Describing and accounting for sound patterns in spontaneous speech

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This talk explores the range of sound patterns found in spontaneous speech, concentrating primarily on the variation in segmental aspects of words and phrases. These patterns have been found to correlate with a number of different factors, e.g. frequency of occurrence, place in prosodic structure, pragmatic function. Many of these segmental patterns are treated as resulting from reductions in the size, number or temporal extent of articulatory gestures associated with a lexical item. Reductions, in turn, have been seen as the products of ease of articulation, with the speaker orienting more towards the system-oriented end of Lindblom's (1990) H&H continuum. However, different phonetic realisations of the same word may represent more than just a speaker exploiting a range of different reduction possibilities and may instead be due to more complex long-domain patterns. This will be illustrated using examples of co-occurrence restrictions on glottal stops from spontaneous Suffolk English (Simpson 2006). A further problem with ease of articulation is that the result of a reduction can also result in an articulation that is apparently more complex than the unreduced articulation. One widespread and commonly reported pattern illustrating this is the reduction of a stop to a fricative which would seem to require more articulatory effort than the unreduced stop. The systematic intervocalic fricative realisation of /t/ in SSBE (e.g. British, political) is a good contemporary example (Simpson 2007). In connection with this, we will ask why more fricatives aren't in fact reduced to stops.

Finally, we will examine what the boundaries on reduction are. So, for example, recent studies have described reductions of filler words, such as eigentlich in German (Kohler 2001) or eigenlijk in Dutch (Plug 2006, Ernestus, in press), showing that a polysyllabic word can be reduced to little more than a single syllable. Furthermore, such forms are often incomprehensible if they are played to listeners in isolation, extracted from the utterance context. Despite the presence of such extreme reductions, it is not clear what the restrictions on reduction in general are, i.e. what constitutes wellformed reduced speech. Pathological speech data from a speaker in the early stages of atypical Parkinson's disease show that incorrect reduction patterns can have serious adverse effects on comprehension.

References