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PHONETIC VARIATION AND CHANGE OF RUSSIAN IN THE CITY OF CHEBOKSARY

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The article presents a quantitative study of socially conditioned variation and change of Russian in the city of Cheboksary (Chuvash Republic of Russia). Speech samples were collected from a socially homogeneous group of 16 Chuvash-Russian bilingual speakers by means of sociolinguistic interviews. Analysis of four vowel variables identified the patterns of their variation according to the speakers' age, gender and two speech styles. Multiple logistic regression analyses were then conducted to assess the results statistically. The results revealed an age differentiation pattern, suggesting a sound change in progress and a levelling of the regional features towards standard Russian. These findings have been linked to a reduced use of Chuvash by the younger generation, and the prestige of Russian in the Chuvash Republic. Furthermore, an unusual pattern of style variation was uncovered: some of the regional forms were used more frequently in a more monitored reading mode of speech. It is suggested that this effect is due to the impact of the orthographic form.

Keywords: language variation, sound change, regional variety of Russian, Russian in the Chuvash Republic, dialect levelling

ФОНЕТИЧЕСКАЯ ВАРИАТИВНОСТЬ И ИЗМЕНЕНИЕ РУССКОГО ЯЗЫКА
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В данной статье представлено количественное исследование вариативности и изменения русского языка в Чебоксарах (Чувашская Республика РФ). Исследованы записи речи 16 чувашско-русских билингвов, полученные в ходе социолингвистических интервью. Проанализировав произношение четырех гласных переменных, мы выявили частотность их использования в зависимости от возраста и пола информантов, а также стиля речи (спонтанная речь и чтение). Кроме того был проведен статистический анализ данных методом логистической регрессии. В результате было обнаружено, что в речи молодых участников, региональные варианты исследуемых гласных встречались реже, чем среди участников старшего поколения. Это позволило сделать предположение о фонетических изменениях, происходящих в региональном варианте русского языка в Чебоксарах, а именно о его нивелировании в сторону стандартного русского. Такие изменения предположительно связаны со сниженным субстратным влиянием чувашского языка на русскую речь молодых билингвов, использующих чувашский сравнительно реже, чем старшее поколение чебоксарцев. Престиж литературного русского языка в Чувашской Республике способствует вымыванию региональных особенностей произношения. Кроме того, заслуживают внимания особенности произношения, обнаруженные при сравнении спонтанной речи и чтения: некоторые региональные формы употреблялись чаще во время чтения, более сознательно

контролируемого стиля речи. Предполагается, что этот необычный паттерн связан с воздействием орфографической формы.

Ключевые слова: языковая вариативность, фонетические изменения, региональная вариативность русского языка, русский язык в Чувашии, диалектное нивелирование

1. Introduction

Variation of the Russian language represents a great theoretical and practical interest for several reasons. Regional dialectology of Russian is remarkable given the vast territory of its spread as well as the history of the language formation and proliferation. At the same time, being in contact with a number of minority languages, Russian is affected by their substrate effects, which also contribute to the regional variation. The coexistence of the languages and their mutual influence, however, are not stable but dynamic, being subject to historical, economic, cultural, technological and other changes in the society. Studying social aspects of language variation in Russian regions is important because it can help understand the reasons of the ongoing linguistic change, implement language planning and promote linguistic diversity. Sociolinguistic studies of Russian have already been conducted in such sub-national regions of Russia as the Republic of Dagestan [Daniel et al., 2010] and Perm Oblast [Kochetov, 2006], with many other regional varieties are yet to be investigated.

In the Chuvash Republic of Russia (also Chuvashia), Russian acquired features differentiating it from varieties spoken elsewhere. While some of them are due to the history of the local dialect formation by Russian speakers coming from different regions, the others are due to Chuvash substrate influence [Reziukov, 1959; Mikhailov, 1989]. In recent decades Chuvashia has been experiencing a dramatic language shift. With Russian and Chuvash being the official languages, their de facto status and use are far from being balanced. Russian is enjoying an across-the-board prestige and is used as a primary means of communication in most language use settings. By contrast, the number of Chuvash speakers is shrinking, with many Chuvashes being reluctant to learn, use and transmit the language to the next generation [Alòs i Font, 2015].

Given these recent developments, we set out with a hypothesis that linguistic forms characterizing the regional variety of Russian in Chuvashia are undergoing variation and change. The use of such forms is expected to be diminishing, driven, on the one hand, by objective factors such as the overall lesser use of Chuvash by the youth and, hence, its lesser interference with Russian. On the other hand, subjective factors, such as the desire to speak “proper” unaccented Russian in order to sound more educated and progressive, are also likely to reduce the use of the regional forms. This language change is likely to propagate from the republic’s capital, Cheboksary, where Chuvash speakers are prone to a quick linguistic assimilation [Ibid.]. The research aims to investigate the use of the regional pronunciation features and to determine patterns of their variation according to the

speakers' age, gender and the mode of speech. The findings will be discussed with the focus on the role of social factors in the use of the regional linguistic forms.

2. Background

2.1. Linguistic situation in the Chuvash Republic

Chuvashia is one of a few Russian regions with predominating non-Russian ethnic population: the Chuvash make up 68% of the republic's inhabitants [Russian Census, 2010]. Historically, Chuvashes mainly lived in the rural areas, while Russians inhabited a few towns and the city of Cheboksary. Thus, Russian-Chuvash bilingualism had not taken place until the 20th century, when interactions between the two ethnicities began to extend, as did the language contact. Today Russian and Chuvash both hold the status of official languages in the region. The Law on Languages promotes the preservation, development and active use of Chuvash in public and social life of the republic. However, despite de jure protected status, the state of Chuvash has been alarming for the last few decades. Only in the period between 2002 and 2010 the number of Chuvash speakers decreased by 14% in Chuvashia and by 21% in Russia [Ibid., 2002; 2010]. The vitality of Chuvash is assessed as endangered, and its vulnerable position has been investigated by various scholars (see, e.g., Alòs i Font [2015]).

A difference in the linguistic situation between urban and rural areas of Chuvashia is noticeable. Writing about bilingualism in Chuvashia of the 50-60s, Andreev [1970] highlights that Chuvashes residing in the cities naturally become bilingual in Chuvash and Russian, while already the second generation of the city dwellers experiences a complete shift to Russian. The pattern has hardly changed since then, but the urban population in the republic grew from 24% in 1959 to 59% in 2010, due in large part to Chuvash speaking individuals moving from the rural areas [Russian Census, 1959; 2010]. The level of Chuvash transmission across generations in the cities is very low, and Russian is becoming the default language in all domains of life, including the family. Although in the republic's smaller towns the language shift is not so dramatic, the situation there lags by just one generation of speakers [Alòs i Font, 2013].

The city of Cheboksary, which is the focus of the present study, has its own sociolinguistic profile. Among 453 000 people living here, 59% are Chuvash and 32% are ethnic Russians [Russian Census, 2010]. The Chuvash became a numerical majority in the city only in the 1970s, following an influx of the rural population, triggered by the construction of industrial enterprises and a hydroelectric dam on the Volga. For Chuvashes settling in Cheboksary, a perfect command of Russian is a high priority. Fomin [2019] argues that Cheboksarians see the Russian language as a valuable

asset to get higher professional achievements in life. Chuvash, on the contrary, is seldom linked to economic value: an overwhelming majority of high school students regard Chuvash as not useful for getting a good job or a high salary [Alòs i Font, 2015]. Alongside associations of Chuvash with rurality and backwardness, this puts its prestige extremely low. Moreover, a belief was revealed among some Cheboksarians that Chuvash hinders a successful mastering of Russian and, hence, the former should be avoided in communication with children [Ibid.]. As a result, Chuvash speakers settling in Cheboksary tend to rapidly assimilate linguistically. Since the city represents probably the most extreme manifestation of the current language shift, with Russian predominating in all walks of life, Chuvash substratum effects on the regional Russian are likely to decrease, making Russian spoken in Cheboksary closer to the standard.

2.2. Phonetic features of Russian in Chuvashia

Russian was introduced to the region after the XVI century. Its features were formed by speakers coming from the areas of Northern, Southern and Central Russian dialects as well as other territories, who settled mainly in Cheboksary. In the XX century, Russian was started to be taught in schools across Chuvashia. Later, after World War II, industrial development caused a mass movement of rural Chuvash speaking population to the towns and cities. Thus, the language contact accelerated, and Chuvash substrate features penetrated the local Russian.

It has been suggested that Russian spoken in Cheboksary should be treated as a variety distinct from those found elsewhere inside and outside the republic [Erina et al., 2018; 2019]. Arguing that the Cheboksary regiolect was formed after the 1970s due to Chuvash substrate influence and extralinguistic factors, the researchers point to its differences from standard Russian in all levels of the language system. However, from the data available to date, it is unclear whether the Cheboksary regiolect belongs to monolingual Russian speakers, bilingual Chuvash-Russian speakers, or both. Although the regiolect seemingly takes an intermediate position between Russian spoken in rural Chuvashia and standard Russian, it has not been thoroughly investigated, and in the context of this study, the term *regional variety of Russian* will be used instead.

Realization of three vowels can distinguish Russian in Chuvashia including Cheboksary: the close-mid back rounded /o/²¹, the open front unrounded /a/ and the close-mid front unrounded /e/. In standard Russian, they are a subject to reduction in unstressed position [Avanesov, 1972; Timberlake, 2004] (see fig. 1). In the regional Russian, not reduced or semi-reduced forms of the underlying /o, a, e/ were attested in the Dialectological Atlas [Avanesov et al., 1986] and in the works

²¹ Slashes // will be used to indicate phonological representations and square brackets [] to indicate phonetic transcription.

of Bogoroditskii [1933], Mikhailov [1989] and others. They seem to be particularly robust among speakers of Chuvash as first language. Thus, these vowels were chosen as the linguistic variables (see table 1). We will consider each of them in more detail, determining their variants and contexts of variation.

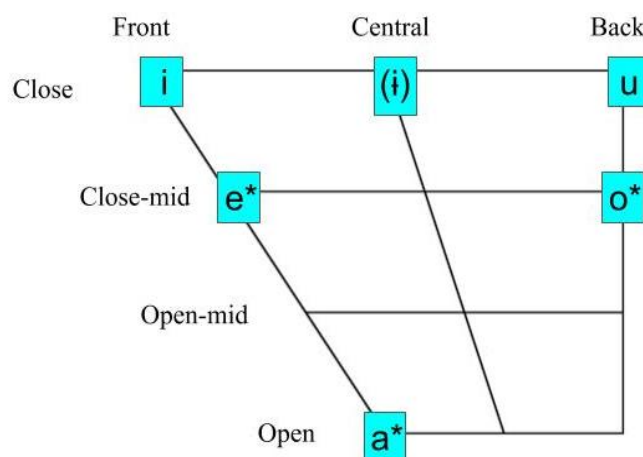


Fig. 1. Russian vowel inventory chart (based on the descriptions of Jones et al. [1969] and Timberlake [2004]). Vowels marked with * undergo phonological reduction

Variable (o). When unstressed, the vowel /o/ can undergo two degrees of reduction [Avanesov, 1972; Timberlake, 2004]. In the first pretonic syllable and in the absolute beginning of the word, /o/ is pronounced as the open front unrounded [a]. In all other unstressed syllables, it is reduced to the mid central [ə]. However, in the regional variety under investigation, the unstressed /o/ can be pronounced as the close-mid back [o], which corresponds to the phenomenon of *okan'e* [Mikhailov, 1989: 44]. Recently, Erina et al. [2019] highlighted that this feature is mainly displayed by older speakers in Cheboksary.

To make codification decisions, it is worth mentioning that vowels are not discrete variables, their variants lie on a continuous scale [Milroy et al., 2003: 138]. Along with the realizations of [o], [a] and [ə], other, intermediate forms can surface. At the same time, in connected speech the reduced variants [a] and [ə] of the underlying /o/ are not perceived as contrastive because an unstressed position determines their quantitative reduction to rather short forms [Timberlake, 2004: 42]. Moreover, the major focus of the study is to establish whether the standard (reduced) or regional (non-reduced) variant is used. Therefore, the variable (o) was treated as categorical, having two variants: standard [a] and regional [o].

Table 1

Linguistic variables

| Variable name | Phonetic context | Variants (the first variant corresponds to the standard) | Examples with the IPA phonetic transcription in the standard |
|---------------|--|--|---|
| (o) | /o/ in unstressed syllables | [a], [o] | <i>obidet'</i> [a' bʲidʲetʲ] 'to offend' <i>zhelezo</i> [zɛ' i' lʲeza] 'iron' |
| (a) | /a/ after palatalized consonants, /tɕ/ and /ɕ/ in unstressed syllables | [i], [a] | <i>riabina</i> [rʲi' bʲina] 'rowan' <i>schastlivyĭ</i> [ɕis' lʲivʲij] 'happy', masc. |
| (e1) | /e/ after palatalized consonants, /tɕ/ and /ɕ/ in unstressed syllables | [i], [e] | <i>petukh</i> [pʲi' tux] 'rooster' <i>champion</i> [tɕimpʲi' on] 'champion' |
| (e2) | /e/ in the absolute beginning of the word or after another vowel | [e], [jɛ] | <i>ëtot</i> ['etɐt] 'this', masc. <i>poëty</i> [pa'et i] 'poets' |

Variable (a). In standard Russian, when the open front /a/ follows palatalized consonants in unstressed syllables (not in grammatical endings), it is realized as the close front unrounded [i]. It also occurs when /a/ appears after the voiceless alveolar-palatal affricate /tɕ/ and the voiceless alveolar-palatal fricative /ɕ/ [Avanesov, 1972]. In Chuvashia on the whole and in Cheboksary in particular, non-reduced realizations of [a] are frequent [Mikhailov, 1989; Erina, 2018]. This pronunciation can even be noticed in the speech of newsreaders and hosts on the local radio stations. The variants for the variable (a) have been determined as [i] and [a].

Variable (e1). When unstressed, the close-mid front /e/ undergoes the same reduction as the /a/. In the standard it is pronounced as the close front unrounded [i] after palatalized consonants and /tɕ, ɕ/ [Avanesov, 1972; Timberlake, 2004]. The merger of unstressed /e/ and /a/ with /i/ was termed as *ikan'e*. This phenomenon became a literary norm in Russian at the turn of the XX century [Timberlake, 2004: 44]. An alternative realization of the variable (e1) among the Chuvash speakers is [e].

Variable (e2). Another environment to be considered for /e/ is the absolute beginning of words or after another vowel. In these cases, /e/ is represented in writing by the letter э and is pronounced as [e]. Contrary to the literary norm, speakers of Chuvash can add the voiced palatal approximant /j/ before the vowel, resulting in [jɛ] [Erina et al., 2019: 37]. This might be down to the confusion of the orthographical forms э and е used in writing to represent the /e/ sound. At the same time, the Chuvash language does not allow hiatus, i.e., two vowels never occur in adjacent syllables [Mikhailov, 1989: 44-45]. That is why Chuvash speakers tend to insert /j/ or /v/ sounds to separate two vowels in Russian words, e.g., *poët* 'poet' can be realized as [pa'jet].

3. Methodology

3.1. Factors of variation

The role of three factors on the vowel realizations was examined in this study: the speakers' age, gender and the style of speech. Speaker age is one of the social parameters consistently affecting variation across languages. Young speakers are often found to adopt innovative variants, while older speakers tend to maintain language practices formed in their adolescence and youth [Chambers, 2003]. Determining generational differences in the use of linguistic forms can help identify and track the process of language change. With this aim, the apparent-time method was used in this study. The method compares speech of various age groups at a single time and assumes that if their use of language differs, the change has occurred or is occurring. Speech of Chuvash participants belonging to two age groups was analysed to assess the effect of age and to determine vectors of a potential sound change.

A number of studies revealed women's higher appreciation of overtly prescribed standard forms [Ibid.]. At the same time, on several occasions women were found to be at the forefront of linguistic innovations [Eckert, 1989]. They more readily adopt emerging new forms, becoming a driving force of language change. Thus, gender was taken as an independent variable in the research too.

Lastly, the use of the vowels was evaluated in two speech styles: conversational (spontaneous) and reading. These styles usually differ in the amount of attention paid to speech and may affect the choice of varying forms. Labov [1966] notes that the most casual speech style, or vernacular, reflects individuals' "genuine" language practices. At the same time, a comparison of conversational and reading styles can help understand whether speakers are aware of the forms they choose to use. As the formality of the speech context grows from a casual talk to reading, speakers tend to use fewer nonstandard variants or even display hypercorrection of forms.

3.2. Sampling and fieldwork

The sample of participants included 16 Chuvash-Russian bilingual speakers residing in the city of Cheboksary. Compared to speakers from other Chuvash areas, Cheboksarians are overall more mobile and more often interact with Russian speakers from other regions. Hence, they are likely to be the first to adopt linguistic innovations and lead change. Although the city population is diverse, in linguistic terms two major groups can be singled out. One is monolingual Russian speakers or predominantly monolinguals with some basic knowledge of Chuvash, the use of which is extremely limited. The other is Chuvash-Russian bilinguals, who became the focus group. A preliminary search revealed that many such individuals moved to the city from other parts of the republic, whereas

Cheboksary natives with a balanced knowledge of the two languages are quite hard (and, in the case of young speakers, almost impossible) to find.

The participants were approached and recruited through social media and the author's network. All of them speak Chuvash as L1 and Russian as L2. The participants were born in the Chuvash Republic and moved to Cheboksary at the age between 8 and 19 years old. The sample comprises 8 younger and 8 older speakers, with an equal number of males and females in each age group. The young group includes speakers aged 19-26 (mean = 22); the older group includes speakers aged 40-65 (mean = 54). The sample is socioeconomically homogeneous: the participants hold or study for a higher education degree and are occupied in qualified jobs. All the used names are pseudonyms.

The fieldwork took place in 2020. Individual recorded interviews were conducted in Russian and lasted between 30 and 70 minutes. The participants were asked to speak about life in their hometowns, moving to Cheboksary, study at school and university, work, hobbies, the experience of being bilingual, their attitudes towards Chuvash and Russian, etc. Thus, social data about the participants were also elicited. At the end of the interview the speakers were asked to read a list of 150 words, containing the target phonetic variables.

3.3. Analysis

Each instance of the vowels in the defined contexts was examined. Monosyllabic function words, such as prepositions, particles and pronouns (e.g., *po*, *pod*, *ne*, *on*) were excluded because they may pattern differently from content words and form a separate cluster. Spontaneous speech samples provided 4155 tokens in total. The number of observations ranged from 17 to 100 tokens per variable per speaker (mean = 65). The reading style data included 2937 tokens, with a mean of 46 observations per variable per speaker. The vowels were analysed auditorily and classified as belonging to one of the two variants. As a native speaker of Russian but non-native to the Chuvash Republic, the researcher had the advantage of being more sensitive to regional pronunciation features. Later, several tokens of each target variable were verified using acoustic measurements of vowel formants in Praat [Boersma et al., 2019]. Mean percentages of nonstandard vowel realizations were calculated for each speaker and groups of speakers. They were analysed statistically by running multiple logistic regression showing if there is a relationship between the use of the regional variants and the speakers' age, gender and style of speech. Random effects of speaker and word were included in the statistical analysis.

4. Results

The results of the phonetic analysis, mean percentages of the nonstandard variants, are summarized in fig. 2. The data show that the older speakers used regional variants of all the studied

vowels more often than the younger speakers, both in conversational and reading styles. The younger speakers are almost categorical users of standard forms of all the variables except the (a). The women overall used the regional variants less frequently or as much as the men did. However, the pattern is reversed for the variable (a) in the young group and the variable (e2) in the old group in the reading mode. As regards style differences, regional variants were used more frequently in the reading mode than in conversational in the case of the variables (a) and (e1), except for the younger females.

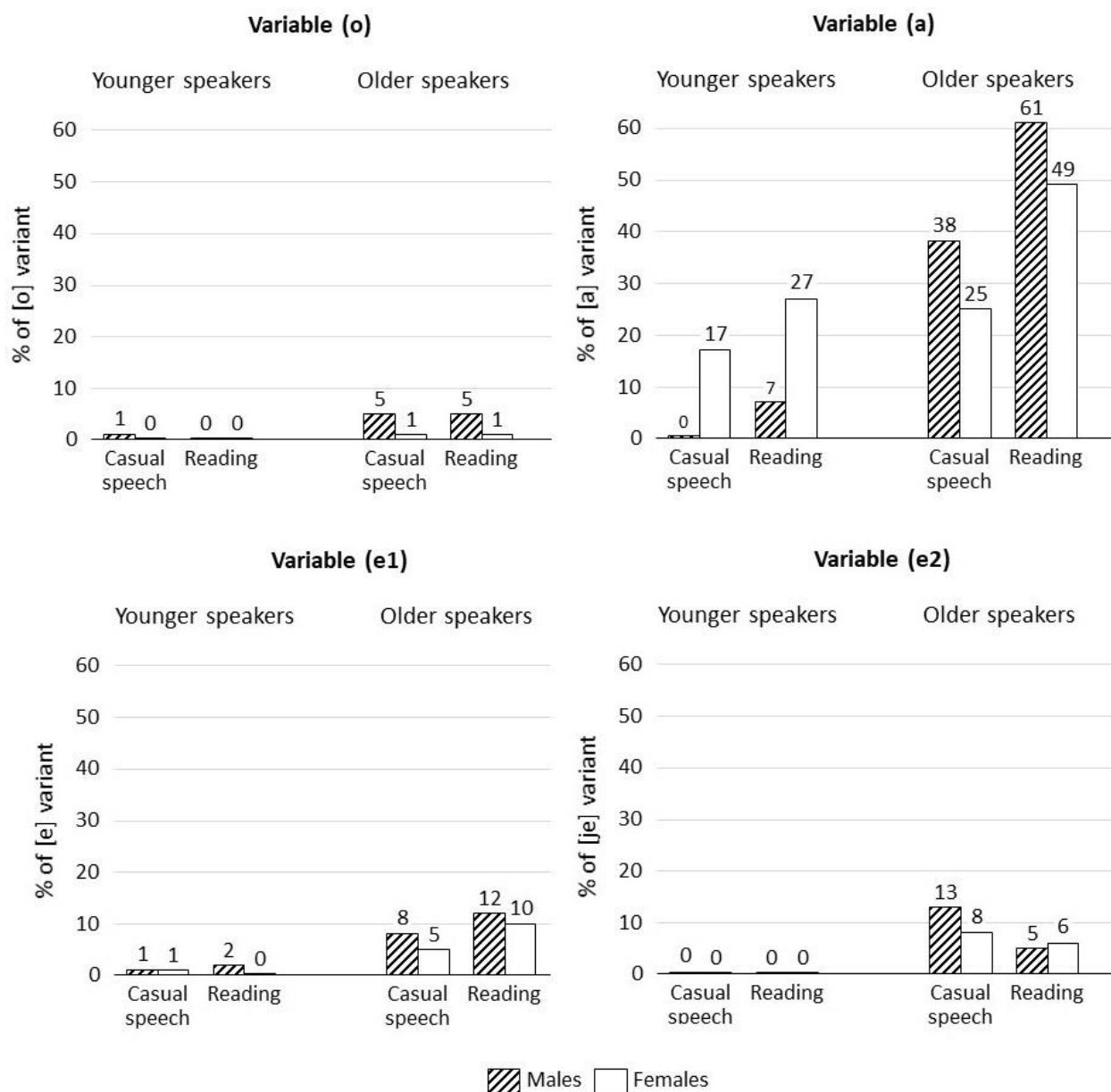


Fig. 2. Nonstandard realizations of the studied vowels

As shown in table 2, the statistical analysis revealed a significant effect of age on the pronunciation of all the vowels under consideration. Mode of speech turned out to significantly

correlate with the speakers' linguistic choices in the case of the variables (a) and (e1). Gender did not surface as a statistically important factor for any of the variables.

Table 2

Logistic regression analyses of the effects on the nonstandard vowel realizations.
Statistically significant values ($p < 0.05$) are given in bold.

| Effects | Variant [o] of the variable (o) | | Variant [a] of the variable (a) | | Variant [e] of the variable (e1) | | Variant [je] of the variable (e2) | |
|----------------|------------------------------------|--------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------|
| | z value | p value | z value | p value | z value | p value | z value | p value |
| Age (old) | 2.067 | 0.039 | 3.799 | < 0.001 | 3.279 | 0.001 | 2.777 | 0.005 |
| Gender (male) | 1.606 | 0.108 | -0.875 | 0.382 | 0.751 | 0.452 | 0.168 | 0.867 |
| Style (casual) | 0.053 | 0.958 | -5.977 | < 0.001 | -3.496 | < 0.001 | 1.523 | 0.128 |

5. Discussion

5.1. Age

The role of age was found to be significant in relation to all the four variables. The results on the variable (o) confirm the claim that okan'e belongs to older Cheboksarians [Erina et al., 2019]. However, even for the older speakers, this feature is very occasional. The categorical use of the standard [a] by the younger generation and the infrequent use of the regional [o] by the older generation may suggest that the transition towards the standard form is nearly completed in Cheboksary. According to the Dialectological Atlas [Avanesov et al., 196], between 1946 and 1966 the Chuvash Republic was characterized by partial okan'e. Nowadays this feature is likely to be giving way to the standard akan'e in the entire region.

For the variables (e1) and (e2), the regional variants in the older group did not exceed 13%, while the young participants used the corresponding standard variants almost without exception. The finding suggests that the nonstandard pronunciation of these vowels is on the wane in the studied community. The sound change is likely to be entering its final stage, similarly to the variable (o).

The variable (a) stands out in stark contrast to the others. The nonstandard [a] seems to be robust in the speech of the older generation. The frequency of its use even exceeds that of the standard reduced variant [i] among the older males in the reading mode. Although the younger speakers favour [a] far less often, their use of the regional variant is still prominent. These findings may indicate that the sound change of the variable (a) either began later than that of the other vowels or progresses at a slower pace. One possible reason for this can be that the regional variant is not stigmatized, which will be discussed later in relation to style.

To conclude, a pattern of age differentiation has surfaced, with the younger speakers using regional variants less frequently than the older speakers. A similar shift towards the standard pronunciation was found in other Russian regions, e.g., in Arkhangelsk Oblast [Daniel et al., 2019]

and Perm Oblast [Kochetov, 2006]. Taken together, these processes can be regarded as a trend towards dialect levelling, driven by the prestige of standard Russian and a disregard of regional dialects, viewed as bearing a stigma of rurality and backwardness. In the case of Chuvashia, one more reason is likely to contribute to the uncovered change. As the young generation speaks Chuvash far less than their parents and grandparents, their Russian is bound to be less affected by the substrate effect. Vowels in Chuvash are not reduced, and the diminishing Chuvash interference may explain why the younger speakers reduce Russian vowels more frequently than the older speakers, who experience more of such interference. Thus, the findings bear out the expectation that the reduced use of Chuvash may cause a change in the regional Russian.

5.2. Gender

Gender did not surface as playing a considerable role in the vowel pronunciations. Overall, the older speakers displayed a variation pattern that is in line with the findings of multiple sociolinguistic studies: the women used regional forms less frequently (except the [je] in the reading mode). For the younger speakers, the difference in the vowel realizations by men and women was negligible except for the variable (a), in which case the young females used the nonstandard more frequently.

An interesting pattern is demonstrated by the young males, whose use of all the four regional forms turned out to be extremely rare. Only one participant used nonstandard variants in casual speech. Such a pattern can be due to professional backgrounds and/or aspirations of the young male participants. For example, Oleg (male, 20) and Igor (male, 22) are due to graduate from drama school. As future theatre actors, they have been trained in the art of oratory and are well aware of their speech. Another participant, Pavel (male, 26), is a video blogger with a rich experience in making comedy sketches. He developed an ability to change speech registers to impersonate different characters. One such character in his repertoire is a rural Chuvash, speaking Russian with a “typical Chuvash accent”. Thus, Pavel has a good understanding (probably unconscious) of the regional pronunciation features, which could make him avoid them in his regular speech. Given the relatively small sample of speakers, these participants could skew the results in the young male group.

Among the older males, occupation also seems to be a relevant factor of variation. Stepan (male, 51) and Kirill (male, 40) used the regional variants less often than the other two men in their age group. Stepan travelled a lot to various regions of Russia during his career as a police officer. A considerable amount of interaction with speakers from outside Chuvashia might have affected his language behaviour. Kirill is a school teacher of Chuvash and as a person with linguistic knowledge is more aware of standard Russian pronunciation. Thus, the professional and life experiences of these two participants can explain their higher appreciation of the standard.

All in all, gender per se does not seem to play a substantial role in the choice of the investigated speech forms. In Chuvashia both men and women are actively engaged in the economic life of the republic. Hence, the use of language forms is equally important for them while performing various social roles. These social roles can shape the linguistic strategies and behaviours of speakers not less than the gender itself.

5.3. Style

The effect of style was significant in the case of the variables (a) and (e1). Respective regional variants were used more often in the reading than in the conversational mode (except the [e] among the younger females). The findings are unusual because many sociolinguistic works showed that in more monitored speech, speakers tend to use standard features with higher frequency. To better understand the uncovered pattern, which is especially eye-catching in the case of the variable (a), let us look at individual speakers.

Inga (female, 40) from the older group did not use a single token of [a] in the conversation; however, while reading, her use of the regional variant rose to 20%. A similar strategy is employed by Ksenia (female, 19) in the younger group: when shifting to reading, her use of the nonstandard form increased from 0% to 16%. Many other speakers of both genders, who did pronounce nonstandard [a] in a conversation, also displayed a considerable increase of its use in the reading style, e.g., Daria (female, 65) from 39% to 80% and Roman (male, 51) from 39% to a remarkable 91%.

The revealed style variation may signal that at least part of the speakers does not perceive the regional form [a] as nonstandard. The participants do not seem to be conscious of its use, hence the form is probably not stigmatized. An outlier Elena (female, 21) bears out this assumption. She is the only participant who uses the regional [a] less often in the reading mode: 20%, as opposed to 50% in a conversation. Apparently, it is not a coincidence that Elena strongly dislikes the regional features, and, as she puts it, “My ears bleed when I hear someone speaking Russian with a Chuvash accent”. It is possible that her awareness of the features making up this accent is higher, and she manages to control her pronunciation of the vowel better while reading. The other participants, on the contrary, are likely to be not or less conscious of using the regional variant [a], and they do so more frequently while reading the list of words.

One possible explanation of the more frequent use of the nonstandard forms in reading can be the effect of the orthographic form. Mikhailov [1989: 44] notes that Chuvash speakers tend to pronounce Russian words the way they are written. This is partly because they acquired Russian through the written speech and textbooks rather than oral expression. He stresses that the influence of orthography on Russian speech of the Chuvash is immense. Thus, the graphical image of words might

have prompted the participants to “follow the letters” and pronounce the non-reduced variant. By contrast, in conversational speech, the visual stimulus is absent, and the speakers were less inclined to confuse the orthographic and pronunciation norms. This assumption is borne out by the results on the variable (e2). In this case, the written form should help the speakers to opt for the standard variant because the letter э, used to denote the vowel in the studied context, always corresponds to the /e/ sound. The older participants indeed used the standard more often when reading.

5.4. Limitations

The nature of the sample and its size limit the generalization of the findings to a wider Cheboksary population. Only bilingual people who had been brought up speaking Chuvash were interviewed. Some of them migrated to Cheboksary relatively late, and so are not representative of the whole city but rather of a part of its community. Moreover, the sample of speakers is not large. Therefore, the study can be regarded as pilot or exploratory, suggesting directions for research on a broader sample.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined the phonetic variation of Russian among Chuvash-Russian bilingual speakers in the city of Cheboksary. The pronunciation of four vowel variables was analysed in the speech recordings of 16 speakers of different age and gender in the context of two styles. The results reveal an age differentiation pattern, with the regional forms being used less frequently by the younger speakers. A suggestion is made about the sound change in progress and the levelling of the regional forms towards the standard pronunciation. These processes have been linked to the reduced use of Chuvash by the younger generation and, consequently, a lesser Chuvash substratum effects on their Russian speech. The prestige of standard Russian is also concluded to be a catalyst of the language change. The effect of gender on the use of the linguistic forms was not significant. At the same time, an unusual pattern of style-shifting has been discovered, with two nonstandard forms surfacing more often in the reading than in the conversational mode. This has been explained by the effect of the orthographic form.

The results contribute to Russian dialectology in sub-national regions by giving a quantitative account of the features characterizing Russian in Chuvashia. The evaluation of social factors in the language use provides input into Russian sociolinguistic scholarship. The findings are applicable for language policy planning in Chuvashia, which is particularly relevant for the region with endangered

titular language. Lastly, the results of the study can be used for a further investigation of the Cheboksary regiolect, fostering linguistic and social studies of Russian urban territories.

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