SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF NORTHERN VIETNAMESE STUDENTS WITH /N/ AND /L/ PRONUNCIATION CHALLENGES

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Abstract: *This article presents a socio-linguistic analysis of the difficulties faced by the students from Northern Vietnam in distinguishing between the phonemes /n/ and /l/ after they move from their home provinces (such as Hai Duong, Hai Phong, Thai Binh, Nam Dinh, and Thai Nguyen) to Hanoi for study and work. These pronunciation patterns, stemming from regional dialectal characteristics, often become a source of language anxiety for students entering environments where the Hanoi dialect - considered the more prestigious - predominates. Based on the Audience Design Theory and Communication Accommodation Theory, this study analyzes how students adjust their speech in response to social judgment, audience expectations, and professional pressures. Through qualitative examples drawn from newspaper articles and previous empirical studies, this paper identifies three stages of change in linguistic attitudes and behaviors: initial linguistic trauma upon arrival in Hanoi, the shift in attitude after prolonged exposure to the standard dialect, and the lasting occupational impacts manifested by persistent linguistic anxiety. The analysis further discusses whether the /n/–/l/ variation should be treated as a dialectal feature or a mispronunciation, arguing that while it is a legitimate regional characteristic, it is socially constructed as an error in dominant linguistic contexts. The study highlights the complex relationship between language, power, and identity in contemporary Vietnam and calls for greater sociolinguistic awareness in education and society to reduce stigmatization and promote linguistic inclusivity.*
Key words: */n/-/l/ variation; Linguistic insecurity; Audience Design Theory; Communication Accommodation Theory.*
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1. Introduction

This essay analyzes a distinct sociolinguistic group: students from Northern Vietnamese provinces such as Hai Duong, Hai Phong, Thai Nguyen, Nam Dinh, and Thai Binh, who experience pronunciation difficulties with the /n/ and /l/ sounds. These students move to Hanoi for higher education and professional opportunities. Due to the regional influence of dialects in their hometowns, their non-standard pronunciation often leads to linguistic insecurity, which is defined by Holmes & Wilson (2022) as "anxiety or lack of confidence about 'correct' or standard linguistic usage, especially in formal situations" (p. 680). When they integrate into Hanoi's formal and professional environment, where the standard dialect is dominant, this insecurity becomes more pronounced.

By applying Audience Design Theory, which suggests speakers adjust their speech based on the audience, and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which focuses on how individuals modify their communication to either converge or diverge from others, this essay examines whether these pronunciation patterns are dialectal variations or mispronunciations and discusses the social implications for these students.

2. The group description

The students in question form a distinct sociolinguistic class due to shared phonological features and social experiences. As highlighted in Vân and Hiền's (2022) study on pronunciation correction among students at Thai Nguyen University, students from provinces such as Nam Dinh, Hai Duong, Thai Binh, and Bac Giang frequently confuse /n/ and /l/ sounds when speaking both Vietnamese and English. These pronunciation errors are not just individual articulation issues but are linked to broader dialectal habits that are deeply ingrained in the students' linguistic backgrounds. In their hometowns, these speech patterns are not considered errors. However, in Hanoi, where the prestigious standard dialect dominates, they face negative attitudes and pressure to conform linguistically.

Hanoi, the capital city, as the nation's educational hub, gathers millions of students from provinces from all over Vietnam, including Hai Duong, Nam Dinh, Thai Binh, and others annually. This movement to the capital suggests a reasonable hypothesis that these students, carrying their dialectal features, experience challenges and linguistic pressures. Bền (2011) also discusses the mispronunciation of the /n/ and /l/ sounds, which is common in regions like Hai Phong and the outskirts of Hanoi. While these features may be normal within their dialects, they often cause discomfort in listeners and are stigmatized in professional environments. Efforts to correct such pronunciation are ongoing,

especially in educational institutions and among teachers.
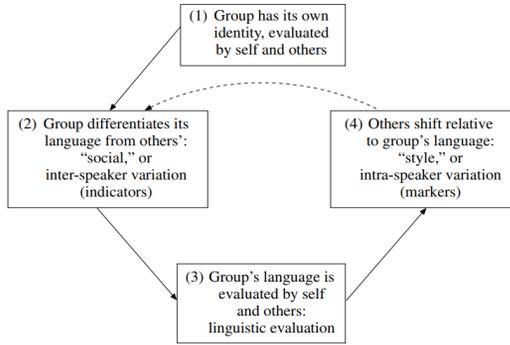
3. Bell's Model of Linguistic Variation

Fig.1: The derivation of intra-speaker from inter-speaker variation,by way of evaluation

Bell's (2002) model of audience design (Figure 1) helps explain the linguistic progression of Northern Vietnamese students as they transition between different social environments. The model emphasizes the cyclical relationship between inter-speaker variation (differences between social groups) and intra-speaker variation (how individuals shift their speech relative to others).

Group Identity and Differentiation: In their hometowns, students from Northern provinces develop a strong group identity based on their local dialect, particularly the /n/ and /l/ sound variation (step 1 in Bell's model). This feature distinguishes them from other regions and serves as an inter-speaker variation or indicator of their social group (step 2).

Evaluation by Others and Linguistic Insecurity: Upon arriving in Hanoi, their speech is evaluated negatively, triggering linguistic insecurity (step 3). This evaluation drives them to modify their pronunciation to conform to the prestigious dialect of Hanoi, as they seek to avoid social stigma and gain acceptance in professional settings.

Intra-Speaker Variation and Style-Shifting: As students adjust their speech to fit the expectations of the Hanoi audience, they engage in style-shifting (step 4), aligning their pronunciation with the standard dialect.

By analyzing this cycle, this essay can better elaborate on how linguistic identity evolves through social evaluations and how students respond to the pressures of language conformity in new environments.

4. The three stages of language attitude change

Stage 1: Linguistic Humiliation and Initial Adaptation in Hanoi

Upon moving to Hanoi, students from Northern provinces frequently experience what can be described as linguistic insecurity, mentioned as "anxiety or lack of confidence". This insecurity becomes particularly evident as they attempt to integrate into academic and professional environments, where their distinct dialectal features, such as the confusion between /n/ and /l/ sounds, are often stigmatized to some extent.

A real-life example comes from Phương, a 22-year-old contestant who, to this day, recalls the sting of a judge's comment during a singing competition: "You have a beautiful appearance and a clear voice, but unfortunately, we have never seen a singer who mispronounces on television" . This illustrates how mispronunciation extends beyond mere speech and can influence a person's self-image and professional opportunities.

Mispronunciation, particularly the confusion between /n/ and /l/ sounds, is widespread and often carries social implications, including embarrassment and professional disadvantages. Despite this, many young people strive to correct their pronunciation errors to improve their communication and self-presentation.

This stage of linguistic humiliation marks the initial adaptation these students undergo as they confront the social expectations of Hanoi's formal linguistic environment. The pressure to modify their speech stems not only from a desire for linguistic conformity but also from the practical need to thrive in academic and professional spheres.

Research by Derwing et al. (2009) and Huttinger (2024) indicates that non-standard accents or dialects, while often intelligible, are frequently associated with social stigma. This aligns with the experiences of the aforementioned Northern Vietnamese students, who, despite being understood, are often judged based on their pronunciation of certain sounds like /n/ and /l/. These students face the challenge of modifying their speech to conform to the linguistic norms of their new environment, often due to external pressures and social judgment.

An illustrative example comes from VnExpress (2011), which humorously recounts the experience of Lâm, a young man from Hải Dương known for his singing talent. Lâm frequently volunteered to perform at social gatherings, but due to his inability to distinguish between /n/ and /l/, his performances were often met with laughter. Famous lines such as "nắng nghe chiều xuống thành phố mộng mơ" became "lắng nghe chiều xuống," turning his performances into long-lasting jokes among his peers. This example highlights how mispronunciations can lead to social exclusion or ridicule, further reinforcing the pressure on individuals to correct their speech for better social acceptance.

Interestingly, Lâm explained that "cả làng anh đều nói như thế" (my whole village speaks like that), underscoring how dialectal features are deeply rooted in regional communities. According to Holmes and Wilson (2022), language is intricately linked to identity and social factors, and variation often reflects social variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, and class. These regional dialects, while forming an essential part of Lâm's identity, can lead to social challenges when speakers enter environments where the standard dialect is dominant.

Stage 2: Return to Hometowns and Attitudinal Shifts

Upon returning to their hometowns after spending time in Hanoi, many students exhibit a noticeable shift in their attitudes toward their local dialect. Having corrected their pronunciation of /n/ and /l/ while in university, they often view their previous speech patterns, once a core part of their identity, as inferior. Vân and Hiền (2022) found that students who had undergone this linguistic shift frequently expressed less tolerance for those in their hometowns who continue to use the non-standard dialect.

This shift in attitude creates a sense of linguistic tension. While back in their hometowns, these students may not revert to using their local dialect. This change can even lead them to correct others in their community, which creates unnecessary stress. Interestingly, the differences between local and standard speech patterns are often unnoticed by the local population, who continue speaking as usual without feeling any sense of linguistic inadequacy. Yet, it is the returning students, those who have modified their speech in Hanoi, who often feel like fixing the mispronunciations of others, further contributing to the tension.

This behavior is particularly evident in familial settings, where younger individuals who have changed their pronunciation might attempt to correct their elders like their parents or grandparents when they mispronounce words. This may lead to negative reactions, as the older generation may interpret these corrections as disrespectful. For example, a young person correcting their parent's speech in an attempt to "improve" their language can strain familial relationships, as these corrections are perceived as undermining the elder's authority and "normal" way of speaking.

Stage 3: Professional Impact and Continued Linguistic Insecurity

Even as these students advance in their careers, they might continue to face difficulties due to lingering pronunciation issues. In professional settings, where clear communication is essential, persistent mispronunciation of /n/ and /l/ may not severely impact comprehension, but it still influences how others perceive them. These pronunciation challenges contribute to feelings of linguistic insecurity and affect their confidence and career prospects. While mispronunciation might not always be a significant barrier to understanding, it can lead to assumptions about professionalism, potentially preventing individuals from gaining certain opportunities.

According to CAT people adjust their communication strategies to align with group norms or to differentiate themselves from out-groups, often reinforcing social boundaries (Giles, 2016). For students from Northern provinces who move to Hanoi, group identity plays a central role in shaping their communication patterns. They modify their speech to align with the linguistic norms of their professional or academic environment, seeking to fit into these prestigious groups and reinforce their identity as part of the professional or academic community.

Giles' (2016) CAT also highlights various psychological and social motivations behind accommodation behavior, including the desire for approval, relationship building, or status negotiation. In these students' cases, the primary motivation for adjusting their speech is to achieve success in academic settings and advance their careers. By improving their pronunciation, they aim to avoid social separation and present themselves more favorably in professional contexts.

5. Dialect or Mispronunciation?

Back to the central question in this analysis is whether the /n/ and /l/ pronunciation variations represent dialectal differences or are simply mispronunciations. From a phonological standpoint, Hwa-Froelich et al. (2002) argue that the regional variations in Vietnamese phonology should be classified as dialectal features. These sounds are part of the students' cultural and linguistic heritage, and within their local context, they are not considered errors.

However, in the broader Vietnamese linguistic environment, particularly in Hanoi, these pronunciation patterns are often viewed as mispronunciations due to the dominance of the standard dialect. Bell's (2002) audience design framework explains that linguistic choices are often influenced by the audience's expectations, and in this case, the audience expects standard pronunciation. Thus, while the /n/ and /l/ variations are part of a legitimate regional dialect, they are treated as mispronunciations in Hanoi's professional and academic contexts.

6. Conclusion and limitations

This sociolinguistic analysis of students from Northern Vietnam who struggle with /n/ and /l/ pronunciation demonstrates the complex relationship between dialect, linguistic identity, and social power. While these pronunciation features are part of their regional dialect, they are treated as mispronunciations in Hanoi's professional and academic settings. These students face challenges not only in social and professional interactions but also in navigating the pressures to conform to the linguistic norms of a prestigious dialect. Their experiences highlight the importance of addressing linguistic insecurity to promote social inclusion and professional advancement. By integrating sociolinguistic theory and relevant examples, this analysis contributes to a decent understanding of how language shift is taking place in Hanoi, Vietnam, and how the students' experiences in Hanoi reflect broader sociolinguistic challenges.

However, the analysis is limited by the lack of extensive empirical research and surveys specifically addressing this issue. Further research is needed to explore the broader social and psychological impacts of mispronunciation, particularly in formal and professional environments, and to investigate the long-term effects of linguistic accommodation on students' career development ■

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Phân tích ngôn ngữ - xã hội về những khó khăn phát âm /n/ và /l/ của sinh viên một số trường đại học phía Bắc Việt Nam

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Tóm tắt: *Bài viết trình bày một phân tích ngôn ngữ - xã hội về sinh viên miền Bắc Việt Nam gặp khó khăn trong việc phân biệt hai âm vị /n/ và /l/ sau khi họ chuyển từ các tỉnh quê hương (như Hải Dương, Hải Phòng, Thái Bình, Nam Định và Thái Nguyên) lên Hà Nội để học tập và làm việc. Những kiểu phát âm này, bắt nguồn từ đặc điểm phương ngữ vùng miền, thường trở thành nguyên nhân gây ra tình trạng bất an ngôn ngữ khi sinh viên bước vào những môi trường nơi phương ngữ Hà Nội - vốn được xem là uy tín - chi phối. Dựa trên Lý thuyết Thiết kế Người nghe (Audience Design Theory) và Lý thuyết Điều chỉnh Giao tiếp (Communication Accommodation Theory), nghiên cứu phân tích cách sinh viên điều chỉnh lời nói của mình trước sự đánh giá xã hội, kỳ vọng của người nghe và áp lực nghề nghiệp. Thông qua các ví dụ định tính được rút ra từ bài viết trên báo chí và các nghiên cứu thực nghiệm trước đó, bài viết xác định ba giai đoạn thay đổi về thái độ và hành vi ngôn ngữ: sự tổn thương ngôn ngữ ban đầu khi đặt chân đến Hà Nội, sự chuyển biến về thái độ sau một thời gian dài tiếp xúc với phương ngữ chuẩn và những tác động nghề nghiệp kéo dài được thể hiện qua tình trạng bất an ngôn ngữ liên tục. Phân tích cũng thảo luận liệu biến thể /n/-/l/ nên được coi là một đặc điểm phương ngữ hay là lỗi phát âm, từ đó lập luận rằng mặc dù đây là một đặc trưng vùng miền hợp pháp về mặt ngôn ngữ, nhưng nó bị kiến tạo về mặt xã hội như một "lỗi" trong những bối cảnh ngôn ngữ chi phối. Nghiên cứu nhấn mạnh mối quan hệ phức tạp giữa ngôn ngữ, quyền lực và bản sắc trong bối cảnh Việt Nam đương đại, đồng thời kêu gọi nâng cao nhận thức ngôn ngữ - xã hội trong giáo dục và xã hội nhằm giảm thiểu sự kỳ thị và thúc đẩy tính bao dung ngôn ngữ.*
Từ khóa: *Biến thể /n/-/l/, Bất an ngôn ngữ, Lý thuyết Thiết kế Người nghe, Lý thuyết Điều chỉnh Giao tiếp.*