Postvocalic (r) in Maltese English: Lingering exonormative standards in a postcolonial variety?

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Factors which have led to dialect emergence in postcolonial Englishes (PCEs) continue to be of interest in sociolinguistics; however, scholars have largely focused on non-Western, non-European contexts with hegemonic colonial histories. This paper documents dialect emergence in a distinctive postcolonial contact setting – Malta – filling a gap in PCE research and assessing the descriptive power of recent PCE models (Kachru, 1985; Schneider, 2007). Through variationist analysis of postvocalic (r) in Maltese English (“MaltE”), this paper considers whether Malta’s distinctive postcolonial history, citizens’ Maltese and European cultural identification, and local perceptions of the global importance of speaking ‘good English’ has halted endonormative stabilization in MaltE structure.

Drawing from 32 sociolinguistic interviews with L1 English-Maltese bilinguals from four age groups, over 3000 tokens were coded for factors shown previously to condition postvocalic (r) (Feagin, 1990; Irwin & Nagy, 2007; Labov, 1972; Myhill, 1988) and underwent multivariate analysis. A hybrid acoustic-auditory coding method was used. Age, following phonetic environment, morphological status, and syllable stress emerged as significantly conditioning postvocalic (r) realization. Following consonants favor r-lessness; (r) in derivational and inflectional affixes slightly favor [ɹ] and contracted words (e.g. you’re) strongly favor [ɹ]. While ‘sex’ was not found to be significant, age was, with (r)-lessness greatest in the youngest group. Despite earlier claims that MaltE is a rhotic dialect, this data evidence that MaltE, as it is spoken by a growing number of L1 speakers, is increasingly less rhotic.

In view of the quantitative results and analyses of local ideologies of English, this paper considers if the movement towards r-lessness be evidence that a larger pattern of retention of exonormative standards, and thus, a potential halting of endonormative stabilization in MaltE. This paper then argues that the current global position of English needs to take a more central place in PCE theories.

References