

Linguistic and social constraints on consonantal variation in Manchester English

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This paper explores the linguistic and social constraints on variation in three consonantal variables in Manchester, UK: t-glottalling, th-fronting, and h-dropping. It is based on a sample of 90 speakers, stratified by age, gender, socio-economic status, and ethnicity.

The data is subjected to a series of generalised mixed effects logistic regressions, with Speaker and Word as random effects (Baayen et al. 2008). The results indicate that h-dropping in Manchester is a case of stable sociolinguistic variation, with working-class males showing the highest rates. While the social conditioning of h-dropping follows the pattern found previously in other dialect areas in the UK, this study provides new evidence on the role of linguistic constraints in this variable process - there is a strong effect of grammatical category; preceding and following segments are also shown to play a role.

T-glottalling in word-final position is a change nearing completion; although it appears to have been initiated by working class males, the youngest generation of Mancunians in all social groups show very high and comparable rates. Intervocalic t-glottalling is less advanced and shows more social differentiation; working class males are still it, but other social groups are catching up in the youngest generation. Both t-glottalling and th-fronting appear to be male-led changes in Manchester.

Internal factors, such as position in the word, following segment, and voicing, are shown to play a role in t-glottalling and th-fronting in Manchester. The paper also explores the role of ethnicity and the question of occupation vs. education as the best indicator of social status in accounting for the variation found in the three consonantal processes.