

Phonotactic simplification in borrowed /TH/-fronting

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Forms and processes that are borrowed from one dialect to another tend to also see a simplification of the rules that govern them (Trudgill 1986). Milroy (2007) points to borrowable forms as off-the-shelf changes: borrowings that are simple enough for a speaker of another dialect to acquire post-Critical Period. /TH/-fronting, which is the substitution of [f] for [θ], seems to be a form that is robustly borrowable in World Englishes (e.g., Schlee and Ramsamy 2013; Holmes-Elliott 2013; Wood 2003). The current study examines phonotactic simplification in a case study of /TH/-appropriation in Philadelphia English.

This study draws on data from 43 speakers in the Philadelphia Neighborhood Corpus (PNC) to investigate phonotactic constraints on /TH/-fronting. /TH/-fronting is a feature of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) which has been described as occurring only in word-medial or word-final position (Fix 2010, Green 2002, Labov et al. 1968). However, these previous descriptions of /TH/-fronting in AAVE have not examined the role of syllable structure as a phonotactic constraint on fronting. In addition to /TH/-fronting in AAVE, recent work in South Philadelphia has found non-AAVE speaking White speakers appropriating /TH/-fronting in word-medial and word-final position as well (blinded for review). Notably, the speakers who exhibit /TH/-appropriation are speakers with regular and antagonistic contact with their AAVE-speaking neighbors: a situation from which feature borrowing could easily arise.

In this study, we examine the role of syllable structure phonotactic constraints on /TH/-fronting in AAVE, as well as expand on these initial observations of /TH/-appropriation by comparing phonotactic constraints across these two demographics in the PNC that exhibit fronting. We examine 2158 tokens from 19 AAVE-speaking Black speakers and 24 non-AAVE-speaking White speakers. Tokens were coded auditorily, and ambiguous tokens were excluded.

We find that the reported word-position constraints on /TH/-fronting in AAVE are borne out, with both groups most likely to front in word-final position, followed by word-medial position, and not fronting at all in word-initial position. When these constraints are broken down into *coda* and *non-coda*, however, a slightly different picture emerges. White speakers only exhibit /TH/-fronting in coda position. For the Black speakers, /TH/-fronting is possible in both coda-position as well as in onset position of a nonstressed syllable, though it is highly disfavored in onset position (4.4% of onset tokens are fronted, compared to 38% of coda tokens).

These results are consistent with an analysis of /TH/-fronting as a borrowed feature for these White speakers. We suggest that the regular, surface-level contact between both groups allows for the borrowing of /TH/-fronting as a feature, but not the more complex phonotactic rules governing /TH/-fronting. The more complex AAVE pattern, which shows fronting in coda-position and in onset-position of nonstressed syllables, has been simplified to a rule that allows for fronting in coda position only for these non-AAVE speakers. These results show phonotactic simplification in feature borrowing, in line with Milroy 2007 and Trudgill 1986.

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