

Substrate effects on –t/d deletion: the case of Palauan English

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Fifty years of research on –t/d deletion in English coda clusters has led us to expect, amongst others, the following tendencies:

- A recurrent set of linguistic constraints on variation that apply in most L1 varieties, see below (Guy 1980);
- Some constraints that are more locally determined, e.g. effect of a following pause (Labov 1989);
- A recurrent social profile for deletion – e.g. higher among working class speakers (Wolfram 1969);
- A recurrent stylistic profile for deletion – e.g. higher in informal or conversational styles (Wolfram 1969, Bailey 1996);
- Higher levels of –t/d deletion in L2 and contact Englishes (and, in some cases, with somewhat different constraint hierarchies) (Schreier 2005);
- In L2 Englishes, higher levels among speakers with lower language proficiencies (Bayley 1996).

A variationist investigation of 60 speakers of Palauan English (a nativising variety spoken in the Republic of Palau in the Western Pacific), stratified for age, gender, education and time spent in the US, found that the linguistic constraint profile was similar to that of L1 varieties but the social and language proficiency profiling of variation was overturned. The statistical analysis revealed that:

- (1) Levels of deletion were relatively low, with –d being deleted significantly less than –t;
- (2) Constraints on deletion patterned very much like those in L1 varieties, with, for example, monomorphemes, preceding obstruents (esp. /s/) and following consonants (esp. obstruents and /l/) promoting deletion, with weak verbs, preceding sonorants and following vowels and /r/ hindering deletion;
- (3) Deletion was more likely among the elite privately educated and those with travel experience than among the state-school educated with little experience outside of Palau.

We explain these findings through consideration of the substrate language. Little work has examined linguistic variation in Palauan, but descriptive phonologies demonstrate that the realisation of /d/ (in all phonological contexts) is variable and (socio)linguistically conditioned (Conant 1915, Flora 1974, Josephs 1997). Allophones include [ð θ d t] but no study indicates the possibility of deletion. In sociolinguistic terms, /d/ is more likely to be [d] in rapid informal and [ð] in slower formal speech (Ash 2003, Josephs 1975), with [ð] the more widespread. /t/, meanwhile, demonstrates allophonic variation too, with word final /t/ being realised with heavy aspiration (Josephs 1975). Furthermore, it is reported for Palauan that “whenever a word ends in a sequence of two consonants, this cluster of consonants is followed by a schwa release” (Josephs 1975: 22).

We argue, therefore, that the substrate phonological system does little to enhance the likelihood of deletion of English –t/d in such clusters, keeping overall levels of deletion low.

Furthermore, those speakers with less contact with native-like targets – the state-school educated, less travelled – show understandably greater resistance to deletion than those whose educational profiles and travels to the US have led to accommodation to this variable characteristic of English.

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