhi: 1, 484 sq. km.

Map of India showing all the states and the national capital territory Delhi:

