

Doing /t,d/ Deletion Singapore Style
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In unifying linguistic theories across speech communities, the use of a stable linguistic variable comes with a wealth of literature, highlighting the relevant linguistic and social issues so that comparisons across communities may be better informed. One such variable is /t,d/ deletion which has been extensively researched over the past 30 years across varieties of English.

This study examines the social and linguistic constraints of /t,d/ deletion in Singapore based on preliminary results from 16 speakers out of a larger corpus of 24 speakers. These 16 informants, 7 male and 9 female, aged between 21 and 44 and stratified by education level, form part of the growing middle class of English dominant Chinese. Ethnographic and sociolinguistic interviews ranging from 2 to 6 hours were conducted with each speaker across different speech situations and a total of over 7000 tokens were collected and analyzed using GoldVarb with the relevant factors being grammatical constraints, preceding and following phonological segments and styles. The sociolinguistic interviews were broken down into formal and casual styles via cues such as topic, intonation and particle use, while a reading passage and word list approximated the most formal style.

The results indicate that these speakers adhere to the grammatical constraint effect with monomorphemes (such as *mist*, *packed*) deleted more often than irregular verbs (such as *lost*, *felt*), while regular verbs (such as *missed* and *packed*) are deleted least often. The preceding and following segment contexts show a novel twist in that they appear to show OCP-like (Obligatory Contour Principle) effects in both directions. Although the influence of the preceding segment with a /t,d/ has been attributed to the OCP (Guy & Boberg 1997), the interaction between the following context and /t,d/ has been largely explained using the Sonority Sequencing Principle (Jespersen 1904) and/or resyllabification. Our data points toward a combination of both the OCP and resyllabification as an answer in our analysis.

Some research on /t,d/ deletion have also noted a gender-based variation with women tending to be more conservative and deleting to a lesser degree than their male counterparts (Wolfram 1969, Neu 1980). These studies are consistent with research on other sociolinguistic variables which have found that women are more likely to use standard forms that are associated with greater social capital.

However, this dichotomous construction of gender is not reflected in our data as male speakers can be found at both extremes across 3 different speech styles. On the other hand, women tend to show a wider range of variation indicating a more nuanced stylistic range. The present study refines previous analyses of gender correlations attached to a specific linguistic feature, demonstrating the complexities in constructing gendered social identities and the stylistic elasticity of such identities.

References

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