/t/ variation in Connemara English

Kate Tallon

Phonetics and Speech Laboratory, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

Abstract

This paper offers a preliminary investigation into the variation of /t/ in L2 English in the Connemara Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking region) Ireland. As part of a broader pilot study it investigates the anecdotal claims that, in this dialect, /t/ is realised as a plosive ([t]) in intervocalic and post-stressed word-final contexts. This pattern diverges from the typical Irish English fricated variant [t̠] (known as 'slit-t') and the tapped variant [ɾ] (intervocalically); the latter is popular among younger Irish English speakers. Findings show that in the investigated contexts, /t/ is not always realised as [t], which is at variance with existing accounts. In addition, /t/ variation appears to be dependent on the strength of subjects' social ties to the community.

Keywords: Irish English, /t/-lenition, sociophonetics, language contact

Introduction

A salient phonological feature of Irish English (IrE), setting it apart from other major English varieties, is the apico-alveolar fricative [t̠] or '*slit-t*', which occurs in post-stressed intervocalic position (e.g. *water* [wɑːt̠ɚ]) and in word-final position following a vowel or /r/ (e.g. *cat* [kat̠], *cart* [kɑːɹt̠]). This feature is prevalent throughout southern IrE in all regions and registers. Among younger IrE speakers, a tapped variant has been found to commonly occur in intervocalic position (e.g. *water* [wɑːɾɚ]) (Hickey 2007; Lonergan 2013, Wells 1982).

A variety of IrE which reportedly diverges from this pattern is the English spoken by L1 Irish speakers. This variety is said to display a plosive [t] rather than the mainstream IrE fricative [t̠] in the aforementioned contexts (Hickey 1984). The production of /t/ has not yet been investigated in the English of Irish speakers and the reports of a plosive [t] realisation remain anecdotal. This study addresses this gap by quantitatively investigating /t/ variation in the Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) region of Connemara (west of Ireland).

Based on previous findings from IrE linguistic studies, it was expected that younger speakers would produce lower levels of the traditional (and stigmatised) plosive variant and higher levels of the mainstream fricated or tapped variants (Hickey 2007, Lonergan 2013).

Methodology

Five L2 English speakers were recruited as part of a broader doctoral pilot

study. All subjects were native L1 Irish speakers from the Connemara Gaeltacht and spoke both Irish and English in their daily lives. Additional details for each subject are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Details of subjects used in study.

Participant	Gender	Age	Childhood home language	Language of education
P1	M	21	Irish	Irish
P2	F	52	Irish and English	Irish and English
P3	M	16	Irish	Irish
P4	M	25	Irish	Irish
P5	M	30	Irish	Irish

A set of 30 sentences and a reading passage were designed to elicit a wide range of phonemes in order to gain a broad picture of the phonological system of this dialect. The sentences were displayed individually on a computer screen for subjects to read. The reading passage was given to subjects in hardcopy format. Subjects were recorded in their own homes in settings with as little background noise as possible. Recordings were made with an Audio Technica AT2020 USB+ cardioid condenser microphone connected to an Apple Macbook Pro. 77 instances of /t/ were analysed in sentence-final (N = 15) and in post-stressed intervocalic (N = 62) contexts. The results of an initial auditory analysis were confirmed by acoustic analysis using Praat. Tokens of /t/ were classified as either plosives [t], taps [ɾ], or fricatives[t̞].

Results

In intervocalic contexts (Figure 1) three out of five subjects (P3, P4, P5) demonstrated high usage (>86%) of the plosive variant and did not produce any fricative variants. The other two subjects (P1, P2) demonstrated almost exclusive use of the fricative variant (>82%). The tapped variant [ɾ] was evident in the speech of three subjects (13-18% of tokens).
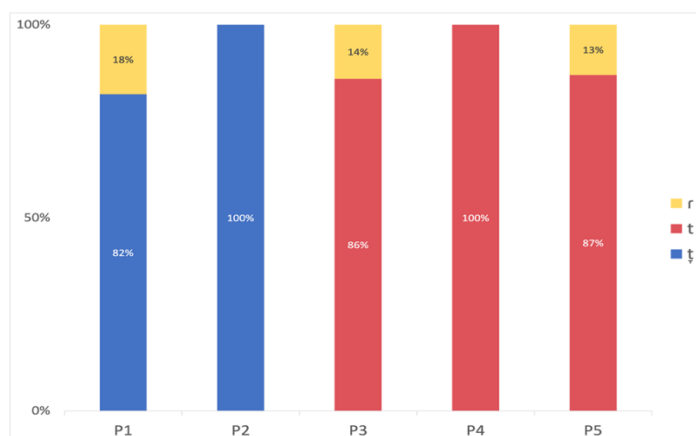
Figure 1. The realisation of /t/ in intervocalic position by participant (P).

In word-final contexts (see Figure 2), three subjects (P3, P4, P5) each demonstrated 100% usage of the plosive variant. Subjects P1 and P2 each demonstrated 100% usage of the fricative variant.
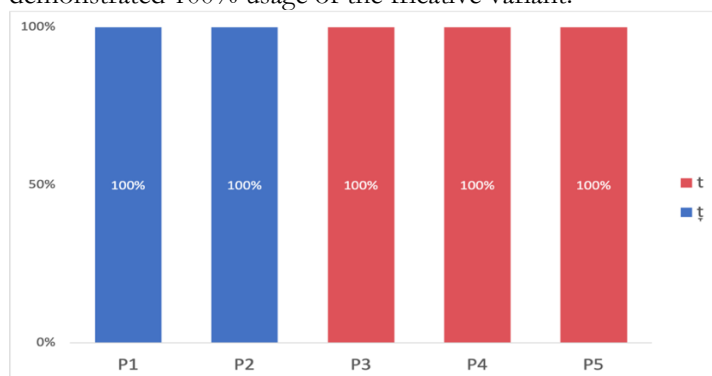
Figure 2. The realisation of /t/ in word-final position by participant (P).

Discussion

The findings of this study are inconsistent with existing accounts of this dialect (Hickey 1984). Given the homogeneity of the subjects' linguistic backgrounds it cannot be claimed here that all Irish speakers of English display a plosive variant in the studied contexts. It therefore cannot be claimed that the production of /t/ correlates with speakers' linguistic abilities in Irish.

It was expected that younger subjects would favour the fricated or tapped variants. Although additional data is needed that includes a larger number of older speakers, this pattern is not observed in this study. Therefore, based on the data acquired here, age is not a reliable predictor for /t/ variation. A more reliable predictor may be the subjects' ties to the local community. For example,

Participant 1, who did not use the traditional plosive variant, had recently moved from rural Connemara to Galway city and had formed strong relationships there. Participant 2, who also did not use the plosive variant, had lived in London for several years and although living and working in Connemara, had strong social ties outside the local area. The other three participants (P3, P4, P5) who showed high rates of the plosive variant, all live, work and socialise in the local area. Although additional data is needed to draw more general inferences about this dialect, the collected data suggests that the more strongly a subject is associated with the local community the higher their rates of the plosive [t] variant.

Conclusion and recommendations

To further investigate the patterns observed in this preliminary pilot analysis, a questionnaire could be given to subjects to elicit further details about their ties to the local community. Scores would be given to each participant (in the manner of Milroy & Milroy's (1997) network strength scores). This would facilitate a quantitative investigation into the relationship between subjects' ties to the local community and their production of /t/.

Acknowledgements

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