

Sociophonetic perception of Dh-Stopping in South Yorkshire English

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Abstract

This study investigates covert linguistic attitudes towards the phenomenon known as dh-stopping ([ð]→[d]) in Sheffield English. This variant is especially salient in the pronunciation of Old English second person pronouns (*thee*, *thou*) but also appears in function words. We explore how different sociodemographic groups perceive this variation in terms of solidarity, accent, rurality, and perceived age. 111 participants from Sheffield and surrounding areas completed a matched-guise experiment where they rated speakers on several scales based on their pronunciation of the dental fricative [ð] and dental stop [d] variants. Results show that gender, age, and geographic area strongly influenced the perceptions of these variants, and the complex social meanings attached to phonetic variants in Sheffield English.

Keywords: dh-stopping; linguistic attitudes; Sheffield English; solidarity; rurality

Introduction and background

The dh-stopping phenomenon, a local variant of the interdental fricative [ð] realized as a dental stop [d], has sociolinguistic relevance in South Yorkshire English. This phenomenon is closely associated with the way Sheffielders pronounce Old English second person address terms *thee* and *thou*, although this realisation also occurs in function words other than pronouns. The nickname *Dee-Dab's* is still used to describe people from Sheffield by those from nearby places in a pejorative way. On the basis that this feature is noted as being more typical for older males in the area, there does not seem to be a huge amount of evidence that it is in current usage. This study explores attitudes towards this variant focusing on solidarity, accent, acceptance, and rural perceptions among speakers of different gender, age, and towns within South Yorkshire.

Objectives

The main objective of this project was to investigate the covert social attitudes associated with the production of the British consonant /ð/ as either [ð] or [d], focusing on how these attitudes vary according to linguistic context and listener background. Specifically, the study aimed to determine (1) the covert attitudes linked to dh-stopping in second-person relic pronouns (pronominal level), (2) the attitudes associated with dh-stopping in function words other than pronouns

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(phonetic level), and (3) whether local speakers from Sheffield perceive and evaluate dh-stopping differently from non-locals in South Yorkshire.

Methodology

Participants from Sheffield and nearby cities completed a matched-guise perception experiment evaluating audio samples with both the standard and dh-stopping variants. This was achieved by ‘splicing’ audio segments containing specific phonetic variables. The study compared listeners’ reactions to instances of *dh*-stopping when it appeared in Old English pronouns (e.g., *thee*, *thou*) versus when it occurred in other function words not derived from Old English pronouns. Responses on solidarity (friendliness and pleasantness), accent acceptance (attractiveness and refinement), and rurality were collected and analysed.

Results and discussion

Boxplots and bar charts illustrate key differences. Regarding the first research question, women tend to attribute lower solidarity to the dh-stopping [d] variant. Also, older participants perceive the dh-stopping variant as more rural and are more tolerant of its usage.

Figure 1 below shows the distribution of solidarity scores attributed to the dh-stopping variant, broken down by gender. Female participants tend to attribute lower solidarity to the use of [d]; whereas Figure 2 represents rurality ratings by age group. Older participants show greater tolerance towards rural associations of the dh-stopping variant.

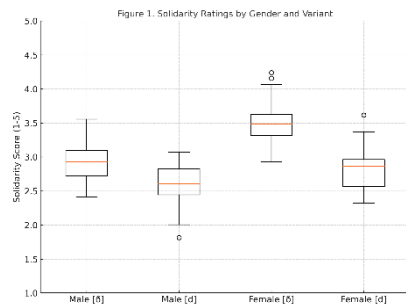


Figure 1. Solidarity scores by gender.

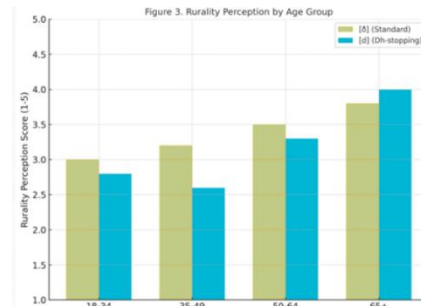


Figure 2. Rurality ratings by age any difference.

As concerns our second research question, whether it is possible to determine any difference between the perceptions of locals (Sheffield) compared to non-locals from other areas of South Yorkshire, Sheffield participants rate the [d]

variant more favourably than those from other areas nearby, as portrayed in Figure 3.

The findings suggest that dh-stopping functions as a sociolinguistic marker influenced by gender, region, and age. Female speakers attribute less solidarity to the variant what suggest that this variant may be socially stigmatized, especially in more formal or public contexts. However, the more positive ratings from older participants and Sheffield residents suggest that dh-stopping retains covert prestige within certain social groups, which implies that regional pride in Sheffield promotes more positive acceptance. Age influences rural perception, reflecting social attitudes towards language variation and identity. Certainly, the results highlight the complex social meanings attached to phonetic variants in Sheffield English.

ANOVA tests confirm these differences as statistically significant. As shown in Figure 4, at the pronominal level, the t -test gives a value of $t = -1.785986$ and $p = 0.11192$. This result is not significant at $p < 0.05$, meaning that differences in evaluations of relic pronouns could be due to chance, while at the phonetic level, the t -test yields $t = -3.739694$ and $p = 0.00571$. This result is significant at $p < 0.05$, indicating that the observed differences for function words other than pronouns are statistically meaningful.

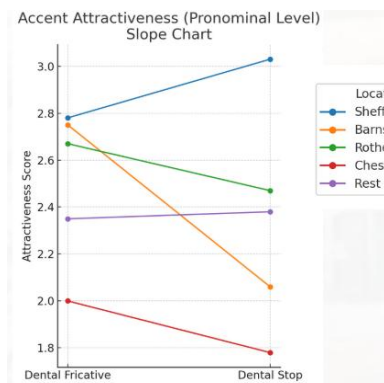


Figure 3. Accent attractiveness by area.

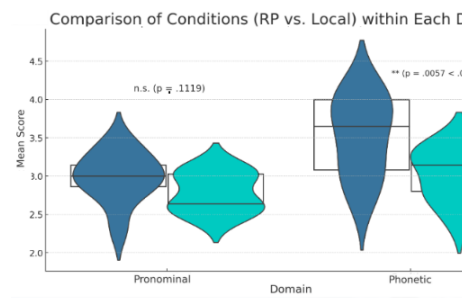


Figure 4. Phonetic vs. pronominal domains.

Conclusion

Overall, the elicited reactions among the inhabitants of Sheffield and South Yorkshire mainly suggest that the Dee-Dah phenomenon has followed a natural evolution, not so much towards a marker or indicator within Sheffield but

towards a Labovian stereotype, circulating by word of mouth among the population of Sheffield and surrounding areas. All in all, it is manifest that the sociolinguistic significance of the dh-stopping variant goes beyond mere phonetic variation, reflecting broader social identities and group memberships in South Yorkshire. These insights contribute to our understanding of sociophonetic variation and its relationship with identity in urban dialects.

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