Variation in discourse clicks across age and gender in Glasgow

Abstract

Many non-lexical features of speech are known to vary according to social factors (e.g., gender and voice quality—[1] or age and prosody—[4]). While phonemic clicks occur rarely in some South and West African languages, clicks are common as non-lexical features in many languages, including English [6, 8, 3], and there is some evidence that they might vary similar to more traditional linguistic variables (e.g., male and female speakers might perform clicks differently and at different rates)[6, 7].

A few studies have investigated clicks in English ([6, 8, 5]), finding that clicks could occur alongside an inbreath, have collocated creaky voice, and be accompanied by oral or nasal particles. These studies use Conversation Analysis to examine clicks, as they have interactional functions which are embedded into turn-taking. These functions include displaying a stance (e.g. disapproval, disagreement, sympathy) or managing sequences of talk in interaction. Sequence-managing clicks can mark word search, index the start of a new sequence, mark incipient speakership (the shift of one speaker to another), backchannel, and more ([9, 8, 6, 5]). Additionally, performance of these actions varies (e.g. they can be performed with or without a click). Only one study, as far as we know, examines a single click function in-depth (indexing a new sequence-[8]), and does not account for where they do not occur. Only Ogden’s study (2013) lays out all the possible conversational actions clicks can perform.

Clicks are rarely studied or discussed in conjunction with social factors. Click production and region and style have been studied on a small scale ([5]), while click rates and gender have been investigated using a large corpus in one study ([7]), suggesting an possible constraint of gender on click production.

Bearing this in mind, this paper combines the fields of Phonetics, Variationist Sociolinguistics, and Conversation Analysis to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the phonetic form and conversational function of Glaswegian clicks?
2. Do male and female speakers perform clicks differently?

This study is based on over 20 hours of audio and visual recordings of 25 same-gendered, self-selected pairs of Glaswegians aged 17 to 60. Clicks were identified and coded in Praat [2] for the presence of particles (e.g., er, um), phonetic accompaniments indicated by previous studies (e.g. audible inbreath, creakiness, nasality), and place of articulation (bilabial to lateral after [6]). Clicks were also coded by function, and while this is primarily a Variationist and Phonetic study, actions which clicks could perform were informed by Conversation Analysis at the qualitative level in line with previous studies. Early results suggest female speakers click less than male speakers and are performing different actions with clicks (see Figures and ). This places clicks in word search sequences in the wider context of gender-constrained linguistic variables and demonstrates the importance of examining interactional variables in context.

Figure 1: Number of clicks across gender
Figure 2: Proportion of clicks produced by each gender across click functions

References


