

Gender and salience in speech production and perception

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Sociolinguistic research has established that some phonetic variables undergoing change attract the attention of people in a speech community, while others do not. This finding is linked by Trudgill (1986) to the notion of salience. Salient, low-prestige variants (equivalent to Labov's 1972 'markers') are typically used more often by men, while non-salient linguistic changes with little social meaning (Labov's 'indicators') tend to be led by women (Romaine 2008). This study re-examines these principles by investigating how gender and salience interact in two variables that are undergoing sound change and whose markedly different properties of gender and salience-related variation appear to be disappearing.

/t/-glottalling and GOOSE-fronting are useful case studies to address this issue as they are both in the process of change in the South of England, yet they traditionally display divergent patterns of salience and gender-related variation. /t/-glottalling is known as a male-led, low-prestige, highly salient variable that can be used to invoke various social meanings in speech production (Kirkham & Moore 2016), while GOOSE-fronting is said to be a female-led change with minimal social associations (Williams & Kerswill 1999). Recent research indicates, however, that glottal /t/ is gaining prestige and that both variables are losing their gender stratification (Holmes-Elliott 2015). This study hence investigates the effect of gender on the production of these features together with how they are perceived in terms of their salience and prestige.

Data were collected from 46 participants aged 16-19 in Hampshire, UK. The production data consist of recordings of the participants completing reading tasks and group discussions. /t/ tokens were analysed auditorily and GOOSE tokens were analysed in terms of the F1~F2 Euclidean distance from each speaker's FLEECE vowel. Perception data was elicited by participants using questionnaires and group conversations to evaluate recordings of fellow local teenagers, whose use of /t/ and GOOSE subtly varied. Preliminary findings suggest that male speakers tend to use slightly more glottal /t/, whereas GOOSE exhibits no notable gender differences. While social indices for GOOSE were rare, the prestige of glottal /t/ varied between participants. This indicates that the gender and prestige differences between the two variables are still present but may be diminishing. The results are contextualised to show the effect of gender and salience on a change in progress and that a variable's social meanings may be linked to a speaker's own speech production.

References

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