Developing new patterns in the speech community: a case study about fricative lenition in Brazilian Portuguese

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Since Labov’s seminal study *Language in the Inner City: Studies in Black English Vernacular* (1972), there is a bulk of research showing the role of children and teenagers in the transmission of sociolinguistic patterns in established speech communities (Eckert, 1988, Kerswill, 1996, Britain, 1997a, 1997b) and in new dialect formation as well (Kerswill and Williams, 2000). Patterns of sociolinguistic variation are established during childhood and adolescence, and it has been claimed that adolescents lead all other age groups in sound change (Eckert, 1988, Kerswill, 1996). Studies addressing the acquisition of socially-structured variation have shown that sociolinguistic variants are transmitted both by parents (Roberts, 2002, Foulkes, Docherty and Watt, 2005) and peer groups (Eckert, 2000), and that the role of each has an impact in the process of language acquisition and in dialect dynamics. But what happens when the expected social institutions, family and school, fail in a vast period of childhood and adolescence, a situation that can be the reality of lots of individuals in developing and poor countries? What kinds of social identity and social values regarding linguistic forms are developed under such severe deprivation of a structured family and a structured life?

We investigated the production of 8 male teenagers, from 12 to 18 years old, living in a reformatory in the city of Rio de Janeiro, when they were interviewed, focusing on the variable use of fricatives in onset and coda. They showed high percentage of velar/glottal fricative in coda and its occurrence in onset, unnoticed among middle class speakers. The variable use in coda showed an interaction between phonetic constraints, grammatical status and word frequency. We argue that the data are better handled in a usage-based model that accommodates sociophonetic variants as possible representations of the same word in the lexicon (Pierrehumbert, 2003).

References


