A sociolinguistic analysis of the current state of /l/ allophony in St. John's English  
Rosanna Pierson  
Memorial University of Newfoundland

This project examines the use and evaluation of light post-vocalic /l/ in St. John's, Newfoundland. The city, which was primarily settled by the Irish, traditionally did not conform to the Standard Canadian pattern of /l/ allophony. That is, it was reported to have light /l/ in all positions, in contrast to Canadian English, which has dark /l/ in codas and light /l/ in onsets (Boberg 2010). There have been, however, several major social and economic changes in Newfoundland since the mid-twentieth century, which have impacted local dialects (Clarke 2010). In terms of post-vocalic /l/, data collected by Clarke in St. John's in the 1980s shows that the light variant is declining in use and being replaced by the dark variant, and that little overt awareness is accompanying this change (2012). This study aims to address the decline and awareness of this feature, through production and perception experiments, respectively. This work follows up that of Clarke in that it looks at younger age groups that have been born since Clarke's study was conducted in the early 1980s.

In terms of production, only a small sample has been collected and analyzed thus far. 10 speakers were recorded in three different levels of formality: while reading a word list, a reading passage, as well during an informal interview (Tagliamonte 2006). As a whole, the data showed a slight difference between /l/s in the coda and onset position, but because of the small sample and the fact that only one style has been analyzed, more data and analysis are needed to determine the rate of use of the feature.

The perception experiment consists of a discrimination task and an affective scale evaluation (Drager 2011), which was performed by 14 participants. During the discrimination task, participants listened to pairs of words; each pair was made up of one word with a dark and one with a light post-vocalic /l/, as well as light-light and dark-dark pairs. These words were recorded and edited using Praat (Boersma & Weenink 2014). A single speaker was recorded saying several repetitions of a word with a dark /l/, i.e. [mɪlk], and a nonsense word with a light /l/, i.e. [mɪlɪk]. The latter variant was then edited in Praat so that the final vowel was deleted, leaving [mɪlk] with a light post-vocalic /l/. This editing process was similar to that used by Eimas et al. (1971) to produce differing voice onset times. While listening to the stimuli, the participants were asked to determine whether the words in each pair were pronounced the same or differently.

For the affective scale evaluation, the participants listened to the same words as before, but this time organized into two blocks: one block with light post-vocalic /l/s and the other with dark, which they heard one after the other. They were given 7 point scales on which to rate each of the blocks according to certain qualities reflecting either status or social attractiveness (Clarke 1982). The listeners had to determine whether the speaker of each of the two blocks seemed confident, intelligent, hard-working, and whether he had a high-paying job, which were all considered reflections of status; and whether the speaker was likeable, kind, friendly, and honest, which reflected social attractiveness.

In the discrimination task, every participant was able to correctly perceive, at a rate higher than chance, when the two words contained different /l/s (one light and one dark). In fact, the lowest correct response rate was 73 percent. Additionally, when asked about the difference between the two types of pronunciations, 11 out of the 14 speakers said that the light speaker sounded more like a Newfoundlander than the dark speaker. These results suggest that people are not only able to hear the difference between dark and light /l/, but they also identify the light variant as a feature of Newfoundland English. In terms of the affective scale evaluation, the listeners rated the dark block as having a higher status (more confident, intelligent, hard-working, and having a higher-paying job) than the light block. None of the social attractiveness qualities yielded any significant differences between the two blocks, based on paired T-test results at p<0.05.

These perception results show that the participants consider the dark post-vocalic /l/ to be more prestigious, at least when it comes to social status, than the light post-vocalic /l/. This, taken with the

References

success in the discrimination task, could indicate that the light variant of this feature is more salient than was considered by Clarke (2012).

REFERENCES


