Functions and social meanings of click sounds in Irish English

Marion Schulte
Universität Bielefeld
marion.schulte@uni-bielefeld.de

Abstract

This study investigates the use and function of click sounds in Irish English. These paralinguistic elements are multifunctional and similar to linguistic discourse-pragmatic markers. In addition to their discourse and pragmatic functions, they also index social meanings and are shown to be connected with assertive and authoritative stances.

1   Introduction

Paralinguistic features like prosody and voice quality are often investigated from a primarily phonetic perspective that focuses on acoustic aspects of their production (e.g. Keating, Garellek & Kreiman, 2015; Garellek & Seyfarth, 2016). In this study, parts of the speech signal that are not, or not entirely linguistic are called paralinguistic following the definition in Schuller et al. (2013). Paralinguistic and nonverbal elements are important for human communication in general, and not only of interest to phonetics (Saville-Troike, 2003). Pragmatic investigations have therefore also started to analyse nonverbal features of language, for example the forms and functions of filled and unfilled pauses and their role in structuring discourse (e.g. Rühlemann, Bagoutdinov & Brook O'Donnell, 2011). This line of research is closely related to the more established field of scholarship that deals with discourse-pragmatic markers. While these markers are part of the linguistic code, they are unusual linguistic elements as they do not make truth-conditional contributions to the semantics of an utterance, are syntactically optional, and very often highly multifunctional (cf. Aijmer & Simon-Vandenbergen 2011). Pragmatics thus offers a fully developed research paradigm for analysing non-canonical linguistic elements that can be transferred to the investigation of paralinguistic features like click sounds.

2   Paralinguistic Elements, Pragmatics, and Sociolinguistics

In spite of the interest in paralinguistic and nonverbal elements in some fields of linguistics, sociolinguists have taken this topic up only recently. Work has been done on the functions and social meanings of voice quality, with a concentration particularly on creaky voice (Henton & Bladon, 1988; Podesva, 2007; Podesva & Callier, 2015; Hildebrand-Edgar, 2016). These studies have found that creaky voice has different discursive functions and indexes a complex set of social meanings. Saville-Troike suggests that different features of language, including paralinguistic and nonverbal elements, may in fact be "inherently more suitable for signaling particular kinds of social meaning but it remains a topic for empirical investigation" (2003: 60). She speculates that paralinguistic features might not be consciously controlled to the same extent as lexical and grammatical aspects of language and might index social factors like "ethnicity, sex, age, and personality" (ibid.). These are mostly macro-level social aspects that have been of key importance in sociolinguistics. Empirical sociolinguistic investigations in this area have, however, been largely restricted to voice quality. A better understanding of the social meanings indexed by various paralinguistic features could advance our knowledge about how speakers negotiate both macro- and micro-level aspects of identity through language use. The present paper aims to contribute to this by investigating the functions and social meanings of click sounds in Irish English conversations from a sociolinguistic perspective. It uses a methodology that has been established for the study of discourse-pragmatic markers and is, to

the best of my knowledge, the first investigation of these paralinguistic elements in this variety of English.

3 Method

The click sounds investigated here are produced by suddenly releasing the tip of the tongue from the alveolar ridge while inhaling. The analysis is auditory and relies on the researcher's perception of the audio signal with the help of visual inspection in Praat (Boersma & Weenink, 2018). The data come from audio-recorded sociolinguistic interviews with 10 speakers of Irish English. These semi-guided interviews with individuals or small groups were conducted between 2015 and 2019 and range in length between 30 minutes and 1.5 hours. Topics covered in all interviews include the participant's neighbourhood and their experiences of living in Dublin. Sociolinguistically relevant information like speaker age, gender (self-identified), or occupation was elicited as well. The speakers are teenagers or young adults who volunteered to take part in this study and live in various areas of Dublin. Some participants were previously known to the researcher, while others were friends-of-friends or strangers. The interviews were recorded in a place chosen by the participants, e.g. their living room, a comparatively quiet public place like a coffee shop, or an empty classroom at school or university. The interviews were conducted in as close a manner to a natural conversation as possible. They are not controlled spoken questionnaires but quite open with regard to topic and length. For more information on the interview procedure and the participants compare Schulte (2019).

The differences between the individual interviews in terms of length and recording context lead to challenges for the analysis. Especially click sounds produced by participants playing with pens occurred frequently and had to be distinguished from clicks produced as part of their vocal utterances. This is usually not difficult for an observer, even on the basis of a recording, but if in doubt about the origin of a click, the token was excluded from the analysis. Some participants produce a very large number of clicks while others produce them only rarely. Only the first 20 tokens per speaker are analysed here in order not to overrepresent possible idiosyncratic uses in such a small sample.

The analysis in the present study is primarily qualitative and considers the positions of clicks within the individual utterance, their relation to the content of the utterance, and social aspects of the speaker and the communicative situation. It thus blends pragmatic and sociolinguistic questions and methodologies in a way that is quite established for the analysis of discourse markers (e.g. Migge, 2015; Murphy, 2015; Schulte, 2019). In particular, this study addresses the following research questions: In which positions do clicks occur? Do different speakers use clicks in similar contexts and with similar frequency? Which discourse-pragmatic functions do clicks have in Irish English? Which social meanings are indexed by the use of clicks?

4 Results

All speakers in this sample produce clicks. Two types of clicks can be distinguished based on the environment following the click, and these types are connected with different functions. Type A occurs after a pause and immediately before a speaker's utterance. Type A clicks have a signalling function: they mostly precede new or important information and often open a speaker's turn. When they occur in the middle of longer turns, they tend to specify the information given previously or introduce an example. Some speakers also produce this type of click to precede utterances that overtly express agreement with another speaker's point, but this function seems to be quite rare. This type of click thus has primarily discursive functions that are closely related. The # in the following examples indicates a pause:

(1) *I didn't really apply that at a local level at all until, # [=!click] like about two, two and half years ago* (Chloe)
(2) *# [=!click] what I noticed as would be something very colloquial in that* (Emily)
(3) *# [click] I really am really mad into my rings my jewellery and stuff like that* (Mark)
(4) *# [=!click] it definitely was* (James)

In (1), Chloe specifies the information she provides previously, and this part of the utterance is preceded by a click. Emily provides discourse-new information in (2), when she details her observations about accents in Dublin, the current topic of the conversation. In (3), Mark expresses his appreciation of jewellery and rings in particular after we talked about the rings on his fingers previously. This is therefore not new or surprising

information - he rather asserts a comparatively important aspect about himself with a click sound and draws attention to this statement. James produces a click in (4) to draw attention to his agreement with the previous utterance by his interlocutor.

Type B clicks are both preceded and followed by a pause. These elements mostly precede information that expresses the speaker's disagreement, e.g. with a previous utterance by their interlocutor, or information the speaker wants to distance themselves from, e.g. views held by other people that the speaker reports. This distancing function can also lead to the click being used before a sarcastic utterance. Examples for Type B clicks are:

(5) # [=!click] # Transport XX it's fantastic (Daniel)

(6) # [=!click] # it just doesn't # it doesn't interest me (Laura)

(7) but it's just there are people who # [=!click] # would be associated with kind of anti-social behaviour (Emily)

(8) # [=!click] # I haven't heard much about Maynooth (Joseph)

(5) is a sarcastic statement about the state of public transport in Dublin, which is notoriously bad and comes up in almost every interview. In (6), Laura distances herself from a topic talked about previously. We spoke about the Irish language, and she overtly expresses her disinterest in studying it. Emily distances herself from behaviour she evaluates negatively in (7) and signals the reason for her dislike of certain social groups by preceding this part of the utterance with a click in inter-pausal position. In (8), Joseph claims to have no knowledge about the current topic of the conversation, which was Maynooth University. The click can also be seen as a form of distancing here, as Joseph shows that he cannot take part in a discussion about this topic.

5   Discussion

Type A clicks are mainly used to link utterances and structure spoken discourse by drawing attention to important aspects, e.g. specifications of previous information, signalling that new information is coming up, or being used as turn openers. In linguistic elements, these functions are performed by discourse markers. Clicks following a pause seem to have similar functions in Irish English and could therefore be considered paralinguistic discourse markers. Type B clicks, however, signal inter-personal aspects of communication. They are used in connection with utterances that express disagreement with previous statements or distance the speaker from the topic of conversation. They are also used in connection with sarcasm and humour. Such functions are usually fulfilled by pragmatic markers, and Type B clicks thus seem to be paralinguistic pragmatic markers. In linguistic elements, discourse and pragmatic functions cannot always be neatly separated and the same seems to be the case for these paralinguistic markers. The rare Type A clicks that initiate agreement sequences would be an example of an element that has both discourse and pragmatic functions and could represent a transition between these.

The high number of different functions this element seems to have is also reminiscent of linguistic discourse-pragmatic markers. Both formal and functional aspects of the clicks investigated here fit the descriptions of linguistic discourse-pragmatic markers (e.g. Aijmer 2013: 16-17), and it therefore seems appropriate to consider them paralinguistic discourse-pragmatic markers. As in linguistic discourse-pragmatic markers, the use of both types of clicks has a sociolinguistic dimension as well. While all speakers produce clicks, they do this to varying extents. Type A markers are more common, but Type B markers are only produced by a small number of speakers. Speaker gender does not seem to correlate with the use of either type (the sample is balanced for gender, but remains very small, so this cannot be said with certainty), but the use of clicks can be related to the use of fricative /t/, a feature that has been associated with stances of authority and assertiveness in another study using the same corpus (Schulte, 2019). Speakers who frequently fricate word-final /t/, and thus index their own expert knowledge and authority, also frequently produce clicks. Speakers who do not use fricative /t/ extensively and prefer other variants, on the other hand, produce a comparatively small number of clicks. It is therefore possible that the frequent use of clicks is connected to similar stances as fricated realisations of /t/. As clicks are used to signal new and important information or reveal the speaker's evaluation of an utterance, topic, or person, they may only be used by speakers who want to be seen as contributing important information, drawing attention to their own

utterances, and evaluating other contributions to the conversation. This would be the case for speakers taking stances of assertiveness and authority.

6 Conclusion

The present study has shown that vocal clicks produced by speakers of Irish English are similar to linguistic discourse-pragmatic markers both in form and in function and can therefore be considered paralinguistic discourse-pragmatic markers. Two different types were found in the data: Type A occurs after a pause but immediately before the following utterance, while Type B is preceded and followed by a pause. Type A has mostly discourse functions and Type B fulfils mainly pragmatic functions. Both types index social meanings in addition to their pragmatic functions. As they are used to structure discourse and signal the relative importance of information and can also evaluate the speaker's agreement with this information, they are used by speakers who want to make these evaluations known and want to draw attention to particular elements of their utterances. This is the case when speakers take stances of assertiveness and authority, so clicks seem to occur particularly in such contexts. The small sample investigated here is not sufficient to link the occurrence of clicks with macro-social factors like age, gender, or social class. A larger study could aim to connect the micro-social level described here with such macro-social factors.

Analyses of paralinguistic elements are quite rare. It has been demonstrated here that such elements can be similarly complex as linguistic constructions, and thus offer potentially interesting insights into all aspects of language use. Especially sociolinguistic and pragmatic studies should therefore pay much more attention to paralinguistic constructions.

References

Karin Aijmer. 2013. *Understanding pragmatic markers: A variational pragmatic approach.* Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

Karin Aijmer and Anne-Marie Simon-Vandenbergen. 2011. Pragmatic markers. In Jef Verschueren, Jan-Ola Ostman and Jan Zienkowski (eds.), *Discursive pragmatics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Paul Boersma and David Weenink. 2018. *Praat. Doing phonetics by computer.* Version 6.0.43. <http://www.praat.org>

Marc Garellek and Scott Seyfarth. 2016. Acoustic differences between English /t/ glottalization and phrasal creek. *Interspeech 2016,* pages 1054-1058.

Caroline Henton and Anthony Bladon. 1988. Creak as a sociophoentic marker. In Larry M. Hyman and Charles N. Li (eds.), *Language, speech and mind.* Routledge, London, pages 3-29.

Nicole Hildebrand-Edgar. 2016. Creaky voice. An interactional resource for indicating authority. MA thesis, University of Victoria.

Patricia Keating, Marc Garellek and Jody Kreiman. 2015. Acoustic properties of different kinds of creaky voice. *Proceedings of ICPhS 2015.* <https://linguistics.ucla.edu/people/keating/Keating-et%20al_ICPhS_FINALMay2015.pdf>

Bettina Migge. 2015. Now in the speech of newcomers to Ireland. In Carolina Amador-Moreno, Kevin McCafferty & Elaine Vaughan (eds.), *Pragmatic markers in Irish English*. John Benjamins, Amsterdam, pages 390-407.

Bróna Murphy. 2015. A corpus-based investigation of pragmatic markers and sociolinguistic variation in Irish English. In Carolina Amador-Moreno, Kevin McCafferty & Elaine Vaughan (eds.), *Pragmatic markers in Irish English*. John Benjamins, Amsterdam, pages 65-88.

Robert Podesva. 2007. Phonation type as a stylistic variable: The use of falsetto in constructing a persona. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 11(4):478-504.

Robert Podesva and Patrick Callier. 2015. Voice quality and identity. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* (35):173-194.

Christoph Rühlemann, Andrej Bagoutdinov and Matthew Brook O'Donnell. 2011. Windows on the mind. Pauses in conversational narrative. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics* 16(2):198-230.

Muriel Saville-Troike. 2003. The ethnography of communication: An introduction. 3rd ed. Blackwell, Malden, Mass.

Björn Schuller, Stefan Steidl, Anton Batliner, Felix Burkhardt, Laurence Devillers, Christian Müller and Shrikanth Narayanan. 2013. Paralinguistics in speech and language - State-of-the-art and the challenge. *Computer Speech and Language* 27:4-39.

Marion Schulte. 2019. The sociophonetics of Dublin English: Phonetic realisation and sociopragmatic variation. Habilitationsschrift, Universität Bielefeld.