

LINGUISTIC CHANGE AMONG GHANAIAAN ENGLISH SPEAKERS: THE USE OF THE VELAR NASAL CONSONANT

Kingsley Cyril Mintah¹, Stephen Gyasi Ofori^{2*}

1. General Studies Department, Wisconsin International University College, Ghana
 2. Liberal Studies Department, Koforidua Polytechnic, P. O. Box KF 981, Koforidua E/R
-

ABSTRACT: *This paper presents an examination of linguistic change among students of the English Department of University of Ghana in their use of the velar nasal. Working with the Labovian paradigm of sociolinguistic investigations, this paper focuses on the use of the velar nasal /ŋ/ and any of its variants /ŋg/, /n/ or /ng/ in the readings of the students as influenced by social variables like sex, social status and ethnicity. The paper's special interest in the use of the velar nasal among the Ghanaian students is premised on the fact that scholarly works on Ghanaian English suggest the nasal velar is hardly realized in Ghanaian English hence the familiarization of students to the sound will elicit linguistic change. The investigation is carried out by analyzing the recordings of readings of the students. This paper establishes three claims in its findings: females use higher frequency of standard forms than their male counterparts at all levels of attention because their attitude towards the use of the prestigious variant; though the higher class (Class 1) use the prestigious variant in casual speech, the lower class tend to respond to linguistic change faster and higher to show overt prestige especially when being observed; and ethnicity largely influence the use of a prestigious form as an ethnic group may engage in a linguistic change to a prestigious code to assert their superiority above their others.*

KEYWORDS: Ghanaian English, Sociolinguistic, Social variables, Linguistic change

INTRODUCTION

Research into linguistic change among societies where language contact is high yields a lot of important results about variations within the language used by people. As languages come into contact, modifications and adjustments are made by speakers to accommodate each language. It has been argued that a transported language undergoes a process of nativisation in order to be used by the non-native society. To this end, three levels of nativisation which includes: the functional level, the attitudinal level, and the structural level are identified and explained. It is maintained that 'English language system is adapted to the new local context by its indigenous user so that new forms and structures develop in phonetics and phonology, in morphology, in the lexicon, in syntax, in style and discourse' (Mukherjee, 2007: 98-99). Thus, through nativisation, varieties of an imported language which are largely similar when compared with the language imported are created.

Ghana has English as an imported language and speakers of English have appropriated and nativised the language at all linguistic levels including phonology. As a distinctive variety, Ghanaian English (GhE) phonology has been described by scholarly works like Sey (1973), Dako (2001), Koranteng (2006), Huber (2008), Quartey (2009), Ofori (2012), Mintah (2012), and Ofori et al. (2014) as being short of some speech sounds of the Received Pronunciation (RP) including the velar nasal / ŋ /. Ofori et al. (2014:53) claims the nasal velar is totally deleted from GhE. According to Koranteng (2006: 332) ‘/ ŋ / has the phonetic realization of / n / as in [θank] for /θæŋk/; or [du.in] for / du:ŋ / ... /ŋ/ is just a pre-velar allophone of / n / in GhE.’ Huber (2008) adds that Ghanaian English, unlike the RP, allows / ŋg / in coda sequences in words like *sing* and *song*. He adds that the nasal velar / ŋ / may be realised as / n / or / g / in some pronunciations. Nevertheless, Dako (2001) discusses that deviation from RP consonants occurs in few cases and usually among younger speakers who have had familiarization with the use of the sound. She adds that a social variable like sex determines which variant of the sound is used by a speaker. These raise the question of variation of the representation of the velar nasal among Ghanaians. Milroy et al. (2003: 4) writes that according to the variationist perspective ‘a language that did not display variability would not only be imaginary but dysfunctional, since structured variability is the essential property of language that fulfils important social functions and permits orderly linguistic change.’

This presupposes that the existence of variants in the representation of velar nasal in Ghanaian English is essential to the use of English in Ghana. Undoubtedly the velar nasal is not frequently realised in the spoken English of most Ghanaians. However, those who happen to have knowledge about the use of the sound make conscious and learned efforts to use the sound in their speech. According to Hudson (1996), this usually deliberate effort by speakers in the acts of linguistic change can be explained by the Theory of Acts of Identity which suggests that social variables like sex and social status influence the use of a feature of linguistic change by a person to present him/herself as belonging to a group or class identity. This informs the assumption that the participants involved in the present study may use the velar nasal sound in their speech to depict their knowledge of the British RP (as these are people who had taken a course in English Phonetics and Phonology at the time of the investigation).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the use of the velar nasal / ŋ / or its variant / ŋg / in the spoken English of Ghanaians and also to find out the role of variables like sex, ethnicity and social status in the realizations of the velar nasal in the spoken English.

SOCIO-PHONOLOGY AND LINGUISTIC CHANGE

This research assumes a sociophonological perspective in the examination of linguistic change among university students. Studies into that field have been carried out by several scholars. Labov's (1966) study of New Yorkers on the realization of (r): [r] and (r): [Ø] in the speech of shopkeepers presents a case in which variation investigation has been investigated. In his research Labov, knowing that New Yorkers alternated between the absence and presence of the consonantal / r / in their use of words, sets out to investigate the use of a variant among New Yorkers in the use of (r): [Ø] which is a feature of British RP which was an accent of prestige.

He predicts that the use of (r): [r] will be easily realised in the speech of speakers when they are less conscious of their social status. He also assumes that the use of the innovated (r): [Ø] will be realised in the speech of lower-status people as they are insecure about their status and would adapt to a prestigious variant. Investigating the realization of a variant in a linguistic context, he assumes that (r): [Ø] will be favoured more by a following consonant by a word boundary. A lot of Labov's assumptions are supported by his findings. His findings prove that a realization of linguistic variant is greatly influenced by social status as lower-status people showed a move toward the frequent use of the prestigious (r): [Ø] variant; and attention level as the repetition of a sound was carefully done by store keepers. However, his enquiry into the influence of age on the use of a variant is not supported as there is no significant use of a variant with respect to age. His later research on "The intersection of sex and social class in the course of linguistic change" (Labov, 1990) revealed the impact of gender as a social variable in the use of a linguistic variant. His researches are significant to this research as they provide the evidence and justification for an inquiry and assertion that social categories such as social status, sex/gender, and linguistic context may affect the realization of a speech sound.

Trudgill's (1974) research in Norwich where he, through structured interviews, examines the impact of social status determined by the area of residence or housing range, age, and linguistic context in the realization of sixteen variables. His study also confirms the fact that social categories like social status, age, linguistic context and attention correlate with a variant of a sound in a linguistic community. Other research projects like those by Milroy and Milroy in Belfast also confirm the influence of social categories on the realization of a variant of sound in a community though the research procedure employed by Milroy, *networking*, was different from the methodology, *interviews*, of that of Labov and Trudgill in their research. Others like Hymes and Gumperz postulate the use of ethnography of speaking in the examining of linguistic variations in the representation of speech sounds.

This research employs the questionnaire and interview like those of Trudgill and Labov in the quest to find sociolinguistic categories which influence the choice of a variant over another in the process of linguistic change among third year (level 300) undergraduate students of University of Ghana, Legon as they support the undertaking of this research. The researchers did not adopt the use of ethnography as that is considered inappropriate in this study.

METHODOLOGY

A total of twenty (20) students from the Department of English, University of Ghana are used for the investigation. They are made up of ten (10) females and ten (10) males who come from three (3) ethnic backgrounds: Ewe, Ga, and Akan and from different senior high schools in the country. The researchers engaged in random sampling in the selection of participants.

The participants selected are students reading 'Phonetics and Phonology' as a core course at the department. They have been introduced to this course in their previous year. These students are preferred over other students because they are exposed to and have knowledge of the sound system of the Received Pronunciation (RP).

Since studies into Ghanaian English have shown the lack of the velar nasal, it is anticipated that our participants are going to make conscious effort to use the sounds they have learnt in class since they regard RP as prestigious. They all admit knowledge of how and when to use the nasal velar sound.

The materials employed in the research include reading materials and a research questionnaire. Each respondent is presented with a research questionnaire to fill and also presented with reading materials to read. The informants are recorded performing three tasks: reading two essays and a word list. The participants engage in a Casual Reading, a Careful Reading and a Very Careful Reading of words on the lists. The Careful Reading material is also the same two paragraphed essay on the topic *Music-Music* that is read at the Casual Reading but this time with words which contain the velar nasal sound underlined. The third reading (Very Careful Reading) material is a word list of words from the two paragraphed essay. The words selected include *song*, *sing*, *singing*, *ring*, *bring* and *king* which make use of the velar nasal sound. Each task is designed to elicit a different level of attention given to speech as postulated in Labov (1972). This is also followed by an interview to seek clarifications to some of the findings in the study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As an important theory in research into linguistic change and how they interact with social variables, the classical Labovian Theory of 'Variationist' is employed in the study. This theory postulates that linguistic variations exist in language and these variations are interrelated with social variables like sex/gender, age, socioeconomic status and situational context. As Salami (1991) writes 'Labovian sociolinguistic framework focuses on quantitative analyses of the relationship between linguistic structures (phonology, syntax, and lexicon) and social categories and statuses, such as sex, age, socioeconomic class, and so forth.' Variationist William Labov emphasizes two features of linguistic change: (a) women of all classes and ages use more standard forms than their equivalent men. (b) The lower middle class (LMC) 'hypercorrects' its language' (Wodak & Benke, 1997). Going by the Labovian theory, it is assumed that linguistic change among the students would be greatly influenced by sex/gender, age, socioeconomic status and situational context. This study establishes its findings and conclusions on quantitative analyses as espoused by the Labovian sociolinguistic framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

GENDER AND LINGUISTIC CHANGE

For the purpose of the analysis of the data, the cases where the velar nasal is realized are described as 'High' and where other variants are realized are described as 'Low'. As mentioned earlier, gender has been found to be an influential factor in the realization of the sociophonological variant. Hence, in this study, 'gender' is examined as a social variable of linguistic change. The following are gathered from the data.

Gender * /ŋ/ in casual reading

		nasal velar		
		High	Low	Total
Gender	Male	3	7	10
	Female	5	5	10
Total		8	12	20

*Figure 1: The frequency of gender and the nasal velar in casual reading***Gender * /ŋ/ in careful reading**

		Nasal velar		
		High	Low	Total
Gender	Male	4	6	10
	Female	7	3	10
Total		11	9	20

*Figure 2: The frequency of gender and the nasal velar in careful reading***Gender * /ŋ/ in very careful reading**

		nasal velar		
		High	Low	Total
Gender	Male	6	4	10
	Female	9	1	10
Total		15	5	20

Figure 3: The frequency of gender and the nasal velar in very careful (wordlist) reading

The figures above show that at all levels of attention, female participants realize the velar nasal more in their speech than the male participants. In *Figure 1*, it is realized that out of 10 male participants, 3 of them made use of the velar nasal in their casual speech while 7 did not. However, 5 out of 10 females used the velar nasal in their casual speech. This suggests that the tendency for a female to use a velar nasal in casual speech during a linguistic change process is higher than that of the male. The same is realized in the Careful, *Figure 2*, and the Very Careful,

Figure 3, readings. Though the male participants performed better in the use of the velar nasal in both cases when compared to their casual readings, however, at every level of attention, the female respondents' realization frequency is higher than the male respondents. This feature is consistent with Labov's (1990) Philadelphia sound changes findings. In that study, Labov claims that other things being equal, females show more advanced forms of changes. It also affirms Trudgill's (1974:182) findings that women informants use forms associated with the prestige standard more frequently than men. This characteristic of females in linguistic change processes to adopt to the prestigious standard have been explained to be as a result of their linguistic insecurity where the use of the prestigious variant is regarded as a means by which females affirm their position or power in the society (Labov, 1990).

The follow up interviews reveal that female users of a language have positive attitude to linguistic change than male users. They readily adopt and make efforts to use the prestigious or targeted variant simply because it is the 'right one' and not because of linguistic insecurity earlier scholars suggest. The male respondents are slow or reluctant to adopt the prestigious or targeted variant with the view that, since they can communicate with any of the variants, there is no need to change to the use of the prestigious or targeted variant unless it is required or they are being observed. What is common with the response from both sexes is that linguistic change occurs when increasing attention is given to the use of the velar nasal. Hence, participants produced the sound with an exaggerated consciousness as the level of attention increases.

SOCIAL STATUS AND LINGUISTIC CHANGE

Most sociolinguistic research works have proved that social status is a force to reckon with in the process of linguistic change. Social status is often defined by the socioeconomic position of the speaker. Other useful indicators of social status include education and occupation among others. In the present study, education is used as a determining factor of the social status of a participant. Participants are classified as belonging to Class 1, Class 2 and Class 3. These classifications are made in accordance with the ranking of their senior high schools attended as classified by the Ghana Education Service. In this way, the researchers are able to infer the influence of high class schools on the realization of a variant.

The bar chart below, *Figure 4*, presents the distribution of the use of a velar nasal in a casual speech with respect to their social class as determined by their education. As expected, students of Class 1 status tend to frequently use the velar nasal in their Casual Readings than those of other classes. Perhaps, it signals that they might have had familiarization with the speech sound earlier and have adopted it into their language; hence, a lot of them could make casual use of the sound. What is also clear is that there is no difference between the number of people and the frequency of use of the velar nasal by those of Class 2 and Class 3 in their Casual readings and speech. This supports earlier claims by Labov (1990) that for a prestigious marker (in this case the nasal velar), the higher a speaker's social status the higher the frequency of use.

Casual reading* and Social Status

--	--	--	--	--

		Social Status by Education			Total
		Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	
Casual	High	4	3	1	8
	Low	2	5	6	12
Total		6	7	7	20

Figure 4: The distribution of the use of a nasal velar in a casual speech with respect to their social class as determined by their education.

Another glaring fact about the use of the prestigious or targeted velar nasal is supported by the frequency table of Figure 5.

Careful reading* and Social Status

		Social Status by Education			Total
		Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	
Careful	High	4	5	2	11
	Low	2	2	5	9
Total		6	7	7	20

Figure 5: Frequency of the use of the nasal velar as against the social status of participants

In Figure 5, it is observed that in the Careful Reading, the frequency of the use of the velar nasal by the lower classes tend to increase in response to linguistic change. This is established on the basis that of the 11 respondents that articulate the velar nasal consonant, 7 of them are from Class 2 and Class 3 as against 4 respondents from Class 1.

The difference occurs in the use of the prestigious velar nasal in the Very Careful wordlist readings in Figure 6. Here the Class 1 respondents' use of the variant remains relatively the same while the classes 2 and 3 respondents show a high upward appreciation in the use of the prestigious variant.

Very Careful reading* and Social Status

		Social Status by Education			
		Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Total
Very careful	High	5	6	4	15
	Low	1	1	3	5
Total		6	7	7	20

Figure 6: The distribution of the use of a nasal velar in a very careful speech with respect to their social class as determined by their education

The Class 2 respondents lead in the use of the prestigious variant at this stage. This responds to the assertion made by scholars that lower class groups respond to linguistic change in the use of a prestigious variant faster than those of the higher class. Trudgill (1972) and Labov (1990) explain that this usually occurs because members of the lower class groups do so in their attempt to show overt prestige and in response to their status insecurity.

The follow up interviews confirm that this occur because respondents of the lower classes want to 'fit in'. This supports the assertion that the need for recognition and the show of overt prestige necessitates members of lower class groups to adopt a prestigious variety especially when they are being carefully observed.

ETHNICITY AND LINGUISTIC CHANGE

Another variable of interest to the research is the influence of the ethnicity on the use of the prestigious or targeted nasal velar consonant sound. The ethnicities of participants involved in the research are Ewe, Akan and Ga. These three ethnic groups, according to the Ghana Statistical Service (2012), form 68.8% of the entire population of Ghana and belong to the four largest ethnic groups in Ghana with Akan as the largest, 47.5%. Despite the popularity of Akan, Ga for a long time enjoyed an elevated role in the educational sector especially at the second cycle level as the language of the elite. This association of prestige is founded on the grounds that Ga was associated with those who have had contact with 'the city', Accra. Today, the proliferation of Ghanaian Pidgin English in senior high schools and the fast growing popularity of Akan as the L1 of many Ghanaians have made Ga less prestigious. The findings seem to suggest that Gas are more likely to adjust to linguistic change faster than any of the two local language speakers.

The *Figures 8, 9 and 10* below provide a distribution of the influence of ethnicity on the use of the prestigious or targeted velar nasal in the pattern of linguistic change among the students in their Casual, Careful and Very Careful readings of the text respectively.

Casual velar nasal* Ethnicity

		Ethnicity			
		Ga	Ewe	Akan	Total
Casual velar High		3	2	3	8
Low		3	5	4	12
Total		6	7	7	20

*Figure 8***Careful velar nasal * Ethnicity**

		Ethnicity			
		Ga	Ewe	Akan	Total
Careful velar High		4	3	4	11
Low		2	4	3	9
Total		6	8	7	20

*Figure 9***Very careful velar * Ethnicity**

		Ethnicity			
		Ga	Ewe	Akan	Total
Very careful High		6	4	5	15
Low		0	3	2	5
Total		6	7	7	20

Figure 10

Figure 8 indicates the three ethnic group respondents observed. The Gas make use of the prestigious forms even in casual speech than all: 50% of Ga respondents use the velar nasal in casual speech as against 28.6% of Ewe respondents and 42.9% of the Akan respondents.

Figure 9 shows the degree of response to the use of the prestigious form in Careful Reading. It indicates that the Ga participants make use of the prestigious variety more than the other ethnic

group participants in their Careful Reading: 66.7% of Gas use the nasal velar; 42.8% and 57.1% of Ewes and Akans respectively use the velar nasal in their Careful Readings. It is therefore not surprising that in *Figure 10*, Very Careful Readings, 100% of Ga respondents make use of the velar nasal while 57.1% of Ewes and 71.4% of Akans use the nasal velar. This suggests that Gas are more likely to maintain the frequent use of a prestigious form of linguistic change than Ewes and Akans. This, we believe, occurs because of their linguistic insecurity. It seems that Gas readily adjust and adopt the prestigious variant in their speech as a means to restore the once prestigious place of Ga in the Ghanaian society. This presupposes that members of an ethnic group, who feel challenged for their prestigious role in society, may engage in a linguistic change to a prestigious code or features of a language to assert their place in society.

CONCLUSION

The case of linguistic change, as investigated in this study, is important in the sociolinguistic use of language. This study suggests that though speakers of Ghanaian English (GhE) may not use some sounds of the Received Pronunciation, GhE speakers engage in linguistic change when they familiarize themselves to the sounds. This linguistic change is greatly influenced by social variables like sex, status and ethnicity as discussed above though the change may be slow. This agrees with Johnson's (1976) assertion that the rate of linguistic change is slow because it varies with respect to social variables such as residence, generations, sex, etc. The study underscores three points about the influence of these social variables:

- In a linguistic change process, females are likely to be more actively engaged in the process than males. Females use higher frequency of standard or targeted forms than their male counterparts at all levels of attention because of their positive attitude towards the use of a prestigious variant in a linguistic change.
- Also, members of the higher class in society are more likely to be frequent users of the prestigious variant of speech or speech sounds in a linguistic change process. However, members of the middle class tend to respond to linguistic change faster and higher to show overt prestige especially when being observed.
- Also, ethnic groups may engage in a linguistic change to a prestigious code to assert their superiority above other ethnic groups in the society.

REFERENCES

- Dako, K. (2001). The sound system of Ghanaian English. In A.B.K. Dadzie (ed.) *Exploration: Journal of the English Department*. 1(1), 107-119.
- Ghana Statistical Service (2012). *Population & Housing Census: Summary Report of Final*

Results. Accra: Sakoa Press Limited.

Huber, M. (2008). Ghanaian English: Phonology. In Rajend Mesthrine (Ed.) *Varieties of English for Africa, South and Southeast Asia*. Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin: New York.

Hudson, R. A. (1996). *Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge: CUP.

Johnson, L. (1976). A rate of change index for language. *Language in Society*. 5(2),165-172.

Koranteng, L. (2006). *Ghanaian English: A Description of the Sound System and Phonological Features*. PhD Dissertation, University of Ghana, Legon.

Labov, W. (1966). *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. Washington DC: Centre for Applied Linguistics.

_____(1972). The social stratification of (r) in New York city department stores. In William Labov (Ed.) *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (pp. 183 -259). Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

_____(1990). The intersection of Sex and Social Class in the course of Linguistic Change. *Language Variation and Change*. 2. 205- 254.

Milroy, L., Gordon, M. J. & Gordon, M. (2003). *Sociolinguistics: Method and Interpretation*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Mukherjee, J. (2007). Structural Nativisation in Indian English: Exploring the Lexis-grammar Interface. *Rainbow of Linguistics* 1. 98-116.

Mintah, K. C. (2012). *A study of some assimilation processes in Ghanaian English*. Unpublished MPhil.Thesis, University of Ghana, Legon.

Ofori, S. G. (2012). *A study of the segmental features of the spoken English by some basic school pupils*. Unpublished MPhil.Thesis, University of Ghana, Legon.

Ofori, S. G., Duah, I. & Mintah, K. C. (2014). Exploring the feasibility of a proposed Ghanaian English pronunciation standard. *Journal of Education and Practice*, Vol. 5, No. 22. <http://www.iiste.org/Journals/index.php/JEP/article/view/14540>.

Quartey, E. (2009). *Phonological features of English as spoken by some final years senior high school students*. Unpublished MPhil Thesis, University of Ghana, Legon.

Salami, L. O. (1991). Diffusion and Focusing: Phonological Variation and Social Networks in Ile-Ife, Nigeria. *Language in Society*. 20(2), 217-245.

Sey, K. A. (1973). *Ghanaian English: an exploratory survey*. London: Macmillan

Trudgill, P. (1972). *The Social Differentiation of English in Norwich*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____(1974). Linguistic Change and Diffusion: Description and Explanation in Sociolinguistic Dialect. *Language in Society*, 3(2), 215- 246.

Wodak, R. & Benke, G. (1977). Gender as a Sociolinguistic Variable: New Perspectives on Variation Studies. In Florian Coulmas (Ed.) *The Handbook of Sociolinguistics* (pp. 127-150). Oxford: Blackwell.