The PM's t's: David Cameron's t-glottalling across the lifespan

Despite the growing number of studies documenting changes to an individual's first language in later life (Sankoff 2013), many questions about this phenomenon remain unanswered. Still unclear, for instance, is the general picture of *which* variable phenomena are susceptible to later-life change: does a variable's social profile in the community or stage of progression through a change reliably influence speakers' likelihood of adjusting their use of it as they age?

The present paper takes a step toward answering this question by examining the potential for lifespan change in one linguistic variable which shows differential community patterning depending on linguistic environment. Specifically, we look at glottal replacement of /t/ ("t-glottalling") in the speech of UK Prime Minister David Cameron, selected for his readily-available recordings and his status as a speaker of Received Pronunciation (RP). We analysed Cameron's speech in two Conservative Party Conference keynote addresses, one from 2006 (age 40) and the second from 2014. These speeches were selected due to the consistency they provided: the nature and purpose of each speech were the same, and the audiences were of similar size and composition, allowing us to avoid the confounds of style-shifting and audience design (Rickford and Price 2013).

Following many researchers (e.g. Tollfree 1999), we excluded tokens of /t/ in foot-initial prosodic position (e.g. *attack*). Then, following Fabricius (2000), we identified two sets of environments in which /t/ may glottal in RP: word-finally, and word-internally before a consonant or syllabic /n/. Tokens of /t/ in all other environments were omitted. We also restricted the data by preceding segment, retaining post-vocalic /t/ and omitting post-obstruent /t/. Concerning /t/ after non-vocalic sonorants, we found that after /n/, Cameron glottals only when at a morpheme boundary (so, in *apparent* or *apparently* but not *country*). Morpheme-internal tokens of /t/ after /n/ were thus omitted from study, along with post-/l/ and post-/m/ tokens, which were infrequent.

Of the environments that remain for analysis, Wells (1997) observes that t-glottalling is not equally likely in all of them. Specifically, he identifies pre-consonantal glottalling (regardless of word position) as "normal" in RP—effectively, a stable variable—while word-final glottalling before vowels and pause represents a recent change. Accordingly, we examined whether Cameron displayed differential behaviour in these two environments across his lifespan. Each token of /t/ under study was coded auditorily as either a glottal or an alveolar stop, and its environment was coded as either an "established" (pre-consonantal) site for glottalling or a "recent" (other environments) site for glottalling.

Figure 1 shows Cameron's t-glottalling in each environment over time. The increase in t-glottalling in "recent" environments is statistically significant (p = 0.04) in a mixed-effects model; by contrast, Cameron's rate of t-glottalling in "established" position remains stable.

Cameron thus provides an individual-level microcosm of the community, advancing t-glottalling where the community does and showing no change where the community is stable. We connect these findings to the nature of linguistic representations and to the role of individual language users in advancing community change over time.
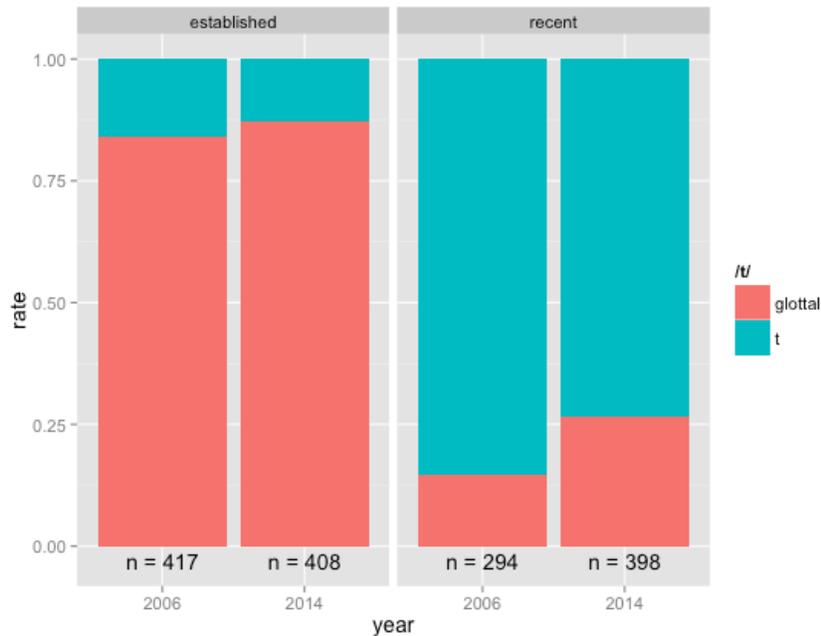

Figure 1.

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