

Intersect(ING) Variables

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The variable realization of nasal consonants in word-final unstressed *-ing* (ING) in English is a ‘showcase’ sociolinguistic variable that has figured in many studies, beginning with Fischer (1958). However, while we have a good understanding of the linguistic and social factors conditioning the realization of the consonant in (ING), less attention has been paid to its vowel, which has been noted to vary from a central [ə] to a high [ɪ] or [i] (Wells 1982).

This paper analyzes the factors conditioning the (ING) vowel using data from a corpus of Toronto English (Hoffman & Walker 2010) stratified by sex, ethnic background and generation/age-group. From sociolinguistic interviews with 76 speakers, we extracted 5,612 tokens of (ING) and coded them impressionistically and acoustically for the phonetic realization of the vowel, as well as for a series of linguistic and social factors. We used the Lobanov-normalized F1 values (indicating vowel height) as the dependent variable in a mixed-effects regression model.

The greatest effect is the preceding segment, with obstruents favouring higher vowels. First-generation non-native speakers have the highest vowels, but once they are removed, the strongest effect is an interaction of sex and following place, with females favouring higher vowels with apicals ([ɪn]) and males favoring higher vowels with velars ([ɪŋ]). Vowels with a following velar nasal are slightly higher than those with a following apical, but the difference is not significant. These findings suggest that (ING) lies at the intersection of variation in both its components, consonantal and vocalic.