

THE SOCIAL EVALUATION OF POST-VOCALIC LIGHT /l/ IN ST. JOHN'S ENGLISH

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Introduction

STANDARD CANADIAN ENGLISH IS GENERALLY described as having two allophones of /l/: light /l/, in syllable initial position (e.g. *leaf*), and dark /l/, syllable-finally (e.g. *feel*). This is not, however, the pattern found in certain dialects of Newfoundland and Labrador English (NLE) (Clarke 2012). St. John's, for example, which was settled largely by the Irish, is reported to traditionally have light /l/ in both syllable-initial and syllable-final positions, as does the Irish pattern (Clarke 2010: 48). Since the mid-twentieth century, Newfoundland has experienced several major social and economic changes, which have in turn affected local dialects and have led to the loss of certain features (Clarke 2010). In terms of post-vocalic /l/, data collected by Clarke in St. John's in the 1980s shows the light variant declining in use and being replaced by the dark variant, with little overt awareness accompanying this change (Clarke 2012).

The lack of awareness of the decline of syllable-final (hereafter post-vocalic) light /l/ was not a question that was addressed directly, but was inferred from the fact that, during production tasks, participants' productions of /l/ did not shift according to style (between interview, reading passage, and word list) (Clarke 2012). It also remains unclear what the extent of "little social awareness" is exactly (Clarke 2012: 516). People cannot be entirely unaware of the feature because there are some comedic Newfoundland personalities that put it to use. For example, Jerry Pack, Donnie Dumphy¹, Gazeebow Unit, and members of Codco all use post-vocalic light /l/ in their impersonations of "townies," or residents of St. John's. What does this mean in terms of overt awareness of the feature? That is, if people are able to use the feature as an identifier of a Newfoundland (specifically, townie) identity, does it mean that they are overtly aware of it and that it carries stigma/prestige?

This study addresses the question of perception and evaluation of light post-vocalic /l/ in St. John's through a series of perception experiments. These experiments test whether people are able to hear the difference between post-vocalic light and dark /l/, whether they identify this difference as being a

¹Dumphy's song "Havin a Time" is one demonstration of this, and can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQS1Rwo5vp0>.

characteristic of Newfoundland or St. John's English, and finally, whether they ascribe any kind of stigma or prestige to the difference.

Methodology

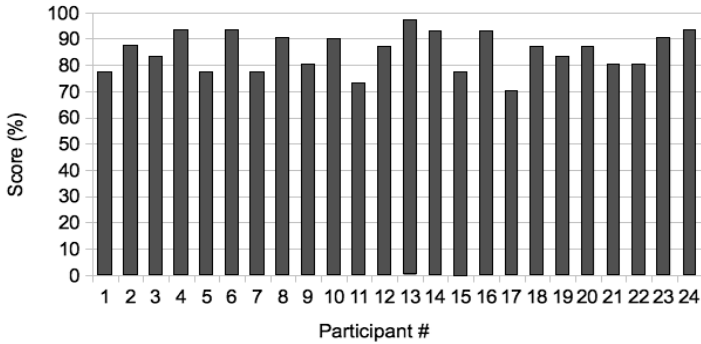
The stimuli for the experiments consist of words that were recorded and edited using Praat (Boersma and Weenink 2014). A single speaker was recorded saying two repetitions of words with dark /l/s such as *milk* ([mɪlk]), and nonsense words with light /l/s such as *milik* ([mɪlik]). The latter variant was then edited in Praat so that the second vowel was deleted, leaving [mɪlk], with a light post-vocalic /l/.

The perception experiments were completed by 24 participants, all of whom grew up and still live in St. John's. They were 12 males and 12 females, ranging in age from 24-50; half were university-educated and half were not. These participants were asked to complete a discrimination task and an affective scale evaluation (Drager 2011; Levon 2006). During the discrimination task, participants listened to pairs of words from the aforementioned stimuli. Pairs consisted of one word with a dark and one with a light post-vocalic /l/, as well as non-identical light-light and dark-dark pairs. While listening to the stimuli, the participants were asked to determine whether the words in each pair were pronounced the same or differently by clicking a box on a computer monitor that said "same" or one that said "different," after hearing each pair.

For the affective scale evaluation, the participants listened to the same words as before, but this time organized into two blocks: one block with light post-vocalic /l/s and the other with dark, which they heard one after the other. They were first asked to listen to both blocks and determine whether one of the blocks sounded more "local" than the other. They then listened a second time, and were given 7-point scales on which to rate each of the blocks according to certain qualities reflecting either status or social attractiveness. As per Clarke (1982), listeners had to determine whether the speaker of each of the two blocks seemed confident, intelligent, hard-working, likeable, kind, friendly, honest, and whether he had a high-paying job.

Results

Figure 1 (next page) reveals that in the discrimination task, every participant was able to correctly perceive, at a rate higher than chance, when the two words contained different /l/s (one light and one dark) and when they contained the same type of /l/ (either two light or two dark). In fact, the lowest correct response rate was 70 percent.

Figure 1 Discrimination task

In terms of the affective scale evaluation, a majority (67%) of participants claimed that the speaker of the block with light post-vocalic /l/ sounded more "local" and more "like a Newfoundlander" than the speaker of the dark block. When it came to ranking the blocks on the scales, the listeners rated the dark-/l/ block as having a higher social status (more confident, intelligent, hard-working, and having a higher-paying job) than the light-/l/ block, as shown below in Figure 2.

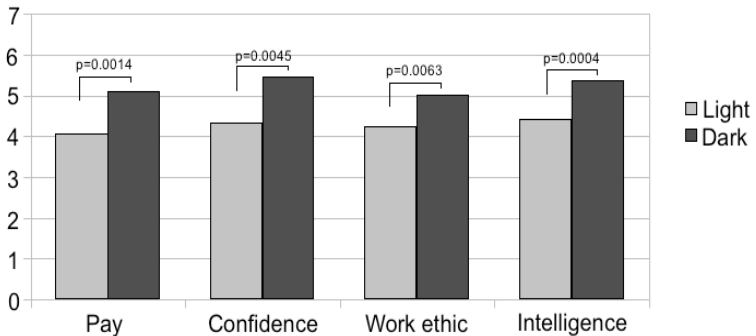
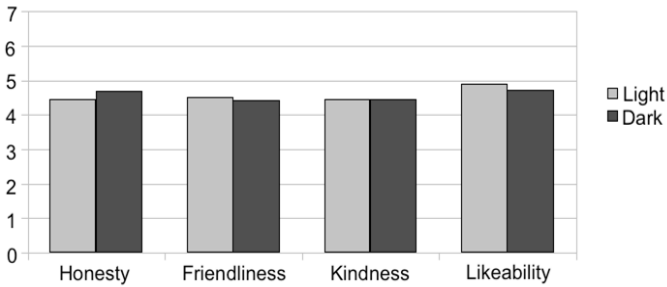
Figure 2 Affective scale ranking, social status

Figure 3 (next page) illustrates that none of the social attractiveness qualities yielded any significant differences between the two blocks, based on paired t-test results at $p < 0.05$.

Figure 3 Affective scale ranking, social attractiveness

Discussion

These results suggest that people are not only able to hear the difference between dark and light /l/, but that they also identify the light variant as a feature of Newfoundland English. Also, the participants consider the dark post-vocalic /l/ to be more prestigious, at least when it comes to social status, than the light post-vocalic /l/.

This result is not entirely unexpected because it is in keeping with Clarke (1982), who reports that non-standard dialects of NLE were ranked lower in social status than a Standard Canadian and a Received Pronunciation (British English) variety. In that study, however, the non-standard NLE dialects were, in turn, ranked higher in social attractiveness than the standard dialects, which is not the case here.

The apparent lack of pride in this feature could be linked to the fact the light post-vocalic /l/ is in decline, but whether it is a result or a cause is unclear from this study. As Van Herk (2011) reports, the non-standard features of NLE that thrive tend to be the ones that evoke loyalty or solidarity. Features such as TH-stopping (e.g. *thin* and *that* pronounced as *tin* and *dat*) or verbal-s marking (e.g. *I/you/we/they loves it*) are still prevalent in NLE today and continue to be used by younger populations, often as markers of a Newfoundland identity (Van Herk, 2011).

Conclusion

These results demonstrate that awareness and stigma exist when it comes to the post-vocalic light /l/ in St. John's English. The feature may not be as salient as the non-standard ones that thrive in St. John's, but this perception study shows that it nonetheless carries social meaning.

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