

Vocalic variation in Standard English spoken by Trinidadian professionals

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Emerging standard varieties, such as Trinidadian English, often exhibit a considerable extent of variation, as they are not fully codified. The International Corpus of English (ICE) provides an excellent tool to describe Standard Englishes in close detail on all levels of linguistic variation. However, most ICE-based research has focused on morpho-syntax (e.g. Hundt & Gut 2012), while the interest in ICE corpora for phonetic research has only intensified recently (e.g. Gut & Fuchs 2017).

This paper investigates vocalic variation in one emerging standard variety of English from the Caribbean, Trinidadian English, using data from the ICE Trinidad & Tobago. The study focusses on the educated English spoken by Trinidadian professionals (11 lecturers, 10 politicians, 8 lawyers) in formal contexts (unscripted speeches, non-broadcast talks, interviews, parliamentary debates, and legal presentations). This selection of speakers provides a solid basis for a thorough account of the current standard of spoken Trinidadian English that goes beyond previous descriptions, which are either impressionistic (Youssef & James 2004), are based on sociolinguistic interviews (Leung 2012), or focus on very specific contexts (Wilson 2014). The focus of the present study lies particularly on the variability in Standard Trinidadian English.

Preliminary results show that some variables are highly stable, while others exhibit salient intra- and interspeaker variation: for example, FACE and GOAT are almost categorically realized as monophthongs ([e:] and [o:]), while STRUT varies saliently between a central and a backed raised realization ([ʌ] and [ɔ]). MOUTH exhibits salient variability between [ʌʊ], [oʊ], and [ɔʊ]. BATH is shown to vary between TRAP [a] and START [ɑ].

We interpret this variability in the standard with regard to the complex variation between English and Creole, typical of anglophone speech communities in the Caribbean: the distinction between Creole features that are integrated into the standard and those that tend to be avoided is not categorical but fluid. This paper also discusses the benefits and problems of using ICE corpora for phonetic analyses: on the one hand, they offer authentic contexts to study the phonetics of Standard Englishes but on the other hand, the limited data of each speaker may potentially restrict an in-depth analysis.

References

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