

Abstract

Contrary to classic predictions associated with the gender pattern in variationism, the results of this study on the effect of age and gender on a phonological innovation suggests that older speakers drive innovation in this small Oceanic speech community of Vanuatu. Young and old men are prone to deleting the phonemic consonant, while women and middle-aged men tend to retain it. The v-shaped distribution of the variant requires considering the interactions and social status of individuals in this community where older men occupy the highest-ranking positions. The deletion does not appear to be stylistic, and multivariate analyses reveal the effect of surrounding vowels, sex and age, on the frequency of consonant deletion. The variation is interpreted as a change in progress towards the deletion of the velar fricative and its high incidence in younger men is explained by their frequent interactions with the older men.