

"Perception of Dh-Stopping in South Yorkshire English"

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Abstract:

This study explores the perceptual and social dimensions of *dh-stopping*, a phonetic feature in South Yorkshire English where the voiced interdental fricative /ð/ is realized as a dental or alveolar stop [d]. While this variant is often associated with traditional second-person pronouns (*thee, thou*) in the Sheffield area, it also appears in high-frequency function words (e.g., *the, them*), raising questions about its broader social interpretation.

A matched-guise experiment was conducted with 111 listeners from Sheffield and surrounding towns. Participants heard pairs of utterances differing only in the realization of /ð/ (canonical vs. stopped) and evaluated speakers on different scales: solidarity, accent acceptance, and rurality. The study examined how listener variables—particularly age, gender, and regional origin—shaped social judgments of this variant.

Results reveal that *dh-stopping* functions as a socially marked variant with complex perceptual connotations. Female listeners were significantly less likely to associate the stop variant with solidarity, suggesting possible stigma or reduced affiliation with the feature in formal or wider public contexts. In contrast, older participants and those from Sheffield rated *dh-stopping* more positively, pointing to covert prestige and local identity reinforcement. Perceptions of rurality also varied by age group, reflecting differing language ideologies across generations.

These findings demonstrate that even subtle phonetic variation, such as stop substitution in function words, carries rich social meaning within urban dialects. The *Dh-stopping* serves as a socio-indexical cue that listeners interpret differently based on their own social positioning, thus reinforcing or resisting group-based linguistic norms.

This work contributes to socio-phonetic research by highlighting how micro-level phonetic alternations intersect with broader processes of identity construction and regional affiliation. The study underscores the need to consider listener perception when assessing the social life of phonetic variables, especially those embedded in dialect contact zones or undergoing stylistic re-evaluation.