American English Has Goʔ a Loʔ of Glottal Stops:

Social Diffusion and Linguistic Motivation

In word-final, prevocalic position (e.g. *it is*) there are various possible phonetic realizations of /t/ in American English (e.g. [t], [ɾ], [ʔ]). Research by Eddington and Taylor (2009), which used data gathered in an experimental setting, found that glottal stops in this position are more common realizations of /t/ in younger speakers, women, and those from the Western United States. The present study examines the linguistic and social factors associated with the use of the glottal stop in American English, but the data come from recordings of informal conversations.

If prevocalic glottaling is uncommon word-internally in American English, why is it apparently spreading word-finally? We provide evidence that word-final /t/s are more often followed by word-initial consonants than vowels, which places them in a glottalizing context. Instances with a glottal realization are stored in the mental lexicon and are available as possible pronunciation choices even in prevocalic position.

We extracted 1,101 instances of word-final, pre-vocalic /t/ from the Santa Barbara Corpus and determined their realization impressionistically. The glottal stop occurred in 24% of the cases. Logistic regression analysis was used to identify factors that favor glottaling of /t/. Our findings concur with the previous research in that age and region were significant: Westerners in their teens and 20s glottalized more than non-westerners in the same age groups. This contrasts with speakers who are 30 and older, both Westerners and Non-westerners, who glottalize to a much smaller degree. We also found that glottaling is favored by a following stressed syllable; however, gender and following vowel quality were not influencing variables, which contradicts the previous experimental findings. We suggest that glottaling of /t/ initially arose word finally because /t/ is more commonly followed by stops than vowels. The glottal pronunciation has then spread to prevocalic position. This change is being diffused in the U.S. and is more commonly used by younger speakers from the Western states.

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