

The Effect of Dialect Features on the Perception of “Correctness” in English-Word Voting Patterns on Forvo.com

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Forvo.com is a user-driven online dictionary of word and short phrase pronunciations, where individuals may record pronunciations and rate those of others on their “correctness.” Launched in January 2008, it archives over 188,000 pronunciations in 217 languages as of May 2009. This paper examines the ratings of pronunciations from speakers in the United States, England, and Australia to determine the factors most responsible for high- and low-scoring English pronunciations. Niedzielski (1999) found that perceived speaker locale affected naïve listener perception of phonetic variables. This paper exams two variables which, in combination with listeners’ perception of speaker locale, affect the “correctness” rating of English pronunciations on Forvo: the perception of hypercorrection as evidenced by the realization of intervocalic /t/, and the link between perceived speaker locale and topic of the word being pronounced. Released intervocalic /t/ is a well-documented feature of British and Australian English (Wardhaugh 1999, Wolfram and Fasold 1974, Bayard et. al. 2001). Within the sample of 187 pronunciations used for this data, only released-/t/ pronunciations by British and Australian speakers received average scores in the high range (greater than 4.0 on a 5-point scale), suggesting that Forvo voters consider released /t/ a hypercorrect feature when from a US English speaker. Voters also show a strong preference for dialect features to match the topic of the word or phrase being pronounced. Listeners prefer hearing US locations or personalities pronounced by a US speaker and vice versa, as evidenced by the lack of any high-scoring pronunciations of words by speakers whose dialect locale did not match the topic of the pronounced word. Both of these patterns suggest that naïve listeners attend extensively to dialect when making judgments about the overall correctness of features in even single-word pronunciations.

References

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