

The stylistic covariates of DH-stopping on Twitter

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Recent research has opened up the question of covariation, the "anatomy" of style and the intersection of socially meaningful variables (Campbell-Kibler 2011), and has positioned individual variants, rather than sociolinguistic variables in the abstract, as the locus of social meaning (Campbell-Kibler 2010). This paper increases scrutiny of the internal composition of meaningful styles by examining the covariation of "DH-stopping" with other stylistic features, using a corpus of posts ("tweets") to the microblogging service Twitter.

DH-stopping is common to many dialects of English, including AAVE and numerous British varieties, and can be represented orthographically in online language by replacing a 'th' with 'd'. 300 English-language tweets were collected for each of the keywords "that", "they", "this", "dat", "dey", and "dis" (all high-frequency lexical items chosen for their ostensible lack of indexical "color"), resulting in a corpus of 1800 tweets. Cases where "they" or "dey" acted as a determiner (=their) were excluded. Each tweet was coded for other stylistic variables: orthographic evidence of /-r/ deletion, co-occurring instances of DH-stopping (other than the keyword itself), and the presence of netspeak initialisms such as "lol", "wtf" and "smh". /-r/ deletion was operationalized as the absence of orthographic 'r' in a word that has non-prevocalic /r/ in rhotic varieties of English. DH-stopping was operationalized as the use of one or more 'd' in place of a 'th'>/DH/ grapheme-phoneme mapping.

The distribution of these co-variables for tweets using each DH-stopped keyword was compared to that of its orthographically standard counterpart. Chi-squared tests reveal that DH-stopping across all keywords predicts co-occurring DH-stopping ($p < 0.001$) and the use of netspeak initialisms ($p < 0.01$), but does not predict the use of r-deletion ($p > 0.05$). In other words, compared to tweets with "this", "that", and "they", tweets with "dis", "dat", or "dey" are more likely to contain further DH-stopping and initialisms such as "lol" or "smh".

Breaking down these results further by keyword, however, reveals that different DH-stopped keywords show more individual stylistic profiles. While "dis" shows the same pattern as DH in the aggregate--it predicts co-occurring DH-stopping ($p < 0.01$) and initialisms ($p < 0.01$) compared to "this", "dat" predicts only the use of initialisms ($p < 0.01$). "Dey", meanwhile, predicts only co-occurring DH-stopping.

Thus DH-stopping on Twitter has a complicated stylistic profile. Though often associated stereotypically with AAVE, no DH-stopped keyword predicted increased /-r/-deletion, another AAVE variable. "Dis" and "dat" predict "netspeak" initialisms, a hallmark of online language, suggesting that they have themselves begun to be enregistered as some form of online language. "Dey," however, predicts only more DH-stopping, suggesting its indexical contribution is commensurate with that of DH-stopping as a variable in the abstract.

Narrowly, these results call for increased scrutiny to the lexical item as an intermediating factor in determining the stylistic affordances of a particular variant. More broadly, it calls for research into style to continue breaking down the contextual and cotextual factors that modulate the form and function of any particular stylistic performance.