

EXPLORING THE STATUS OF THE VOICELESS LABIOVELAR FRICATIVE /ɱ/ IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ENGLISH

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Abstract

The study attempts to investigate the current status of the voiceless labiovelar fricative /ɱ/ in American English with reference to selected sociolinguistic variables, such as age, regional background, formality of the speech and prestige. The study comprises 17 subjects and 34 recordings of their speech – two recordings of a different level of formality per each speaker. All of the analyzed recordings are available online. The analysis focuses on wh-words, such as e.g. why, while, whale or white. In the first part of the study, the number of wh-context words in each speech is juxtaposed with the actual production of the researched variable. The second part of the study concentrates on the comparison of the obtained qualitative data with selected social variables. The results of the study may not only broaden the understanding of the voiceless labiovelar fricative use in American English but may also have pedagogical implications to whether the variable should be included in the phonetic courses on American English.

Keywords: voiceless labiovelar fricative, social variables, age, formality, regionality, American English, prestige

1. Introduction

As explained by Hudson (2007), supposing that the term language is understood as an entity consisting of all of the world languages, we can talk about various representations of it in terms of different varieties. This means that a variety is a “set of linguistic items with similar social distribution”, and as a result any national language, but also sport or legal language is a variety (Hudson, 2007, p. 22-23). What is more, we can also talk about language in terms of standard and non-standard varieties. McDavid (1980) points out that commonly standard languages emerge by trying a number of different solutions and simply by choosing one variety to be more prestigious than the other. In addition, the choice does not have to come from the varieties that are contemporary at a given time or

among the languages spoken in a given region, as it is very often that the language established as standard differs considerably from everyday language (McDavid, 1980, p. 184-185).

One of subcategories of a language variety is accent. According to sociolinguistics, when referring to an accent, we comment solely on the speaker's pronunciation. The term may be applied to a variety of language that is different from another one only with regard to phonetic or phonological features (Chambers & Trudgill, 2004, p. 5). This means that the term accent is a very narrow label. Although it is relatively common for people to believe that they do not have an accent, and consider it as always being a characteristic of others but never themselves (Romaine, 2000, p.20), this is not necessarily the case. As Trudgill (1975) candidly states, "absolutely everybody speaks with an accent – an accent is not something odd or peculiar but something that we all have" (Trudgill, 1975, p. 20).

It has been commonly accepted that differences exist in languages and accents. Now, the question of how and why those differences exist appears. Firstly, we have to understand that the most obvious component is that "language is a dynamic kind of phenomenon" (Trudgill, 1975, p. 14). It is constantly changing and adapting to new environments. It is impossible for a language to cross boundaries of history, and also the physical boundaries of cities or countries, and remain unchanged. However, as dynamic as it is, language does not undergo the same changes over an equal amount of time or in the same manner in every place in the world. In fact, transformations in language do not happen regularly. The reason for this is that different changes are not identically distributed in time and space. Some of them are even currently underway, and whether they will ever be completed or not is yet unknown (Romaine, 2000, p. 136). Nonetheless, there are different theories on the cause of such change and how these changes happen. One of the earliest ideas was the one proposed by Johannes Schmidt in 1872, called 'wave-theory'. It aimed to describe the spread of linguistic changes across land in terms of a wave or a meteorological front (Wells, 1982, p. 13). However, Schmidt does not mention where the beginning of those changes is. In 1974, Trudgill negated Schmidt's assumptions by claiming that change does not happen in such a way. In contrast, he focused on the source of change, and stated that any variations spread from urban areas to suburban ones, and eventually to the population in the countryside (as cited in Wells, 1982, p. 13). The factor of 'affectedness' was picked up by Romaine, who describes linguistic change in terms of it being similar to any innovations, or to be even more precise, to a disease. Romaine points out that a linguistic change, much like a virus, can initially be found only in a small group of people, but with time, it can be spread even to a whole population. To visualize this, Romaine employs a graph used also in biological studies to show the spread of disease, which for the purpose of linguistics is termed 'a change' (Romaine, 2000, p. 143). What is more, there are not only many theories connected with how the language changes, but also

there exist various ideas explaining different kinds of change. For example, we can find sociolinguistics often embarking on the subject of change from below or above our consciousness.

Still, considering different ways in which changes occur in the language, it should be noted that they do not happen in isolation from the surrounding environment. Therefore, social factors, such as age, regionality or even register and style should be taken into consideration.

It is quite common in sociolinguistic studies to omit age as an important factor. It is very often regarded as merely a biological characteristic and thus, seems unworthy of attention. However, considering the fact that our age affects such important issues as our right to vote, marry, drive or what to wear and whether to go to school or work, it is an important indicator of our position in life. It also impacts our relationship with the society and influences the way we perceive others and how they perceive us. This is what connects age with language. People can recognize another person's age by their voice quality, but also by their linguistic behavior (Llamas, 2007, p. 69). At different stages of life, people tend to opt for different variants. Eckert (1998) points out that with aging, people tend to change other social variables as well, for example, their family or employment status, place of living, and also their social networks or participation in the community. All those changes have an impact on their language patterns. As a result, it is almost impossible for people to undergo changes in life without introducing variability into their linguistic patterns (Eckert, 1998, p. 151).

Other notions closely related to social communities that we operate in are register and style. Both of them depend on the situation in which the language is used. However, even though some people use these terms interchangeably, the difference between them is significant. Register is used to describe those variations in language that stem from its use. It deals with situation, its purpose, its subjects, the message, and the participants' relationships. An example of register may be the language used by lawyers, policemen or even in reference to religious terms. In contrast, style is only concerned with formality or lack of it in a given situation, and it can be evident in lexis, syntax, and also pronunciation (Romaine, 2000, p. 21-22).

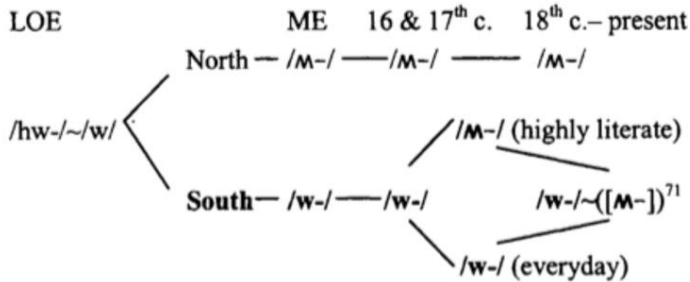
2. Linguistic variable /ɹ/ in American English

It is quite often assumed that American English is more conservative than British English as, since settlement times, it has not undergone as many significant changes as the language of the homeland. In his article *Is America English Archaic?*, Krapp (1927) tries to provide an explanation for such assumptions. He gives the examples of Iceland and Ireland, which isolated themselves from the outside world, and therefore did not change as much, even in terms of their language. However, the colonization of America was different. American society did not isolate itself from the outside world. It still maintained contact with

Britain, as well as the rest of the world. Krapp (1927) also provides a supporting argument by pointing out that if the colonial communities had separated completely from Europe, today we would have been able to hear the language of Dryden or Shakespeare in parts of New England. Such a situation can be observed in the case of dialects from Kentucky or Tennessee. As their mountaineer region had been isolated from the rest of the country, they maintain some unique archaisms to thisday (Krapp, 1927, p. 297-299). These arguments, however, do not support the claim. If those dialects still remained completely intact, the answer to the question of what colonial English sounded like would be much easier to provide. Still, many people believe that the English of the colonists, and as a result American English, stems from the language of Shakespeare. As Krapp (1927) puts it, “the first English settlement at Jamestown was made before Shakespeare breathed his last” (Krapp, 1927, p. 293). However, it is a relatively broad definition of the language of those times. Even if the colonization process coincided with the life of this great playwright, not everyone in the British Isles used to share his variety of language. In addition, the colonists came from different regions and represented various social groups. Therefore, it is only natural to assume that American English should be traced back to the regional dialects of the British Isles, even if none of these dialects had been readapted in full on the new lands (Longmore, 2007, p. 521).

The linguistic variable that is the subject of this study is the additional /h/ sound that occurs in the pronunciation of some speakers at the beginning of selected wh- words. There are various opinions as to whether this variable is a single sound or a consonant cluster. However, such pronunciation of wh- words often worked as a marker distinguishing the spelling of certain opposed words, as it is in the case of, for example, whine and wine. Therefore, Cruttenden (1994) proposes that /ɸ/ gains phonemic status in the speech that includes such opposing words [...], and the fact that there is a great deal of words in which /ɸ/ may be opposed to /w/ is an argument in favor of monophonemic solution for /ɸ/ (Cruttenden, 1994, p. 194-195).

The voiceless labiovelar fricative has its origin in Old English. Back then, the spelling reflected pronunciation more accurately than English does today. The words spelled with hr, hn, hl, and hw at the beginning, were respectively pronounced with the initial /h/ (Cruttenden, 1994, p. 195). Minkova (2004) states that at this point in history, all of those consonant clusters were treated as bi-phonemic, which means they were regarded as /h/ sound preceding the respective consonant. She further elaborates on the evidence for this regard by pointing out that in the literature of Old English period, there can be found proof of alliteration that considered hw to be equivalent of other h- words that did not include consonant clusters as the ones mentioned above (Minkova, 2004, p. 16).



2.1. Change from /hw/ to /w/ in British English (adapted from Minkova, 2004, p. 31).

As was pointed out in the historical depiction of the variable, it was already the case that in Middle English the voiceless labiovelar fricative ceased to be a salient feature of English. Therefore, it could be assumed that it was the Scots-Irish that brought the variable to the USA. In addition, Minkova (2014) reports that the use of the initial /h/ for some of the wh- content words was widespread during the colonial American English (Minkova, 2014, p. 111). Another point is the previously mentioned areas of Kentucky and Tennessee are the most conservative in their use of English. Those Appalachian regions were settled mainly by the Scots-Irish in question. Unfortunately, today the task of tracing back certain phonetic features becomes more and more difficult. However, this information is only supposition. It could prove to be more useful to examine contemporary dialects to see which ones preserved the variable. However, borders between dialects have become more and more unclear. Minkova (2014) writes about the voiceless labiovelar fricative as a variable that was a prominent feature of the American South by the mid-20th century, but by the end of the century, this distinction stopped being so clear (Minkova, 2014, p. 112). The best description of particular dialects is provided in Schneider's *Varieties of English: The American and the Caribbean*. When it comes to the New England area, Labov (2000) stated that there still can be observed a distinction between wh- and w- words that are homophonous. This is partially retained in some areas of New Hampshire, Vermont and Massachusetts (as cited in Nagy & Roberts, 2008, p. 74). In the northern cities of the East coast the situation is more likely to be less prominent. In New York, the merger has been complete for some time, as it was already included in the Linguistic Atlas series, and therefore no distinction between the wh- and w- words is made in pronunciation. The same situation is represented by the speakers of Philadelphia who discarded the distinction as well. And when it comes to some other northern areas, the variation is similar. Some speakers may still use the voiceless labiovelar fricative in their speech; however, it is clearly a receding feature (Gordon, 2008, pp. 74-85). Thomas (2008) proposes that in southern states, the wh- words were likely to be

pronounced with the use of /hw/ or /ʍ/. However, he points out that today it is mainly a feature of older speakers, and as can be discovered in the Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States, the better-educated speakers used to distinguish between the wh- and w- words in their speech (Thomas, 2008, p. 110). Finally, the Western and Midwestern speakers are still relatively likely to keep the distinction. However, younger generations opt for a more standardized form, which is a merged voiced form /w/ (Gordon, 2008, p. 133). Based on those descriptions, it is apparent that the voiceless labiovelar fricative is relatively widely distributed among various regions of the USA. Therefore, it could be assumed that it is not a regional feature but rather a variable that is subject to other social variables, such as the age of the speakers.

3. Methodology

The aim of the study is to conduct an analysis of speech samples of the speakers whose pronunciation features include the linguistic variable /ʍ/. It can be found in words beginning with a consonant cluster wh in spelling and whose pronunciation typically starts with /w/. Therefore, such words as, for example, what, when, why or white are taken into consideration. The main research question of this project is what the status of the voiceless labiovelar fricative is in current American English. It aims to explore whether there exist any social or regional factors that influence the use of the feature. Some sources (Thomas, 2008; Gordon, 2008) suggest that it is the age of the speaker that determines the use of the variable. On the other hand, when it comes to American English, linguists tend to describe the use of the voiceless labiovelar fricative as a regional feature of the Southern dialect. As a result, the study tries to provide some evidence for what the voiceless labiovelar fricative is regarded as in the speech of current American speakers, and what sources of variation affect its use. However, as the research does not target any particular group of speakers, its focus is explorative and intends to indicate some tendencies that co-occur with some of the social or regional aspects. Therefore, the analysis is conducted with reference to social variables such as regionality, age, formality and prestige. To conduct the research, no computer software for speech analysis is used. The reason for this is the fact that the data obtained by using software in the pilot study did not prove to be a reliable source of information. This may be attributed to the fact that the audio samples were not of sufficient quality to undergo an adequate computer-assisted analysis. As a result, the recordings underwent only an auditory analysis.

3.1. Subjects

The subjects for this research consist of a group of speakers who use the American English variety and whose pronunciation features include the use of the voiceless labiovelar fricative. These speakers were selected by means of the following selection process.

Firstly, as this research did not set out to answer any specific questions regarding a particular group of speakers, the subjects were chosen from a group of arbitrary recordings from the website youglish.com. Through this medium, a group of content words and phrases, such as *white*, *while*, and *why* were researched in order to select a group of speakers whose pronunciation included the required feature. However, as the number of recordings that included the given phrases exceeded 20 000 samples, not all of the videos underwent a preliminary analysis. Still, a group of seventeen speakers was selected for further investigation. Following that, the study required research into the background of the selected speakers. This included searching for the region the speaker originated from, their age, and education or occupation, which, in most cases, could be found through Wikipedia.com or other popular online sources.

Name	Date of birth (age)	Place of birth (regionality)	Education/occupation
Haley R. Barbour	22.10.1947 (76)	Mississippi	lawyer, former governor of Mississippi
Richard B. Cheney	30.01.1941 (83)	Nebraska	businessman, former Vice President of the USA
Howard Fuller	14.01.1941 (83)	Louisiana	activist, academic
Robert M. Gates	25.09.1943 (80)	Kansas	politician, college Chancellor
Philip J. Hanlon	10.04.1955 (68)	New York	mathematician, former president of Dartmouth College
Michael S. Hyatt	1955 (69)	no available information	author, motivational speaker, blogger, businessman
Vernon E. Jordan	15.08.1935 - 1.03.2021	Georgia	attorney, businessman, activist, Clinton advisor
John R. Lewis	21.02.1940 - 17.07.2020	Alabama	politician, civil rights leader
Amory Lovins	13.11.1947 (76)	Washington D.C.	physicist, author
Bill Moyers	5.06.1934 (89)	Oklahoma	journalist, former White House spokesman
Charles A. Murray	8.01.1943 (81)	Iowa	political scientist author
Roger Searle Payne	29.01.1935 - 10.06.2023	New York	biologist, environmentalist

Louis W. Sullivan	3.11.1933 (90)	Georgia	doctor, former US Secretary of Health
Teresa A. Sullivan	9.07.1949 (74)	Illinois	sociologist, former University president
Craig Symmonds	31.12.1946 (77)	California	historian, author
Elizabeth Warren	22.06.1949 (74)	Oklahoma	law expert, US senator
Tom Wolfe	2.03.1930 - 14.05.2018	North Carolina	writer, journalist

Table 3.1.1. List of subjects, their age, regional background and education and/or occupation.

3.2. Recordings

The recordings of the samples came from the streaming website youtube.com. For all of the speakers, two video recordings were chosen for further analysis. The aim was to pick recordings that provided both the formal and informal setting for speech. Therefore, in most of the cases, the first video represented a speech delivered at a university or a conference, and the latter one was a video of an interview with the subject. The transcripts of the videos were obtained by means of automatically generated subtitles available on youtube.com. This enabled a speedy compilation of written text files. However, as this is only computer-generated text, all of the files were examined for mistakes.

3.3. Procedure

The next step of the research was the analysis. This stage began with an examination of the created text files. While listening to the recording and reading the obtained transcripts, all of the wh- content words (1750 in total) were highlighted and auditorily analyzed in terms of the research variable. All of the instances of the words, in which the occurrences of the variable are present, were counted, and then the number of actual instances of the feature was marked. This step provided information on the number of occurrences of the variable (856 in total), as well as its distribution among content words. The last step of the procedure was to compare the results obtained from different speakers. All of them were analyzed in comparison to each other, as well as to selected social factors.

4. Results

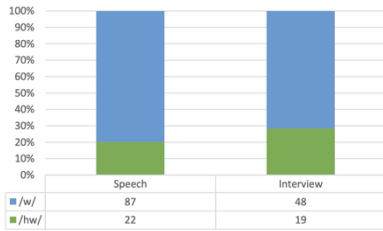


Fig. 4.1. Haley Barbour's use of the variable in the speech samples.

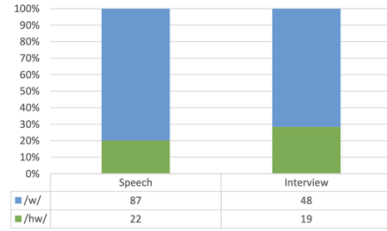


Fig. 4.2. Richard Cheney's use of the variable in the speech samples.

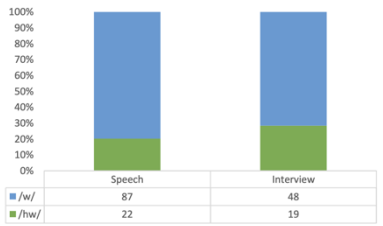


Fig. 4.3. Dr. Howard Fuller's use of the variable in the speech samples.

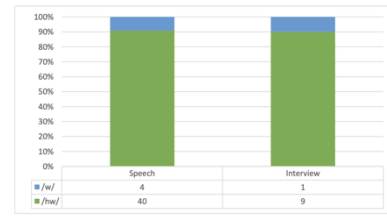


Fig. 4.4. Robert Gates's use of the variable in the speech samples.

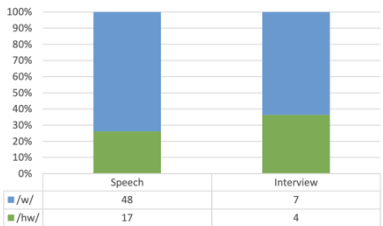


Fig. 4.5. Philip J. Hanlon's use of the variable in the speech samples.

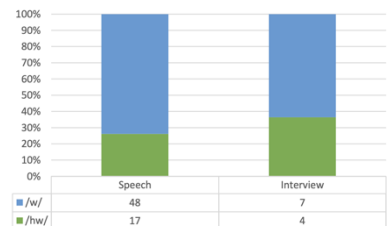


Fig. 4.6. Michael S. Hyatt's use of the variable in the speech samples.

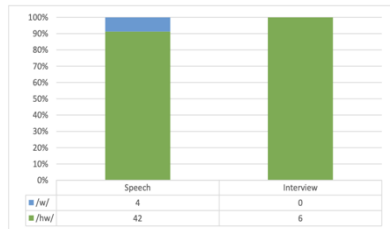


Fig. 4.7. Vernon E. Jordan's use of the variable in the speech samples.

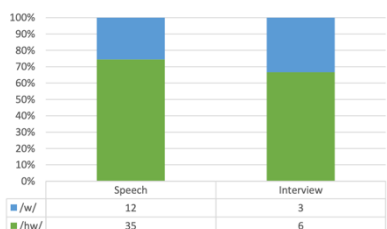


Fig. 4.8. John R. Lewis's use of the variable in the speech samples.

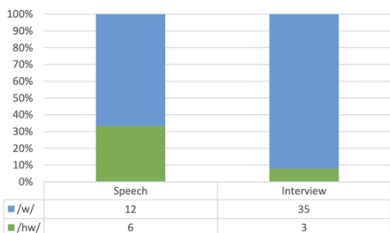


Fig. 4.9. Amory Lovins's use of the variable in the speech samples.

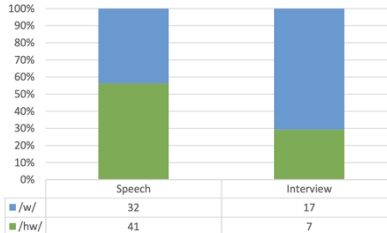


Fig. 4.10. Bill Moyers's use of the variable in the speech samples.

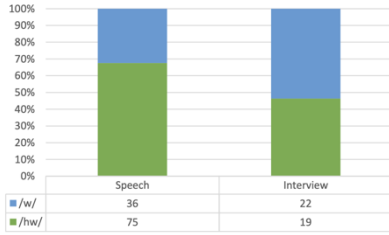


Fig. 4.11. Charles Murray's use of the variable in the speech samples.

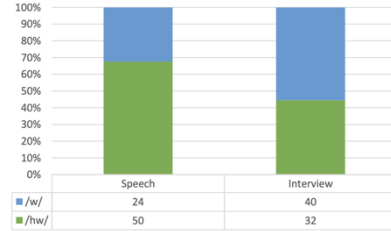


Fig. 4.12. Roger Payne's use of the variable in the speech samples.

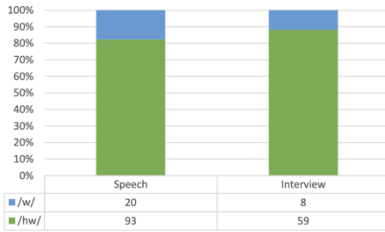


Fig. 4.13. Louis Sullivan's use of the variable in the speech samples.

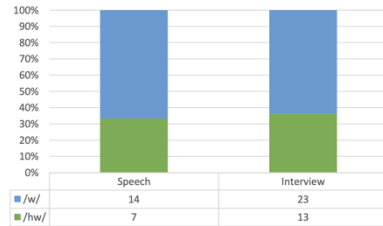


Fig. 4.14. Teresa Sullivan's use of the variable in the speech samples.

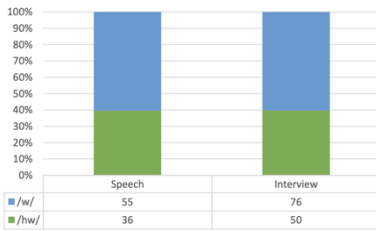


Fig. 4.15. Craig Symmonds's use of the variable in the speech samples.

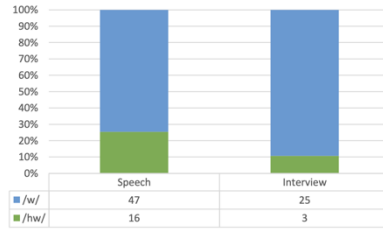


Fig. 4.16. Elizabeth Warren's use of the variable in the speech samples.

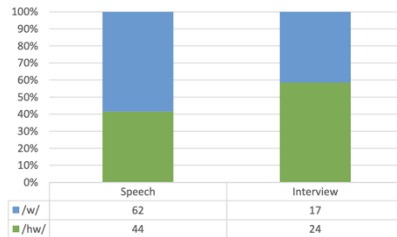


Fig. 4.17. Tom Wolfe's use of the variable in the speech samples.

5. Analysis and discussion

Across all of the analyzed speech samples, the voiceless labiovelar fricative is spread irregularly. It is never used in 100 per cent of the cases where a wh- context appears. Interestingly though, there are a few instances in which the feature appears also in the words where wh- context occurs in the middle of the word. Such examples can be heard in the speech of 9 of the speakers and they include such examples as everywhere, anywhere, somewhere but also overwhelmingly, erstwhile or meanwhile. This shows that the historical assumption that the variable /w/ was used as a marker differentiating between words that spelled with initial

wh and those homophones spelled without the initial wh is not present currently. The use of the variable in today's speech seems rather arbitrary.

What is more, it is also worth mentioning that some of the realizations of the variable in speech were extremely weak and their occurrences may be attributed to deep expiration or inspiration of the speaker rather than their conscious choice to use the researched variable.

5.1. The variable and age

The average age of the speakers analyzed in this research is 80 years old. Based on this information, it can be safely assumed that the voiceless labiovelar fricative is a variable used mostly by speakers from older generations. This leads to an expected conclusion that /ɱ/ is a declining feature that is present in the speech of people who acquired the feature many years ago when it was still prevalent in use. Today, it can still be heard more often than expected; however, it seems that it will become extinct in the next few years as younger generations tend not to acquire it anymore.

5.2. The variable and regionality

According to the historical analysis of the spread of the variable across the United States, the voiceless labiovelar fricative is expected to work as a marker of regionality in southern states. Looking at the place of origin of the speakers, it can be observed that the highest concentration of speakers come from the American South; however, it cannot be clearly assumed that the presence of the voiceless labiovelar fricative can be correlated solely with regionality. If the researched variable were a regional feature, it would be more prevalent in the speech that is characterized by a strong southern accent, the so-called "southern drawl". Yet, in the case of the researched subjects, only four of the speakers – Richard Cheney, Haley Barbour, Howard Fuller, and Teresa Sullivan – present quite a strong southern accent, including other prominent features of this variety in their performances.

In addition, as people travel and languages spread easily, especially across such a vast country as the USA, it becomes more and more difficult to draw clear borders between regional features. Therefore, as the variable cannot be unquestionably attributed to be a regional characteristic, it might be worth regarding it as a feature of General American. Standard languages are usually thought to be an ideal set of features that are rarely present in actual speech realized by the speakers. What is more, following McDavid's (1980) proposal that standards do not have to be based on contemporary linguistic features, it does not matter that the variable might be extinct in the near future, and we could consider including the variable /ɱ/ as one of the features characterizing Standard American pronunciation. This could also have possible educational

implications, especially for those English philology curriculums that offer separate courses on American pronunciation.

5.3. The variable and formality and prestige

The aim of the selection of the speech samples was to provide two environments that were as different as possible. It was assumed that a sample recorded while delivering a speech was the formal one, and the other sample – in most cases an interview – was representative of a lower level of formality. As can be observed in the graphs above, the voiceless labiovelar fricative is more commonly used during the formal speech, and only six speakers present an opposite situation. Even though those differences in distribution of the variable are not great, there is still an observable tendency for the speakers to apply the feature when the situation is believed to be of greater importance. Interestingly enough, Roger Payne – a biologist whose academic work revolves around the life of whales – uses the variable /ɱ/ almost every time he uses the words whale, whales or whaling as if the variable was a marker distinguishing the most prominent and significant words in the context of his work and speech topic. It can be therefore assumed that the voiceless labiovelar seems to show a tendency towards being regarded as a prestigious marker that discerns a more formal speech. However, it cannot be stated what the source of such variation is. Either the variable is a prestigious characteristic for the speakers, so they tend to opt for it in their more careful speeches or it is thought to be a well-regarded prestigious marker by the audience, and therefore speakers are more likely to employ it in their formal and more significant speeches.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to analyze and understand the use of the voiceless labiovelar fricative in contemporary American English. As it was an exploratory study, it did not aim at providing unequivocal proof, but rather to point to certain tendencies that accompany the use of the variable. The study has certainly shown that the voiceless labiovelar fricative can be treated as a linguistic marker of age. Today, it can be found mainly in the speech of older generations, and as no speakers at the age of 20, 30 or 40 years old who use this feature as part of their accent could be found, the variable can be expected to die out in the next few years.

In addition, the voiceless labiovelar fricative is most common in southern dialects. It can also be traced in the speech of those American regions that were historically influenced by the South. However, the results of this study also show that those boundaries are no longer as clear as they could have been in the past, and that the voiceless labiovelar fricative can no longer be regarded as a marker differentiating specifically the southern accent.

Finally, the use of the feature was compared with the formality of the situation in which the speech was delivered. These results provided information on certain tendencies that occur. As it turns out, the variable still seems to be regarded as a prestigious marker of educated speech, as nine out of seventeen subjects used the variable more often in their formal presentations. However, as the variable is not acquired by younger generations, this prestige is most probably attached to it only by those who use it and who decide to include it in their speech rather than the audience.

Summing up, the study has certainly proved that the voiceless labiovelar fricative is a linguistic variable that can be used as a marker. The research provides information on certain trends that co-exist with the use of the voiceless labiovelar fricative. It clearly shows that the age of the speakers is the most salient source of variation, and that older speakers seem to associate the variable with certain degree of formality. It also points out that regional boundaries become more and more unclear and so it happens when it comes to the voiceless labiovelar fricative. However, the variable could be a potential feature of the so-called Standard American.

7. References

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