

T and D Skipping in the Ol' Adul'

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The topic

You may have heard people not pronounce their Hs (e.g. “‘ave you got a pen, pet?”), but have you ever heard anyone not pronounce their Ts or Ds? It is common practice among many people to subconsciously leave Ts and Ds at the ends of words unpronounced. If you were saying “I haven’t missed pubs”, would you pronounce the *t* in *haven’t* or the *d* in *missed*? I know I wouldn’t. This is what we call T/D deletion.

Why are we interested?

Previously, researchers have been interested in how the frequency of T and D deleting changes depending on a handful of social influences, such as social class, sex and age, or linguistics influences like the sound that comes before the T or D. It has been found in the past that Ts and Ds are more likely to be skipped if they are preceded by sounds like *s* as in *past* than if they are preceded by the sound *l* as in *adult*. But the language use of older adults has not received as much attention in this research as the speech of younger speakers. So we set out to fix that.

What did we do?

We analysed the interviews that Lauren did with you and 15 other Tynesiders aged 70 and above in 2019 to 2020. We then analysed their speech to see how often they left their Ts and Ds at the ends of their words unpronounced. We also wanted to see what role their age played in their T/D deletion. After all, age has an effect on many aspects of our daily lives and behaviours: it determines when we can drive, earn a living, book a holiday, and have a pint! So, it seems reasonable to assume that it might have an effect on our language, too.

Types of age

The most common understanding of age is *chronological age*, and this is our age in years. However, many people feel younger or older than they actually are, so some say that considering the age that we *feel* is a better indicator than our actual age of the functioning of our bodies and brains, and a better predictor of our behaviours. This is called *subjective age*. So, for this study, we analysed how the chronological and subjective ages of the older adults in Tyneside affected whether they pronounced their Ts and Ds.

What about previous studies?

Other studies haven't found any strong effects of chronological age. However, a few studies did find that older participants tended to pronounce their Ts and Ds more, with younger chronological ages deleting them more.

What did we find?

We found that chronological age seemed to have the same effect here: the chronologically younger participants left their Ts and Ds unpronounced more than the older participants. However, we found the opposite pattern for subjective age: the participants who *felt* the youngest pronounced their Ts and Ds; but as participants got subjectively older, they tended to delete them more (unlike for chronological age).

So, what does this mean?

Our findings here point towards the need to consider other types of age when researching people's speech. We only had the chance to look at 16 interviews. It's not enough to write a book about, but it suggests there's more to age than meets the eye, and linguists ought to look further into these patterns. Maybe age is more than just a number after all.