Speech Rate, Pause, and Linguistic Variation: Evidence from North America

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Variation in speech rate and pause duration have been studied periodically within a range of linguistic disciplines, although mainly in psycholinguistics and speech sciences. Recently, these features have been examined from the perspective of social variation, primarily in terms of regional differences (e.g., Kendall 2006; Salmons, Jacewicz, and Fox 2008; Armstrong, Clopper, and Smiljanic 2008). Following perhaps from earlier traditions, most of these treatments have come more from the perspective of speech sciences than from sociolinguistics however, and, despite some interesting findings, many of these recent reports have not explored the full range of interest of speech rate and pause studies for variationist sociolinguistics.

Speech rate and pause are ubiquitous features of every utterance made by every speaker. These features are sensitive to and indications of social differentiation at the same time as they are sensitive to and indications of speech production processes. The often subtle and multiplex patterns found in speech rate and pause provide the perfect testing grounds for a range of sociolinguistic questions about the relationship between speech style and linguistic variation (Labov 1972; Bell 1984; Eckert and Rickford 2001), performance and identity-management (e.g., Schilling-Estes 1998), and broader addressee- and speaker-oriented production processes (cf. Arnold 2008).

In this paper, I report the results of a large-scale analysis of variation in speech rate and silent pause duration in American English, demonstrating variation among male and female speakers of four ethnicities from five regions in North America from a dataset of over 23,000 measurements each of speech rate and pause duration. In addition to presenting the findings of the study, I draw connections between the data examined here and more traditional linguistic variables to explain how the speech rate and pause data inform our larger understanding of language variation.

References