

## A case of linguistic variation among white ethnics in New York City

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TH-stopping, reported in the speech of working-class and immigrant groups across the U.S. (Wolfram 1969, Dubois & Horvath 1998, Rose 2006, Mendoza-Denton 2008), is considered a regional feature of New York City English (NYCE). Its origins in NYCE have been anecdotally attributed to a substrate effect (Thomason & Kaufman 1988) produced by Italians, the Irish, and Poles (Babbitt 1896, Labov 1966). This study analyzes *th*-productions from sociolinguistic interviews with bilingual Polish Americans born in NYC (Generation 2, N=10) or residing there since their early teens (Generation 1, N=5). Results suggest that TH-stopping in the Polish community did originate as a substrate effect, but has since become an ethnic marker.

An acoustic analysis of 500 underlying and derived stops (resulting from TH-stopping) reveals that the latter employ the Polish voicing contrast (negative VOT for [d] (-2 msec) vs. short VOT for [t] (20 msec)), while the former manifest mean VOT values typical of English (short VOT for [d] (20 msec) vs. long VOT for [t] (70 msec)). This characterization holds for both generations. T-tests comparing VOT values for underlying and derived stops yield  $p < .05$ .

A GOLDVARB multivariate analysis was conducted on 6,000 *th*-productions acoustically coded as stops or fricatives. The **linguistic** conditioning of TH-stopping reflects its role as a fortition and a markedness-reducing process. Stopping is favored in “strong” consonantal positions: utterance-initially (factor weight: .65), as opposed to utterance-medially (.47). It is also common with function words, especially those likely to act as syntactic heads and carry stress (e.g. *those*: .79, *these*: .54, but *them*: .36). Lexical words disfavor stopping, irrespective of the position of the fricative (*initial*: .39, *medial*: .36, *final*: .39), whereas *th*-initial numbers favor, and *th*-final numbers disfavor stopping (*initial*: .54, *final*: .33). TH-stopping is also conditioned by the sonority of the preceding segment: the less sonorous the segment, the more likely it is to trigger stopping (*stops*: .61, *fricatives*: .48, *sonorants*: .39). This result may reflect the stigmatized nature of TH-stopping: substitutions produced in contexts of small sonority distance are perceptually harder to identify (Berent et al. 2007). Naro (1981) has similarly argued for a saliency effect in the distribution of a stigmatized syntactic variable in Brazilian Portuguese.

Generation and gender emerge as **social** predictors of TH-stopping, with G1 men (.61) and G2 women (.56) favoring stops. Both generations display sharp stylistic effects across tasks (interview, passage, word list), almost entirely resisting stopping in the word list. An analysis of social networks reveals a strong positive correlation between TH-stopping rates and speakers’ Polish-orientation scores ( $r = .8$ ,  $p < .007$ ): those who speak Polish in private and public, have Polish friends, belong to Polish cultural institutions, and use Polish media, exhibit higher stopping rates. TH-stopping may thus represent an ethnic marker, whose emergence would parallel the development of *Polonia* – an “imagined” (Anderson 1983) Polish-American community, and a concomitant ethnic

revival (Bukowczyk 1986). The unusual tendency for women to favor stopping reflects the central role they played in the creation of *Polonia*, not only as homemakers, but also community leaders (Radziłowski 1996).

### **References**

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