Epiphenomenal, sociophonetic and interactional ejectives in English and German

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There is increasing evidence that non-pulmonic sound production is a systematic and widespread feature of languages, such as English and German, which are not generally treated as having clicks and ejectives as part of their phonological inventories. Stop releases fuelled by an oral or glottalic airstream mechanism need addressing at several levels of analysis. First, they arise from two different sources, not only resulting from active articulations, but also emerging as the epiphenomenal products of articulatory overlap (Marchal 1987; Ohala 1995, 1997; Simpson 2007). Second, besides being allophonic, clicks and ejectives also fulfil interactional functions, as well as being a systematic part of the range of sociophonetic variation a speaker can produce in different linguistic activities (Gordeeva & Scobbie 2006; Simpson 2010, forthcoming; Wright 2005, 2007).

While the active and passive (epiphenomenal) production mechanisms and the different functions of non-pulmonic sounds appear to be fairly transparent, the actual classification of a particular click or ejective token may be far from clear-cut. However, teasing apart the different sources and functions of sounds is essential in the analysis of sociophonetic variation. A typical case of confusing interactional function and sociophonetic variation is the aspirated release of plosives in Tyneside English (Local 2003). Final aspirated plosive release is a correlate of turn-transition. Finding such aspirated releases to be more frequent at the end of individual items from a word list can not be treated as part of a change in sociophonetic variation without recognising that interactional function may be the main influencing factor.

In this paper I will attempt to tease apart form and function in ejectives in English and German, examining what the possible production mechanisms behind these ejectives are and relating them to their interactional and sociophonetic context. In doing so I will cast doubt on the traditional description of ejectives and the glottalic airstream mechanism.

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