On Lenition in Liverpool English: why element loss isn’t enough
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The lenition of phonological stops in the variety of English spoken in Liverpool, UK is well known (Knowles 1973, De Lyon 1981, Honeybone 2001, Sangster 2001). In Liverpool English (henceforth LE), surface fricatives are frequently attested for underlying stops at all places of articulation, although this realisational freedom is at its greatest for the voiceless alveolar stop in utterance final position, where surface forms corresponding to every step on a typical lenition trajectory can be found (e.g. [t, tʰ, ts, s, h]). The only detailed phonological treatment of LE lenition to date is Honeybone (2001) who (partly following e.g. Harris 1994) provides an analysis in terms of the loss of privative subsegmental material, and makes a number of important generalisations concerning the inhibition of lenition in certain segmental and suprasegmental environments. However, because of the phonological nature of Honeybone’s analysis, certain phonetic details are missed.

In this paper, I provide an acoustic analysis of all six stops /p, t, k, b, d, g/ in utterance-final position, produced by 16 male and female adolescents during an elicitation task. I show that whilst the range of realisations described in previous literature is well attested, there is much more structured variability than has previously been indicated. For example, I show that when utterance final /t/ surfaces as a fricative, it is not straightforwardly alveolar [s], nor even a ‘slit’ alveolar fricative, as Honeybone (2001) has suggested, but rather that there is a wider range of previously unrecognised variants of ‘stopless /t/’, each with varying degrees of oral approximation. I provide evidence that this fine-grained phonetic detail is under the strict articulatory control of the speakers, and that this control must be part of the speakers’ phonological knowledge (see e.g. Docherty & Foulkes 2000).

The paper concludes by explaining that whilst LE lenition might be best described in terms of the loss of subsegmental material, the fine-grained, phonetic detail cannot be suitably modelled in this way and is better thought of in terms of gradient articulatory gestures (e.g. Brownman and Goldstein 1986, 1992). I argue that these approaches are not incompatible, and suggest that they can be combined using an exemplar, usage-based model of phonology (e.g. Bybee 2001). In combining these areas, the paper (i) offers a consideration of lenition theory from a usage-based framework, (ii) examines the nature and role of the ‘phonetic component of the grammar’ and (iii) addresses the implications for the nature of the information that can be said to be ‘part of a speaker’s phonology’.

References