

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

- Ellis, Alexander J. 1869-1889. *On Early English Pronunciation : With Especial Reference to Shakespeare and Chaucer*. New York: Greenwood.
- Foulkes, Paul and Gerard Docherty. 1999. "Newcastle Upon Tyne and Derby: Instrumental Phonetics and Variationist Studies. In *Urban Voices: Accent Studies in the British Isles*. Paul Foulkes and Gerard Docherty (eds). London: Arnold, 47-71.
- _____. 2006. "The Social Life of Phonetics and Phonology." *Journal of Phonetics* 34,4: 409-438.
- Jones, Mark J. 2002. "The Origin of Definite Article Reduction in Northern English Dialects: Evidence from Dialect Allomorphy." *English Language and Linguistics* 6,2: 325-345.
- _____. 2005. *The Phonetics and Phonology of Definite Article Reduction in Northern English Dialects*. PhD Dissertation. University of Cambridge.
- Jones, W.E. 1952. "The Definite Article in Living Yorkshire Dialect." *Leeds Studies in English*: 81-91.
- Ross, Frederick, Richard Stead and Thomas Holderness. 1877. *A Glossary of Words Used in Holderness in the East-Riding of Yorkshire*. London: Published for the English Dialect Society by Trubner & Co.
- Rupp, Laura. To appear. "The (socio-)linguistic cycle of Definite Article Reduction". *Folia Linguistica Historica*.
- Tagliamonte, Sali A. 1998. "Where have all the t' definite articles gone? Yorkshire English at the crossroads of history". Paper presented at NWAV 27, Athens, GA.
- _____. 1996-1998. *Roots of Identity: Variation and Grammaticization in Contemporary British English*. Economic and Social Sciences Research Council (ESRC) of Great Britain. Reference #R000221842.

Search form. Search. Section menu. The definite article the is the most frequent word in English. We use the definite article in front of a noun when we believe the listener/reader knows exactly what we are referring to: because there is only one: The Pope is visiting Russia. The moon is very bright tonight. Who is the president of France? This is why we use the definite article with a superlative adjective: He is the tallest boy in the class. It is the oldest building in the town. That is, a single function can be expressed through multiple forms, but there tend to be linguistic and extralinguistic patterns governing the variation (Bybee et al., Reference Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca1994; Chambers, Reference Chambers2008; Labov, Reference Labov1994; Walker, Reference Walker2010). In the former case, also known as vertical variation because it reveals learner development (Adamson & Regan, Reference Adamson and Regan1991), learners vary between a nativelike form and a nonnativelike variant, such as alternating between past forms went and goed. The present study explores the sociophonetic perception of L1-American English listeners in their L2, Spanish.

@article{Tagliamonte2009VariationIT, title={Variation in the English definite article: Socio-historical linguistics in t'speech community1}, author={S. Tagliamonte and R. Roeder}, journal={Journal of Sociolinguistics}, year={2009}, volume={13}, pages={435-471} }. S. Tagliamonte, R. Roeder. Published 2009. History. Journal of Sociolinguistics. This paper provides a sociolinguistic analysis of variation in the English definite article, a.k.a. definite article reduction (DAR), in the city of York, northeast Yorkshire, England. Embedding the analysis in historical, dialectological and contemporary studies of this phenomenon, the findings uncover a rich system of variability between the standard forms as well as reduced and zero variants.