

Variation and change in Northern English velar nasals: Production and perception

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Abstract

This thesis is a sociophonetic and phonological study of velar nasals in the North West of England, concerned specifically with the variable presence of [ŋg] clusters in words such as *wrong* and *singer*, which have undergone obligatory coalescence to [ŋ] in almost every other region of the English-speaking world.

The pathway of change followed by post-nasal /g/-deletion in the Late Modern English period has been employed as evidence for the life cycle of phonological processes. However, this theory of sound change and the architecture of grammar that underpins it both make a number of predictions about how this process should behave synchronically that are as yet untested. In this thesis I draw upon complementary sources of data from informal sociolinguistic interviews, elicitation tasks, and a matched-guise perception survey to provide a unified account of northern English (ng) with respect to its observed pathway of change, its variation in contemporary dialects, and the wider indexicality and social meaning of its locally-restricted [ŋg] variant.

The results lend support to the life cycle in three ways. Synchronic variation in northern English (ng) is conditioned almost entirely by morphophonological factors in ways predicted by the life cycle, providing support for a cyclic model of phonology stratified into stem-, word-, and phrase-level strata. Differences between these domains with respect to the rate at which deletion applies also reflect the age of each avatar of this process, providing further empirical insight into the history of this change. Finally, a cross-linguistic comparison of the distribution of [ŋ]~[ŋg] suggests that rule generalisation has given rise to dialectal microtypologies that represent different ordered stages of the same diachronic pathway of deletion.

This thesis also reveals that [g]-presence is increasing over time in pre-pausal position. Crucially, results of the perception task suggest that this is not a case of evaluation-driven change. Contrary to popular conceptualisations of the speech community, there is no evidence of a shared evaluative norm in the case of (ng). This is a case of incipient social meaning: the variable is increasing in salience as a dialectal feature, but in the early stages of this change there is not yet a shared consensus on the content of its evaluation. The results also highlight theoretical issues — specifically the granularity of social meaning — surrounding the incorporation of sociolinguistic evaluation into explanatory models of sound change. Instead, I propose an alternative account of this innovation, namely that it reflects a more general motivation for pre-boundary strengthening: alongside other cues to phrasal boundaries, [ŋg] is used as a clear speech variant in pre-pausal position as a device to signal turn-taking and to mark a juncture in speech.

These results highlight the importance of combining synchronic and diachronic accounts in explanations of language variation and change: in the case of Northern English (ng), historical evidence can be used to inform and explain its pattern of synchronic variation, and conversely its synchronic status can lend insight into its historical trajectory of change.