

Palatalization

Most quantitative work in English over the last several years has focused on the variability of morphophonemic and vocalic variation. Although early work on /t~/d/ and /r/ deletion was in the vanguard of variation studies, further work on consonantal variation has been lacking.

This paper reports on a study of palatalization of the alveolars /t/, /d/, /s/, and /z/ before the palatal glide /y/. Respondents read a phrase list of such items as “miss you” and “hit you,” a reading passage with similar items embedded, and were recorded in free conversation. The following identity and environmental conditions were coded:

Item identity — /t/ /d/ /s/ /z/

Morpheme status — monomorpheme (e.g., miss)/preterit (e.g., mashed)/3rd singular (e.g., wants)

Preceding vowel — high/nonhigh

Style — phrase list/reading passage/conversation

Sex — male/female

Age — young/middle/old

Status — working/middle

Logistic regression results show significant influences for all the above. Palatalization occurred about 33% for all possible occurrences. /t/ is dispreferred, /d/ and /z/ had a middle position, and /s/ was considerably preferred. Monomorphemes preferred palatalization as did preceding high vowels. Stylistic variation showed preference for palatalization in the least formal style (i.e., conversational), and male, older, and working class respondents palatalized most frequently.

The linguistic influences seem straightforward: /t/ is least and /z/ most preferred due to voicing and continuant feature matches and mismatches with the following /y/; high vowels should promote the process, and morpheme status has been shown previously (in t/d studies for example) to retard deletion or modification processes.

If only these linguistic influences were robust, it would not be hard to understand why this variation has flown under the prescriptivist/folk linguistic radar, although respellings such as “wantcha” are common and reveal some public knowledge of the phenomenon. (Wiktionary gives the helpful etymology that this item is from “want+cha.”) Folk humor involves such obviously related elements as “jeechet” (did you eat yet?), but scorn of and/or pundit comment on the process is generally lacking.

But the age, sex, status, and style dimensions are all robust, and they point to a nonstandard or less admired status for palatalization (conversations, male, older, male, and working class). If it is a “normal” nonstandard feature, one would expect the age-grading associated with nonstandard usage (preference by younger and older respondents), but instead there is a clearly age-related pattern that suggests but I suspect does not really involve change.

It will be interesting to see if palatalization before /r/ (“trip”) and “long-range” palatalization before /r/ (“street”) are related phenomena. The former appears to be completely unnoticed and the latter only more recently attended to. In addition,

experimental studies of responses to palatalized and nonpalatalized forms may help shed more light on the status of this process in modern US English.