'Lazy pronunciation' in Toronto Heritage Cantonese: the case of (n-/l-)

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In Hong Kong Cantonese, there is a group of sound changes in progress colloquially known as 懶音 'lazy pronunciation'. A well-known example is the alternation between syllable-initial /n/ and /l/, which is often characterized as a merger of /n/ to /l/ (Zee 1999; To et al. 2015; i.a.), e.g., pronouncing 南 /**n**aːm²¹/ 'south' like 藍 /**l**aːm²¹/ 'blue'. While this merger is sometimes reported to be complete or near-completion (Zee 1999; To et al. 2015), some variation is observed, with age and gender suggested as important factors conditioning variant choice (Ng 2017; Liang 2018), as well as an expectation that heritage speakers may differ from homeland speakers. For example, Cantonese-English bilinguals in Vancouver are found to differentiate /n/ and /l/ in English but merge the two phonemes in Cantonese (Soo et al. 2021). However, little work has teased apart the linguistic and social factors that contribute to this variation.

We investigated the factors that contribute to variation and compare the realization of /n-/ and /l-/ in heritage speakers in Toronto and homeland speakers in Hong Kong. If there is influence from English, which differentiates /n/ and /l/, we expect heritage speakers to have less [l] for /n-/ and [n] for /l-/. However, if heritage speakers amplify the change (due to less pressure to conform to a standard, less exposure to homeland speech, or categorical perception as /l/), we would expect them to have greater (perhaps categorical) usage of [l].

We analyzed spontaneous spoken data from sociolinguistic interviews (14 speakers) in Cantonese from the Heritage Language Documentation corpus (Nagy 2011). The corpus includes homeland speakers in Hong Kong and three generations of heritage speakers in Toronto. Tokens of syllables with /n-/ or /l-/ as the onset were extracted and coded impressionistically (and cross-checked) for the variable (n-/l-) and linguistic factors (vowel backness, vowel height, vowel length, tone, previous segment). We also considered the social factors of generation, ethnic orientation and gender of the speakers. The tokens were classified as underlyingly /n-/ or /l-/ based on 19th-century sources (from 粵音資料集叢 https://jyut.net), and these were accordingly analyzed in separate mixed-effects logistic regression models.

504 tokens were extracted (418 /n-/, 86 /l-/) after excluding characters categorically realized as [l]. For the /n-/ tokens, there is more retention of [n] after a previous (coda) nasal, conditioning by the tone and following vowel, as well as significant differences by generation, gender and ethnic orientation. Although generation is significant, there is no monotonic relationship suggesting an advance of the change across heritage generations. In contrast, for the /l-/ tokens, a nasal coda in the preceding syllable significantly favoured realization as [n], and there was no other conditioning. That is, in both datasets, there is a preference to produce [n] after a nasal. The results also confirm one finding in the literature, that /l-/ is less likely to surface as [n] than the other way around, but do not provide any evidence of a different pattern between heritage and homeland speakers.

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