

Sociophonetic Variation in the voiced alveolar lateral fricative in Yami

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This study discusses sociophonetic variation in the pronunciation of the voiced alveolar lateral fricative [ɬ] in Yami, an Austronesian language spoken on Orchid Island, Taiwan.

In Yami, /l/ undergoes palatalization and becomes [ɬ] when preceded by a high front vowel [i] (Li and Ho, 1988; Ho, 1992; Rau and Dong, 2006). The allophonic variant [ɬ], however, has recently been found to be undergoing a rapid loss.

To examine how this variation is patterned, social factors such as age, gender, and social network integration are taken into consideration. In terms of age factor, a striking generational difference was found: the [ɬ] variant is well preserved among older speakers, while the [l] variant is frequently used among younger speakers. The generational difference not merely indicates an in-progress change (McMahon, 1994: 241f) but may further imply the instability of the [ɬ] variant within the speech community (Labov, 1994: 83f). With regards to gender, previous studies have found gender-related differences more heterogeneous. Some (Labov, 1990) maintained that women are generally the innovators leading linguistic change; others (Trudgill, 1972) stated that women tend to use conservative forms than men do; still others (Nichols, 1978) found that women could either be more linguistically innovative or conservative than men depending on different situations. Our data, however, show no significant gender differences across age groups, suggesting the limited power gender has in predicting phonological variation in Yami. As for social network integration, those participants who are highly integrated into the community tend to use the conservative form [ɬ], while the low-integrated ones tend to choose [l] over [ɬ] (Lippi-Green, 1989).

We propose three explanations – language contact, cross-linguistic transfer from Mandarin to Yami, and linguistic market to explain the sound change. First, [ɬ] > [l] can be seen as a contact-induced sound change because this sound change is only observed among fluent Yami-Mandarin bilinguals or those whose Mandarin is more proficient than Yami, but not among the Yami-monolinguals (Weinreich, 1953:51). Besides, since the /l/-palatalization rule is only found in Yami and not in Mandarin, we could reasonably consider Mandarin the dominant source of cross-linguistic transfer. This influence can be attributed to the frequent use of Mandarin in participants' daily conversations. Finally, linguistic market could also play a role in triggering this sound change because many participants recalled that when they pursued higher education or sought job opportunities on the main island of Taiwan, people mocked their Mandarin pronunciation. To engage in the *market* and to earn respect, they avoided their former pronunciations and chose the *right* sound, consciously diluting their Yami-accented Mandarin, hoping to make their pronunciation sound *standard*.

While the participants ultimately chose to return to the Yami community, the [ɬ] > [l] change continues, indicating that the two allophonic variants are in a transition stage. If this sound change becomes pervasive among the younger generation, we are likely to lose the distinction between [ɬ] and [l] in Yami in the future.

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