

Variation in *the* definite article: Exploring the sociophonetics of its form and function

Rebecca Roeder and Sali Tagliamonte, *University of Toronto*

In some dialects of northeast England, the definite article exhibits robust variability, labeled *Definite Article Reduction* [DAR], in which vowel elision occurs and a range of variants results, as illustrated in (1):

- (1) [ðə] main thing is to be happy. And if I get a bit miserable with myself, I go [tʔ]
top [ʔ] garden and talk to mi tomatoes. (male, age 81)

Previous phonetic research on dialects in this area has revealed the complex and variable nature of consonant reduction and glottal realizations, in both DAR (Jones 2002 and 2005) and non-DAR contexts (Foulkes and Docherty 1999 and 2006). Despite the subtlety apparent in the low-level phonetic differences between forms, however, recent sociolinguistic work on DAR in York, England, which treated a range of phonological, morpho-syntactic and discourse-pragmatic factors (Tagliamonte 1998) suggested that several of the variant forms may actually encode different functions in the grammar (see also Rupp, to appear). In particular, a zero variant was found to be constrained by a different set of factors than the glottalized variants. It was further argued that the zero variant had a distinct historical antecedent (Ross, Stead and Holderness 1877; Ellis 1889; W.E. Jones 1952)

In this paper we augment the existing account of DAR in York English by adding a socio-phonetic component to the analysis. DAR variants were analyzed individually using phonetic measures of duration and voice onset, thus bringing acoustic evidence to bear on the discussion of alternative realizations. The phonetic results provide acoustic support for inclusion of the zero variant among the range of DAR phenomena in the speech community.

More broadly, this research addresses the challenges of finding uniform phonetic correlates of listener percepts in dialect research. While impressionistic analysis enables insight into perceptual saliency, instrumental analysis reveals the phonetic correlates of these listener judgments. Since phonology is based on the concept of discrete contrasts that must be recognizable by the listener/acquirer, but phonetic realizations are gradient and variable, the study of socio-phonetics provides a meeting place for discovering the relationship between perception and production. In this study, the complementary effects of impressionistic and instrumental analysis substantively enrich the explanation of a complex linguistic variable. In addition, this paper offers further insight into the combination of phonological and grammatical factors that condition the DAR variants, highlighting the importance of approaching the investigation of a single language feature from a variety of linguistic perspectives.

References

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