T-lenition in Irish English

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This presentation is about the pronunciation variants for T in Irish English. This is a subject which has been discussed before, most recently by Izabela Grabarczyk, Jeff Kallen, Mark Jones & Carmen Llamas, Marion Schulte and Fergus O’Dwyer and myself. Schulte has looked at it from a sociophonetic perspective and O’Dwyer from a third-wave ethnographiic perspective. Both authors are concerned with the sociolinguistic determinants for T realisations and strive to classify these in some orderly manner presumably to reach a level of prediction for how T is realised in specific contexts by speakers. There is a significant feature of these investigations, namely they are gender-specific: Schulte only looked at women and O’Dwyer only looked at men. Furthermore, O’Dwyer attempted to correlate T realisations with pragmatic functions and tried to demonstrate regularity in the appearance of fricated [t̪] as opposed to a glottalised realisation [ʔt, ʔ, h] or Ø according to discourse context.
The approach in the current presentation is different from that of the two authors just mentioned.

Here I wish to treat T-lenition from a typological point of view and consider its place in the sound system of Irish English. So let’s start with a few questions:

First of all, what is lenition?

It is a phonetic phenomenon whereby the articulation of a consonantal segment is produced with less effort. This reduction of articulatory effort is manifested in certain typical ways, (i) by producing a fricative for a stop, (ii) by debuccalisation, i.e. removing the articulation to the glottal region, yielding a fricative or stop, /h/ or /ʔ/ and (iii) by zero, that is by deleting the segment entirely. Lenition can be a feature of a vernacular style as with the glottal stop in supraregional southern British English and disappear in slower, more careful speech. It can also be a part of the sound system of a language and persist through all styles, as with stop lenition in (Castilian) Spanish or in Danish.
Secondly, how does lenition relate to syllable structure?

Lenition is a phonetic phenomenon which occurs preferentially in the coda of a syllable. The reason for this is that articulation is strongest in a syllable onset and reduces towards the close of a syllable (in the coda). However, with words in connected speech, various sandhi phenomena appear, e.g. lenition in a coda can be blocked if the initial of the following word is consonantal; lenition can be expressed if the coda is followed by a vowel or by a pause.
Thirdly, how does lenition relate to word stress?

Lenition is favoured in post-stress positions, otherwise it can be blocked even though the segmental context would allow lenition. This makes phonetic sense: a stressed syllable onset requires more articulatory effort than an unstressed one and so it inhibits lenition.

This can be shown clearly with an example from Irish English. Fricated [ɾ] is found intervocally in post-stress position. However, where the stress shifts one syllable to the right in a word, lenition is blocked, e.g. *Italy [ɪˈɫɪli]* but *Italian [ɪˈtælɪən]*.

In cases of secondary stress, there is variation in the application of T-lenition. In a word like *humanity [ˈhjuːmænɪˌɾɪ]* not all speakers have lenited [ɾ] in the final syllable. The same holds for others words like *solicitor [səˈlɪsɪˌtɔr]*.
- T-lenition in varieties of Irish English -

The default realisation of lenited T in supraregional Irish English is as an apico-alveolar stop. This is found in all styles for speakers of this variety, so it is an indicator in the Labovian sense and not a marker. [Mary Robinson snippet]

In vernacular varieties, especially urban ones on the East coast of Ireland, T-lenition is carried further with debuccalisation common in colloquial styles, i.e. [ʔ, h] or zero.

Any sociolinguistic investigation of T-lenition in Irish English will only make sense in a setting in which there is choice. Speakers must be able to choose - unconciscously in the case of phonetics - between variants for these to be sociolinguistically significant. This is, of course, possible if speakers move between supraregional speech and a vernacular mode, as has been the case for the informants in the studies by both Schulte and O’Dwyer.

For speakers who persistently use supraregional Irish English there is no choice, T-lenition can only manifest itself as fricated [ᵗʰ] (there is a lexicalised exception in Saturday with intervocalic [-h-], probably from Irish Sathairn, also with intervocalic [-h-]). However, there is a subset of these speakers who have a flap [ɾ] as the realisation of post-stress, intervocalic /t/, e.g. better [bɛɾə], more on this anon.
Suprasegmental Irish English

T-lenition is manifested as fricated [ts]:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No lenition</th>
<th>Lenition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>t</td>
<td>[ts] &gt; h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tea, lightning</td>
<td>but water water what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t</td>
<td>~ &gt; Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vernacular (urban) Irish English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

T-lenition is manifested as fricated [ts], debuccalised to [?, h] or Ø.
Table 1  Syllable position and lenition in Irish English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Permitted realisations of lenition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>all varieties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) intervocalic</td>
<td>pity</td>
<td>t,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) word-final</td>
<td>pit</td>
<td>t,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) pre-consonantal</td>
<td>little [-d]</td>
<td>? h, h, o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) post-consonantal</td>
<td>spent</td>
<td>?, o ( [-tʰ] )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2  Classification of lenition alternatives in Irish English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of change</th>
<th>Segment</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lenition 1</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>sitter ['sɪrə]</td>
<td>only intervocalic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lenition 2</td>
<td>ɬ</td>
<td>sit [sɪ]</td>
<td>(default)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lenition 3</td>
<td>ɬ</td>
<td>sit [sɪ ɬ ʊp]</td>
<td>mainly sandhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lenition 4</td>
<td>h, ɬ</td>
<td>sit [sɪh, sɪʔ]</td>
<td>(default)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lenition 5</td>
<td>ɬ</td>
<td>sit [sɪ]</td>
<td>(default)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

default = (i) intervocally or (ii) post-vocalic and pre-pausal
There are three sibilants in supraregional Irish English. Two are known from standard forms of English, i.e. /s/ and /ʃ/ as in sue and shoe. The third is the fricated [t] being discussed in this presentation. All three sounds are kept apart by Irish speakers as can be seen clearly from the following spectrogram.
A consistent contrast is maintained by Irish English speakers between the fricated [tʰ] and the normal sibilant [s]. Note that the latter is longer in articulation and has its intensity peak at a higher frequency than fricated [tʰ]. This means that word pairs like kit and kiss or hit and hiss are not homophones.
Fricative [t] for /t/ (non-local Dublin speaker)
T-Frication_(non-local_Dublin).mp3
T-Glottalisation (local Dublin speaker)

T-Glottalisation_(local_Dublin).mp3
- T-lenition and the sound system of Irish English  -

T-lenition where it is not expected.

The interdental fricatives of standard English are realised as dental stops in supraregional Irish English, an occasional reading pronunciation as fricatives notwithstanding. Importantly, T-lenition does not apply to the dental stops of Irish English.

However, in vernacular varieties, especially in the East Coast Dialect Area, roughly from Drogheda down to Waterford, one can hear pronunciations like [paːt̪] for path or [mæʊt̪] for mouth. How can this be?

The answer lies in the presence of alveolar stops for supraregional dental stops in vernacular varieties of eastern Irish English. Speakers who have [tɪŋk] for think will have /paːt/ for path phonologically which can then provide the input to T-lenition as the /t/ for them is an alveolar stop, i.e. [t] will lenite to [t̪] if the phonetic conditions for lenition are met, e.g. intervocalically or in word-final, pre-pausal position.
In sociolinguistics, three basic approaches are recognised, calls ‘waves’. The first stems from Labov’s earlier investigation in New York City and is based on class; the second derives from the work of James and Lesley Milroy in Belfast and is centred on the concept of social network.

The essence of third-wave investigations in sociolinguistics, as pioneered by Penelope Eckert is that the individuals project their personae and adopt positions in their social groups by the choice of sociolinguistically significant variants. So the stress is not on class, or social network, but on the linguistic behaviour of the individual.

For the current presentation the question is whether T-lenition can serve as a carrier for individual identity and be manipulated for the expressing of an individual’s style.

To answer this question, one must ask where choice exists in T-lenition. If speakers cross registers, e.g. from supraregional to colloquial, then they will have the variants of the latter at their disposal. So speakers can use fricated [ʈ] or debuccalise the lenited T entirely, using [ʔ, h] or zero.
But what about speakers who do not shift registers, those who always use supraregional Irish English?

Among younger females there is a tendency to employ a tap for lenited /t/ in intervocalic position (a tap is only possible in this position; it is phonetically impossible before a pause). This is traditionally a feature of local Dublin English but the source for this in non-local young female speech must be external, most likely from North American English.

So there is choice here, between fricated [tʰ] and a tap in intervocalic position.
Tap [r] for intervocalic /t/ (non-local Dublin speaker)

T_IntervocalicTap_(non-local_speaker_Dublin)_1.mp3
The phenomenon of T-lenition sets Irish English apart from most varieties of English (excluding Newfoundland/Maritimes English in Canada and Australian English [partially]). It is maintained by all speakers, even in formal, reading style, though the manifestation varies according to register and the vernacularity of speakers’ speech.

T-lenition is a good example of how phonological considerations (syllable position, sonority values of segments) intermesh with social, and often personal, factors. It is the combination of these which ultimately determines the manner in which T-lenition is realised and the variation of this realisation in discourse.
References


