

Constraints and communities in Early New Zealand English

Speech communities are generally considered to be defined in part by shared linguistic characteristics. Such shared characteristics are often argued to include constraints on sociolinguistic variables (Guy 1980, Cameron 1993, Otheguy et al. 2007). This paper seeks to quantify the extent to which constraint effects are shared by speech community members of similar sociolinguistic backgrounds, and the extent to which communities of differing backgrounds show contrasting constraint effects.

The variable investigated is final coronal stop deletion (CSD) in English, reflected in alternations like *east side* ~ *eas' side*. This variable is well-known to be conditioned by various linguistic constraints (cf. Guy 1980). The present paper examines these constraints in the speech of 17 individuals from the early New Zealand English corpus (Gordon et al. 2004) of speakers who were among the first generations born in NZ to British immigrant families. The sample is drawn from three communities: those whose parents and settlements were predominantly Scottish, those of English backgrounds, and those with mixed backgrounds. These communities differ in terms of overall rates of deletion (e.g., the English delete the most, at 37%, the Scots the least, at 28%) as well as by some of the constraint effects (e.g., the preceding context is significant in a multivariate analysis only for the Scots), but several constraint effects are consistent across all groups, possibly reflecting linguistic universals (e.g., a following consonant – in phrases like *last night* – promotes deletion much more than following vowel – in phrases like *last act* – for all speakers and all communities; similarly, higher lexical frequency favors deletion for all groups). Individual speakers in each community converge fairly well on the constraint values found for their community: e.g., all but one of the English group, and all but one of the Mixed group, treat following glide – e.g., *last week* – as a highly favorable context for deletion, while all but one of the Scots do not show this pattern; these results confirm the hypothesis that speech community members share quantitative constraints on variation. However, there appears to be a diachronic trend across all groups towards a decrease in deletion among younger speakers, which suggests convergence of these different communities of immigrants towards an emergent NZ variety of English, which is consistent with the findings for other variables that have been studied in this corpus (cf. Trudgill 1999).

References

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language investigated: English

country: New Zealand

map:

