

CROSS-LINGUISTIC VARIATION IN PHONOLOGY: PHONOLOGICAL VARIATION OF SYLLABLE-INITIAL /N-/ IN ENGLISH, CANTONESE AND MANDARIN

Full presentation

Cecilia Yuet Hung Chan

City University of Hong Kong

This study investigated the phonological variation of syllable-initial /n-/ in three language varieties, L1 Cantonese (Chinese dialect), L2 English and Mandarin (standard spoken Chinese) spoken by Hong Kong students. This cross-linguistic study filled the gap of previous sociolinguistic research which focused on monolingual variation (Bright 1997, Chambers 2003, Gordon 1997, Labov 1972, 1994, 2001, Trudgill 1972, 1983). Within Labov's (1972) and Tarone's (1983, 1988) theoretical and methodological research framework, this study adopted a quantitative approach to correlate the social variables (age, educational level, gender and speech styles) with the phonological variable /n-/ observed in Hong Kong students' Cantonese, English and Mandarin. It also examined whether the sociolinguistic approach or the linguistic approach is more appropriate in accounting for the phonological variation in focus. This study included female and male children, teenagers and young adults from primary school, secondary school and university in Hong Kong respectively. Six oral tasks in each of the three language varieties were designed for collecting data. These tasks were: free conversation, informal interview, passage reading, word reading, minimal pair reading and minimal repetition. The variations of the phonological environment of /n-/ which may lead to phonological variations were included in the reading tasks. Follow-up interviews were conducted with informants to find out their awareness of, and attitudes toward, the merging of /n-/ with /l-/ in Cantonese, English and Mandarin. The results show that the occurrences of the merging of /n-/ with /l-/ vary in terms of language varieties. The linguistic variable of /n-/, in a few cases, is correlated with the sociolinguistic variables of age, educational level and gender, and it is closely correlated with speech style. To a minimal extent, the substitution of /n-/ by /l-/ is connected with the variations of phonological environment. The findings of this study indicate that both micro and macro factors play roles in cross-linguistic variation in phonology. The micro factors include the writing system of the language in focus, ease of articulation, phonological environment and stylistic variation. The macro factors are related to social and socio-psychological variables. Among all the factors, language variety and stylistic variation have stronger effects on the phonological variation in focus. The phonological variation of /n-/ in the three language varieties is constrained by the same sociolinguistic variables, to a similar extent. This study on cross-linguistic variation in phonology, on the one hand, does not fully support the linguistic model for language variation; on the other hand, it provides us with evidence to prove that systematic language variation exists in a speech community.

References

- Bright, W. (1997) Social factors in language change. In Coulmas, F. (ed.) *The Handbook of sociolinguistics*, 81-90. Mass.: Blackwell Publishers.
- Chambers, J. (2003) *Sociolinguistic theory: Linguistic variation and its social significance*. 2nd edition. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Gordon, E. (1997) Sex, speech and stereotypes: Why women's speech is closer to the standard. *Language in Society* 15: 23-52.
- Labov, W. (1972) *Sociolinguistic pattern*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- _____ (1994) *Principles of linguistic change: Internal factors*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers.
- _____ (2001) *Principles of linguistic change: Social factors*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers.
- Tarone, E. (1983) On the variability of interlanguage systems. *Applied Linguistics* 4/2:143-163.
- _____ (1988) *Variation in interlanguage*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Trudgill, P. (1972) Sex, covert prestige and linguistic change in the urban British English of Norwich. *Language in Society* 1: 179-195.
- _____ (1983) *On dialect: Social and geographic factors*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Keywords

Phonological variation, cross-linguistic variation, phonological change

Postal Address: Department of Chinese, Translation and Linguistics, City University of Hong Kong,
Tat Chee Avenue, Kowloon, Hong Kong

E-mail: ctcyh@cityu.edu.hk

Fax No: 852 2788 8706 Phone No.: 852 2788 8792