VOT Changes in Obsolescing Languages: Evidence from Kurmanji

Most obsolescing language situations involve gradual decline in speaker numbers and speaker fluency. As more speakers in a subordinate community shift to the dominant language (O'Channessy, 2011), fewer children learn the minority language, and often those who do so learn it imperfectly, resulting in semi-speakers, people who have learned the language to some degree and are not fully fluent. Large-scale investigation projects on sound change in obsolescing languages are notably lacking for some areas of the globe, in particular the Middle East. This paper therefore targets one of the languages of the Iranian group, one of the geographically most extensive and typologically most diverse branches of Indo-European. Following recent investigations of obsolescing languages such as Babel (2009), we present a study of phonetic and phonological changes in the Khorasani dialect of Kurmanji (an Iranian language) based upon recordings of two generations of speakers. This paper focuses on the realization of the phonological contrasts of initial voiceless consonants to find the differences of the voice onset time as a phonetic correlate of voicing distinction, and investigates the question: What is the evidence of VOT values of the initial voiceless consonants in the Khorasani dialect of Kurmanji on the process of language change regarding interference from the strong dominant language, Persian?

VOT has been defined as a time interval between the onset of release burst and the onset of periodicity that reflects laryngeal vibration (Lisker & Abramson 1964:422). Three contrastive categories were defined regarding VOT values: fully voiced stops (Voicing Lead); voiceless unaspirated stops (Short Lag) and voiceless aspirated stops (Long Lag). Khorasani Kurmanji has contrastive aspirated/unaspirated initial stops and affricate consonants, rarely found in any other Iranian Languages, especially Persian. There are 12 voiceless consonants in Kurmanji, and 8 of them include 3 stops and one affricate paired by the aspirated /unaspirated distinction. The four pairs are: [p]/[p^h] , [t]/[t^h] , [k]/[k^h] , [tʃ]/[$tʃ^h$]. The feature of 'unaspirated' in an unaspirated initial voiceless consonant is a marked feature in Kurmanji, compared with the aspirated ones which occur in the dominant language Persian, and tend to be more unusual cross-linguistically, more difficult for children to learn and more easily lost in language change. They tend to be replaced by less marked ones (aspirated initial voiceless consonant) in language change.

It is clear that categorical changes, loss of allophones, and sub-phonemic variation are all characteristics of sound change in obsolescing languages. The extent to which sound changes have occurred in the Khorasani dialect of Kurmanji is considered through instrumental phonetic investigation in this paper. Acoustic measurements show that unaspirated initial voiceless consonants have undergone phonetic change convergent with Persian, the dominant contact language. The narrowing of the aspirated/unaspirated contrast in Generation 2 of Kurmanji speakers can be most straightforwardly interpreted as an externally motivated change from Persian. Results displayed that Khorasani dialect of Kurmanji in Generation 2 is experienced by approximation-like sound changes and not phoneme substitution.

Keywords: Voice onset time, voicing, sound change, Khorasani dialect of Kurmanji.

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