

The Role of Gender in English Pronunciation and Sound Change

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We rarely think about how we pronounce specific sounds, and even less realise that we may pronounce them differently dependent on our gender, which may then lead to altered pronunciation by future generations. Examination of gender and language is part of the field of sociolinguistics, the study of language in relation to social factors. The Language Variation and Change (LVC) paradigm studies patterns of language variation, how this variation is socially meaningful and whether this can explain language change. Within this, sociophonetics examines language at a phonetic level, analysing how speech sounds vary and/or change over time in relation to social and phonetic factors. Research in this area has been carried out for many decades, beginning with work by Labov in the 1960s. This talk will begin by briefly describing a selection of key studies illustrating the role of gender in English pronunciation variation and change, before moving on to cover more recent work where gender has been found to be important, or less influential.

Gender appears to be relevant in the pronunciation of /s/, which is highly variable across individuals. Recent studies have examined the role of social factors in /s/-retraction, whereby the /s/ in /str/ (and /stj/ and possibly other) clusters sounds more like /S/-like in some dialects of English due to retraction of the tongue. Two studies will be described, the first considering /s/-retraction and phonetic context, dialect and gender across 9 dialects of North American and Scottish English. The second study analyses /s/-retraction and class, gender, style, location and phonetic context across 40 speakers from the South East of England.

The role of gender in the pronunciation of /l/ is less straightforward. The pronunciation of /l/ can be considered as either 'clear' or 'dark', or on a continuum between the two. Dark /l/ is produced with the tip of the tongue placed behind the teeth on the alveolar ridge and the tongue body raised towards the velum at the back of the mouth, whilst clear /l/ has the tongue body in a neutral position. Many dialects of English have clear word-initial /l/ and dark word-final /l/, however /l/ is dark in all positions in most dialects of Scottish English. Sound changes to word-final /l/ are well documented across dialects, often where it is darkening towards a high back vowel in vernacular speech, but the role for gender is unclear. Less is known about social factors and the pronunciation of word-initial /l/. One study will be described which examines the darkness of word-initial /l/ and phonetic context, gender and speaker decade of birth across 24 elderly speakers of Glaswegian English.

The results from these studies provide evidence of phonetic variation and change with varying roles for gender alongside other social and contextual factors. These factors often operate in interaction with each other, highlighting the complexity of influences, both social and phonetic, on language variation and change.