Stop Signs: The Intersection of Interdental Fricatives and Identity in Newfoundland

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Investigating local linguistic norms to discover larger patterns of language behaviour has been standard practice in sociolinguistic study. Looking closely at socially salient variables reveals patterns that problematize accepted trajectories of variation as traditional and newly emerging sociolinguistic identities interact. This paper integrates findings from multiple complementary projects to describe the forces influencing the stopping of interdental fricatives (dis ting for this thing), a highly salient marker of Newfoundland English, in and around St. John’s, the province’s major city. The iconic status of stopping to both locals and non-locals (Clarke 1991) makes it an ideal venue to empirically investigate language change, agency, and identity.

In urbanizing communities (24 informants, 2665 tokens), multivariate analysis reveals variation patterns typical of dialect erosion: older men maintain traditional norms while younger women move toward the standard, especially in linguistically salient contexts. In the same communities, a timing-based approach (7 informants, 467 tokens) finds that young women seem to be agentively inserting stopped forms, suggesting that they have adopted a system with fricatives as the default choice. When we contrast “townie” (urban) and “bayman” (rural) communities and affiliations (15 informants, 1148 tokens), we find a more complex pattern: style shifting is greatest among urban males and rural females. We posit that these seemingly divergent patterns result from efforts by speakers to position themselves within the local social landscape during a period of rapid social change. Rural and formerly rural women continue a 60-year-old standardization process, while urban women adopt and reinvent traditional markers; for men, the conflation and conflict of local identities associated with class, rurality, and masculinity lead to sociolinguistic polarization.