Phonotactic divergence in World English: At the crossroads of external language history, internal variation and creolisation

Daniel Schreier

This paper looks into the role of language contact and creolisation in the reversal of phonotactic constraints in British and American English (Br/AmE). The variable discussed is consonant cluster reduction (CCR), which operates through the deletion of a final stop in word-final and syllable-coda consonant clusters. This process is pervasively homogeneous in Br/AmE, both in term of quantity and in internal factors that govern its variation (the principal factors being cluster status, e.g. /-st/, which can be mono- or bimorphemic (past, passed) and the following phonetic environment, vowel, pause of consonant). The regularity of this process is shown with data from both varieties.

The same process is then reported in two post-colonial varieties of English that have undergone large-scale language contact and creolisation: Jamaican English (Patrick 1999) and St Helenian English, spoken on an island in the South Atlantic (Schreier 2004). These two varieties have independently reversed the Br/AmE conditioning factors and thus display a differing and highly diagnostic constraint pattern (most notable that bimorphemic clusters are more likely to undergo reduction than monomorphemic ones). Phonotactic divergence of this type is addressed with reference to external language histories and contact-induced restructuring processes that accompany the creolisation of English varieties.
