

Merged? The sociolinguistic reality of the purported (v/w) merger in Indian English

This paper explores the sociophonetic reality and variability of the Indian English (IE) v/w merger, a feature that has become iconic of IE to global audiences (Chand 2009). The globally circulated folk-understanding of the merger involves pronouncing /v/ as [w], e.g. *available* (Gorman 2007). The (v/w) phenomenon has been broadly labeled as a pan-IE feature (e.g., Trudgill & Hannah 2002). However, despite widespread folk-attention to the purported merger, only one methodical study—albeit via impressionistic auditory analysis, not acoustic analysis—has focused on variable realizations of (w) as [w] versus [v]: they found the merged phoneme [v] to be stably present in the speech of non-native English speaking upper middle class New Delhiites across two age groups (teenagers and 40+ year olds), speech styles and language backgrounds (Sahgal & Agnihotri 1988). However, this merger has not been explored through nuanced quantitative variationist or acoustic analysis, and /v/, as the potential other side of the merger, has never been examined through any quantitative or acoustic means.

This paper draws on sociolinguistic interviews with 36 Hindi-English early bilinguals in New Delhi (age 18-87). Tokens were coded for eight internal factor groups and six social factor groups, and realization quality was determined through both acoustic and aural analysis. Multivariate analysis demonstrates that (w) is undergoing apparent-time change, moving towards a categorical [w] realization, while (v) is diachronically stable, yet variable in its realization quality across speakers. Both phonemes are realized as their ‘target’ phone ([w] and [v], respectively) a majority of the time, yet several variants were uncovered: (w) is realized as a labial approximant 89% of the time, with five realizations uncovered, while (v) is realized as [v] 82% of the time, with seven realizations uncovered.

Multivariate analysis in Varbrul uncovers that (w) realization as [w] significantly ($p=.020$, $N=2094$) correlates with one social factor group (age/occupation) and three linguistic factor groups (location+preceding phonetic environment, syllable weight and following phonetic environment), and (v) realization as [v] significantly ($p=.032$, $N=1535$) correlates with one social factor group (Delhi residence length), one stylistic factor group (formality) and three linguistic factor groups (following phonetic environment, syllable count and word frequency).

Linguistic factors as making up four of the five factor groups significant for predicting (v) behavior, in conjunction with the large proportion of tokens which are realized as [v] (82%), suggests that (v) variation is not as common *in this community* as past literature and international attention on IE more broadly as a single phenomenon suggest. When (v) variation does occur, it is mediated by internal linguistic constraints, and is not in itself significant for delineating different social identities, alignments, age or groupings. For (w), several factor groups were not significant for predicting (w) realization, suggesting that the evolution of (w) towards a categorical [w] realization is not confined to narrower social groupings or areas of India—this process may be a pan-Indian change, and further research in other communities would help in assessing this.

The paper next examines how this data meshes with historical hypotheses for the (v/w) merger (the Substratum Contact Hypothesis and the England Hypothesis [c.f. Trudgill et al. 2004]), discussing how historical and sociolinguistic backdrop can contribute to understanding contemporary IE phonology in a population of fluent Delhi-based IE/Hindi speakers.

While no widespread (v/w) merger is uncovered in this variety of IE—contrary to folk hypotheses—this data demonstrates several motivations for the variation for each separate variable, which help project how each variable is changing diachronically in this population of IE speakers. Further, it contributes to our understanding of early IE speakers as maintaining a separate English variety, with variation motivated by internal yet orderly constraints. Finally, it contributes to our understanding of how earlier socio-historical processes may impact current day sociolinguistic scenarios.

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Language Investigated: Indian English in New Delhi, India, as spoken by urban Hindi/IE early bilingual elites

Data Source: Informal sociolinguistic interviews conducted in 2007

Location: South New Delhi, India

