

//-evated Speech: The Effects of Attentiveness, Social Class, and Syllabic Position on //Darkness in a Suburban Northern Dialect

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The // phoneme has two major allophones: clear [l] and dark [ɫ] (Rogers, 2014). Darker //s are more velarised, with comparatively lower F2–F1 values. In Standard English, [l] is observed in syllable onsets and [ɫ] in coda position, yet this differentiation is not found in all English dialects (Carter et al., 2003).

Existing research on // darkness focuses on cross-regional variations and large cities, with less emphasis on intra-regional patterns. This paper explores // vocalisation in a smaller Northern English speech community, Macclesfield, investigating how attentiveness to speech, social class, and syllabic position affect // darkness.

Ten male native English speakers, aged 40-70, from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, were recorded across three tasks of increasing speech attentiveness: casual speech, reading passage and word list, following the Labovian style–attention framework (Labov 1966), which predicts convergence towards standard variants in more attentive speech. Participant class was indexed by subjective and objective measures. Acoustic analysis and linear regression were used to assess // darkness in relation to style, social class, and phonemic position.

The results show that // darkness increased with attentiveness to speech, with significantly darker realisations in the word list condition ($p = 0.0108$), challenging unidirectional assumptions of the Labovian style–attention model. Within the subjective class index, middle-class speakers produced slightly darker // variants than working-class speakers (mean F2–F1: 706 vs 780 Hz), though neither subjective nor objective class showed a significant relationship with // realisation. Across all conditions, speakers' // vocalisations were consistently darker than Standard Southern British English benchmarks (Turton, 2014).

It appears that the Labovian model of attentiveness to speech is not universal, but conditional on local prestige structures. Instead of converging towards Standard English as a prestige target, participants shifted towards more urban northern varieties, indicating horizontal levelling rather than the expected vertical convergence. Labov's model, largely developed in communities with linguistic insecurity, does not fully account for contexts where local variants carry covert prestige. In such communities, prestige systems seem to shape stylistic trajectories differently, creating conflicts with the predictions of the style–attention framework.

The lack of class-stratified patterning in // darkness suggests that l-vocalisation operates as an identity marker feature, indexed with covert prestige rather than class-based differentiation. As such, // functions here less as a class-stratified variable, but more as a regionally salient feature, responsive to stylistic changes rooted in local identity. This indicates that discussions of // salience should account for regional variance and the role of local prestige in shaping the perceptual and social weighting of features.

While we cannot reject the Labovian model, this data challenges assumptions of unidirectional stylistic convergence and highlights the need for models that account for covert prestige and regional stability in phonetic variation.

References

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