

Variation in the pronunciation of word-initial /h/ in Estonian

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It is well known that word-initial /h/ is often not pronounced in Estonian. Already in the first Estonian grammars from the 17th century an observation that Estonians do not pronounce word-initial /h/ was made. It was also noticed, that in some regions (like in South-Eastern Estonia) it is pronounced and that educated people pronounce it. Language planners have considered necessary to preserve word-initial /h/ taking into consideration historical principle of orthography and also its phonological function.

It has been found previously, that /h/ is pronounced almost always while reading texts (Kalvik, Piits 2015). Speakers tend to pronounce /h/ significantly more often in a formal situation than in an informal situation (Cui 1999; Mesipuu 2007). This is confirmed also by the Phonetic Corpus of Estonian Spontaneous Speech: in formal speech /h/ is pronounced on an average in 76% and in informal speech in 36% of cases. In addition to communicative situation some social factors (e.g. speaker's gender and education) and also some linguistic factors (e.g. accentuation, context, word's frequency) have been shown to have an effect on the variation.

The aim of this study is to find out how much the pronunciation of word-initial /h/ varies when the same speaker is in different communicative situations. The Phonetic Corpus of Estonian Spontaneous Speech is used. There are 8 speakers who have been recorded both in the formal situation (monologues like lectures and presentations) and in the informal situation (dialogues between speakers familiar with each other). Words with word-initial /h/ were analysed. All speakers pronounced /h/ more often in the formal than in the informal situation, but there was between-speaker variation. When /h/ was pronounced, it had voiceless and voiced variant. In addition to communicative situation following social and linguistic factors will be considered: speaker's gender, age, regional background, word's accentuation, frequency, position in the utterance, preceding context.

Keywords: phonetics, word-initial fricatives, variation, Estonian

References

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