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Pronunciation's Variations of English Articles

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This study is based on the quantitative data collected from 48 subjects through individual interviews during my stay in El Paso, Texas, in March, 1983. Pronunciation rules of English articles are often introduced in books of English grammar, such as English Pronunciation by Robert Lado and Charles Fries (1956).

However, careful investigation provides us with enough evidence to suggest that the rules described in these grammatical books are not always obligatory, especially in a real social context. The present study was carried out to fulfill the following two objectives:

- 1) to investigate the pronunciation variation of definite and indefinite articles before words beginning with a consonant, vowel, and semivowel, and to examine their relative frequency, and
- 2) to investigate their correlation with some social factors, namely sex (males vs. females), ethnic background (Anglo-Saxon Americans vs. Mexican Americans), and education level (college graduate vs. non-college graduate).

The interview consists of two parts. One is called a Formal Interview, where each subject was asked to describe the pictures shown to them (sixteen pictures in total). The pictures intentionally include certain words beginning with a vowel, a glide, and a consonant in order to elicit their natural pronunciation of articles preceding these words. Another part of the interview is called Reading, where each subject was asked to read a prepared reading text with 22 definite articles. The degree of formality increases in the Reading; thus, the style shifting of their pronunciation of articles was expected as Labov observed through his study (William Labov, Sociolinguistic Patterns, 1972).

Pronunciation variants of articles are classified into four categories in both indefinite and definite articles: indefinite articles [ə], [ən], [ey], and

[eyə], and definite articles [ðə], [ði], [ðe], and [ðiə]. In indefinite articles, [ən], [ey], [eyə] before words beginning with a consonant and [ə], [ey] and [eyə] before words beginning with a vowel are regarded as stigmatized forms. In the same way, [ði], [ðe], [ðiə] before words beginning with a consonant and [ðə], [ðe], and [ðiə] before words beginning with a vowel are considered as stigmatized forms of definite articles.

From a linguistic investigation, the following points are clarified:

- 1) Stigmatized forms of definite articles occur more often than those of definite articles.
- 2) Before words beginning with a semivowel [y], the variant [ə] of indefinite articles is used. In other words, the semivowel [y] is regarded the same as a consonant unconsciously in case of indefinite articles. However, it is hard to say whether it is regarded as a vowel or a consonant in case of definite articles because half of the subjects used the variant [ðə] and the other half used the variant [ði].
- 3) Variants [ə] and [ðə] show the different relative occurrence according to the kind of following vowels. The variant [ə] often occurs preceding a low-central vowel and a mid-back vowel. Variant [ðə] often occurs before a mid-central vowel and back vowels.

The main results of a sociolinguistic investigation are:

- 4) It is hard to state that the stigmatized forms are highly correlated with sex, but males seem to be more sensitive to the pronunciation of articles judging from the style shifting.
- 5) Male non-college subjects use the variant [ði] before a consonant more frequently, and their hypercorrection can be observed in the Reading, i.e., they use the stigmatized form [ði] before words beginning with a consonant more frequently in the formal style.
- 6) Female non-college subjects use the variant [ðə] before vowels frequently, and they show a remarkable style shifting.
- 7) Anglo-Saxon Americans use the more stigmatized form [ðə] before vowels than Mexican-Americans, while this tendency is reversed in the more formal style of the Reading.
- 8) Mexican-Americans use various kinds of stigmatized forms of the variable (the), especially in the Formal Interview.
- 9) Those who have had college education use stigmatized forms fewer times than those who have no college education. Furthermore, the latter shows hypercorrection of the variant [ði] before a consonant in the Reading. This hypercorrection is highest in Mexican-American non-college subjects.
- 10) The Mexican-American college subjects show the highest sensitivity to the use of English articles. This is probably due to the educational situation they have been placed in since their early childhood.