

Talking or Talkin' Among TED Talk Speakers

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This paper investigates (ING) variation in TED Talks, a set of practiced speeches given at prestigious conferences around the world. The variation of (ING) in American English has been well documented, with publications exploring the effects of various linguistic and social factors on the production of (ING) in polysyllabic English words. Typically, the (ING) variation studies have utilized sociolinguistic interviews and conversations to naturally elicit the most unguarded, spontaneous speech (e.g., Kiesling, 1998; Wagner, 2012). However, there are a wide variety of speech events and styles people use, and this paper investigates (ING) variation in formal speech registers in one major form of scientific communication.

Despite TED Talk speakers coming from various backgrounds, style and audience are controlled, and there is a propensity towards the formal register, which is found extensively in academic and professional presentations and tends to conform to the standard dialect. This register allows variationists to observe the effect of topic in formal settings, as it is less obscured by the variational factors examined in previous (ING) studies; namely, gender, ethnicity, and age.

The corpus consists of 19 TED Talks given by native English speakers, who represent the three primary topics under investigation: business, mental health, and neuroscience. These three topics were chosen to represent contrasting points on the style continuum: from a relatively casual, emotional, and non-academic topic (i.e., mental health) to a more formal, neutral, and academic topic (i.e., neuroscience). To ensure greater distribution of speakers, we manually coded a maximum of 25 polysyllabic (ING) variants per speaker as either [G] (velar) or [N] (alveolar), and then coded a number of linguistic and social factors (e.g., grammatical category, gender, ethnicity, topic and speaker background).

We documented 465 tokens of the (ING) variants in the corpus, with 362 velar [G] tokens (77.8%) and 103 alveolar [N] (22.2%) variant. Across topics and backgrounds, speakers employed the velar [G] variant substantially more than its alveolar counterpart. A binary logistic regression was performed and it revealed that topic and speaker background were significant predictors of (ING) variation. For instance, academic speakers in the neuroscience topic used the most velar variants and speakers in the business topic, the lowest. However, the patterning was reversed in speakers from non-academic backgrounds. The mental health topic and non-academic speakers were significant predictors of the use of the [N] variant.

Our results demonstrate that variation in the pronunciation of (ING) due to linguistic and social factors can still be observed in controlled and conscious speech, such as that found in TED Talks. These findings shed new light on variationist research into the effect of topic on speech variation, which may influence the types of variants used by speakers even in practiced speech.

Selected References

- Kiesling, S. (1998) Men's identities and sociolinguistic variation: The case of fraternity men. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* , 2, 6699.
- Wagner, S. (2012). Real-time evidence for age grad(ing) in late adolescence. *Language Variation and Change* , 24 , 179202.