An investigation of the stylistic role of final stop release in Washington, DC, metalinguistic discourse

Anastasia Nylund (Georgetown University)

This study examines the stylistic function of word-final stop release in metalinguistic discourse, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Following studies of ( -t/d) deletion in the Washington, DC, area, I discuss how stop release is conditioned, and the role of stop release in style-shifting within sociolinguistic interviews. As Coupland and Jaworski (2004) assert, metalanguage is an ideologically loaded discourse type. Speakers may style-shift to the released variant of a final stop to cast themselves as “knowledgeable”, or “expert”. Previous investigations of the social meanings of released final (-t) (Bucholtz 2001, Podesva et al 2008, Eckert 2008) associate it with “articulate” speech and “educated” personae. Data for this study comprise eight sociolinguistic interviews with residents of the DC area, in which speakers are asked to reflect on language use and dialect in DC and surrounding areas. The ethnoracial categories, White, African-American, Asian-American, and Latino/a, are each represented by one male and one female speaker.

For the quantitative analysis, the data were coded for preceding and following phonological environment, ethnicity, and sex. A Goldvarb analysis largely supports previous studies on stop deletion and release: preceding consonants favor release, and ethnicity remains the most significant social factor. In particular, African-American speakers highly disfavor release, a pattern congruent with the association of deletion with AAVE (Fasold 1972, Labov et al 1968, Wolfram 1969). Qualitative analysis indicates that stop release fulfills a stylistic role. Speakers cluster released variants in parts of the interview where they act as “articulate evaluators” of language use, “correctness” and comparisons between language in DC and other regions. These findings contribute to inquiry on the social meanings of stop release by further linking it to “articulate” identities and suggesting that metalinguistic discourse is a useful site for isolating and examining such identities.

References
Eckert, Penelope. 2008. Variation and the indexical field. Journal of Sociolinguistics, 12/4: 453-76