

Phonological Simplification: Gradual Deletion Of Phoneme /H/ InSpoken Urdu Language

Dr. Tabassum Saba¹, Dr. Bushra Siddiqui², Dr. Sara Khan³

¹Assistant Professor Department of English Language and Literature The University of Lahore,

²Assistant Professor Department of English and Literary Studies University of Management and Technology, Lahore.

³Lecturer Department of Humanities CUI Lahore Campus.

ABSTRACT

Pakistan is a multilingual country where among many other languages Urdu serves as a Lingua Franca. With the passage of time, this language has also undergone many changes and is still in a process of constant flux. Among many other changes, a prominent change is the deletion of the phoneme /h/ in some words in the spoken form of the Urdu language. The present study takes into consideration forty participants, twenty male and twenty female, on a convenient basis to evaluate whether they pronounce this /h/ phoneme when occurring in the middle of a word or not. For this purpose, three Urdu words i.e., “mujhay (me), tumhain (you) and nahin (no)” are taken as a sample. The data is collected through short interviews to notice whether or not this phonemic deletion of /h/ actually occurs. Content analysis is applied to interviews and has served as a theoretical framework to explore this data. It has also analyzed the reasons behind phonemic variation. The results are obtained through mean value.

Keywords: Urdu, spoken form, phonemic deletion, gender.

1. Introduction

All languages possess some rules for sound change and ‘deletion’ is such a rule which is epitomized by many languages. Although the phenomenon of deletion is not significant in all languages yet some languages focus on this aspect as a very important rule in connected speech production. Aspirated sounds in Urdu show variation in different contexts, which mainly occur due to some phonological rules. Some of these variations show random behavior, which makes them harder to be generalized phonological rules. Putri and Rachman (2021) believe that children are usually imperfect in actively moving the articulators in the required appropriate place or manner of articulation particularly when it comes to some “fairly complex sounds” (p. 22). To make the process of articulation easier, those phonemes which require a little more effort to be pronounced are normally dropped consciously or unconsciously. In this regard, the current research will focus on the deletion of the phoneme /h/ in spoken Urdu language.

The word ‘deletion’ refers to the omission of a sound or segment. This deletion can be at the level of a single feature, or sound or it can comprise a complete syllable as well. Sometimes, a sound is so weakly articulated that it loses its acoustic

implication. Many languages demonstrate this deletion but that deletion is consciously made and takes place according to set patterns and is followed by all speakers as a standard variety e.g., ‘cannot’ is converted to ‘can’t’, ‘plumber’ is pronounced as /plʌmə/, adjust is pronounced as /ə’dʒʌst/. It may also refer to simplification which is strongly associated with articulation difficulties (Galluzzi et al. 2015).

Deletion is the basic rule to bring change in voice no matter if it is made intentionally or unintentionally. Fischer and Labov have worked on the deletion of sound and features. Fischer (1958) was the pioneer to investigate the change in pronunciation by deleting or pronouncing the allomorph ‘-ing’ based on social class division. Labov (1966) dealt with the deletion of the /r/ phoneme and that too focused on different social classes. The previous researches focused mainly on the variation in language practice within a specific linguistic area and that, too, was class specific and did not bring any change to actual pronunciation. The present study has focused on the deletion of the central phoneme /h/ in the words like “mujhay, tumhain and nahin” which is gradually replacing the actual pronunciation of these words.

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether the central phoneme /h/ is pronounced or

deleted in informal communication; whether it is a conscious phenomenon or unconscious. It also looks for the reasons behind this deletion as that seems to bring a gradual change in the spoken form of the Urdu language.

The research has considered whether this change in pronunciation is temporary or it is bringing any change to the actual pronunciation. Usually, aspirated sounds are less stressed or not properly pronounced because they require extra effort in articulation. The study has also scrutinized whether this changing pronunciation is leading to language simplification or is a matter of the speaker's language background.

The objective of the study is to explore whether this deletion of the /h/ phoneme is made consciously or unconsciously to trace its link with language simplification. It takes into consideration the social class of the speaker as well to see how much the influence of social class lies in making an extra effort to pronounce an aspirated sound which occurs in the middle of a word. The data for this research is collected from the participants from the upper middle class and is analyzed through content analysis and mean value.

In the beginning, the use of content analysis was restricted to the studies which analyzed texts merely to see the frequency of the occurrence of some specific terms but in the 1950s the researchers started using it for conceptual analysis rather than word analysis only. They also analyzed semantic relationships in the content rather than merely the presence of the semantic element. Now, with time, content analysis is in use to analyze mental models and their socio-cognitive, linguistic, historical and cultural significance. It covers an array of fields like marketing, literature, media studies, ethnography, gender studies, sociology and many others. According to Berelson (1952), content analysis is applied to identify the communication differences in different cultures and it also reveals the trends and focus in communication adopted by different speakers at individual or collective levels. Furthermore, it is also applied to investigate the cognitive development and emotional state of individuals as well as groups.

2. Literature Review

Phonological rules outline the phenomenon which consists of diverse pronunciations and word forms. Phonological rules can obliterate or supplement whole phonemic segments. Those rules which postulate how the sounds of a particular language

interrelate with each other, are called 'phonological rules'. An analysis of these rules demonstrates that a constituent, common to most of the rules, may be roughly or conventionally called "ease of articulation" (Lass, 1998). The process in which a sound change occurs to become more familiar with a neighboring sound is called assimilation. This assimilation can be further elaborated through its subclass that makes a variation in stricture which refers to 'lenition' or 'fruition'; either it weakens the sound or strengthens it. These variations occur mainly due to changes in resonance or openness (Napoli, 1996).

Since the advent of the 1960s, sociolinguists have reflected through their researches what dialectologists had come across for almost a century that drawing particular linguistic boundaries can never explain dialectal variation. As dialectologists made researches on regional variation, sociolinguists observed language change across social levels and registers applied in various situations by the same speech community. They were capable of observing linguistic change in progress through a variety of longitudinal studies. Labov's study at Martha's Vineyard regarding the vowel system is remarkable research on language variation (Labov, 1972).

Such research studies suggested that language change is not a phenomenon that occurs among young children who are going through the process of learning their mother tongue rather it happens particularly among members of a speech community. These researches reflect how different social groups interact and relate to each other and so favor linguistic innovations. An innovation, as Labov suggests, originates from “change from below” (Labov, 1994). It must be remembered that an innovation does not reflect a change but to convert an innovation into a change requires it to be adopted by the members of a speech community. It is noteworthy that only diffusion of innovation changes it into a change and this notion is also widely researched by Milroy and Milroy (1985) and also by J. Milroy (1992). Consequently, Milroy and Milroy (1985) differentiate between innovators of linguistic change and early adopters of language. Moreover, he considers the adopters of a language responsible for converting innovation into diffusion which leads to language variation.

It is assumed that although different listeners misperceive sounds to a great extent yet the phonological changes occur in a very limited number. Ohala refers to the occurrence of incorrect misperceptions of words as “mini-sound changes”, and asserts that these variations often do not carry “maxi-changes” with them just because listeners are provided with other various opportunities to convert their misperceptions into correct perceptions. Hence, it happens only under particular environmental situations that these “mini-sound changes” convert into real sound changes (Ohala, 1989).

Such an observation denotes an unintentional and ultimately haphazard origin of innovation termed as “change from below”, as suggested by Labov (Labov, 1994). Apart from this unconscious or unintentional language change, the conscious part played by individual speakers can be well exhibited, particularly in lexical innovation. Innovative words used by high prestige individuals also lead to language variation. This concept of prestige refers to “overt” and “covert” prestige as studied by Labov and many other researchers. His New York study was more inclined toward “overt” prestige as he observed different pronunciations of /r/ (Labov, 1966) whereas his research on Martha’s Vineyard regarding /ai/ and /au/ pronunciation reflected “covert” prestige (Labov, 1972). This conscious variation based either on social class or prestige or

any other reason may have its influence on the diffusion of innovations. It sounds more convincing and appealing that the speakers unconsciously or only semi-consciously generate innovations while conforming to the requirement to have successful communication.

Trorkaugott (1991) suggests that the innovations linked with grammaticalization are highly influenced by Gricean conversational maxims (Grice, 1975). In a broader context, language change which is not confined to grammaticalization, semantic or lexical change, also elucidates language variation which as Keller points out refers to the number of unconscious activities by speakers (Keller, 1997). These speakers converge themselves in the collective effort inferred in communication and it changes a simple activity into a goal oriented activity as Keller points out that the speakers pursue to be socially efficacious (1994, p. 106). It may arouse many maxims which include the attempt to make oneself identified or non-identified with a specific social group, to invite or not to invite attention, along with to scrimp and save energy in pronunciation. Keller rightly asserts that “when we are talking, we try to kill several birds with one stone: we try to conform, attract attention, be understood, save energy” (1994, p. 105). Hence, to be socially successful may imply different connotations depending upon the context; consequently, innovations generated by agreeing to communication maxims bring about variation. Such sort of variation may cause change when exertions to comply with the maxims produce unintentional convergence.

Saussure completely disparaged the synchronic and diachronic interpretations of linguistic variation as it has not only opened new means to the understanding and knowledge of language but it has also left the issue of incorporation unresolved. The theories proposed by different linguists regarding language variation suggest that they are synchronic, fundamental and stable and they are even incompatible with what our knowledge is about language change. If language is ruminated fundamentally, “as an edifice built of phonemes and lexemes, features and rules”, it becomes difficult to observe the ways and reasons for its modification (Guy, 1995, p. 56). Structures do not convert into other structures but to the extent that the languages are discussed, they keep on modifying and varying all the time and this

variation is produced by the change in societal conditions of specific speech communities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Content Analysis

Content analysis is the research technique which has been used in this study to make valid and effective inferences by interpreting the interviews with the respondents. It is helpful to convert qualitative data into quantitative data by systematically assessing the provided data. This method has been long in use for social sciences particularly but is now becoming prevalent in other fields as well. It serves as a tool to evaluate the occurrence of certain words or concepts in a particular text. It identifies those important aspects of the content which are the focus of research e.g., phonemes, words, phrases, etc. by presenting them clearly and well. It justifies looking at the content and directs the choices regarding data collection, sample size and analysis to the argument. In the past, content analysis used to be a time-taking process as the analysis was mostly done manually. It was initially adopted by the researchers in the 1940s as it goes "In recent years several studies ... have employed quantitative content analysis" (Janis & Raymond, 1942) and then Kaplan asserts "In recent years there has been (and is being) developed, especially by Lasswell and his associates, a technique known as content analysis" (1943, p. 230). It becomes obvious from Kaplan that Lasswell is considered to be the pioneer in the development of content analysis.

The collected data is analyzed mainly through content analysis which is further evaluated through mean value. The study observed the percentage of the participants who pronounced or deleted the /h/ phoneme. The reasons behind this variation in the pronunciation of the /h/ phoneme have also been discussed and evaluated.

3.2. Research Material and Participants

This research has an exploratory nature as it tends to investigate how people use language differently from each other and how language undergoes a gradual change by the way it is opted by people especially the way a specific phoneme i.e., central /h/ is pronounced or not. For this purpose, a few questions in the form of an interview were asked to see whether, in response to these questions, they pronounce the phoneme /h/ or delete it and why.

The study takes into consideration 40 participants, twenty male and twenty female, from a private sector university to evaluate how language use differs according to gender variation.

3.3. Ethical Consideration

Ethical considerations play a vital role in reflecting the researcher's objectivity and unbiased attitude during the process and as the current study has focused on interviews so this aspect is given much importance. All the participants involved in the research were taken into confidence before becoming a part of this research. Their consent was taken with the assurance that their identities would not be revealed. They were also informed that the collected data will be utilized for research purposes only and will never be misused.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

The data for the present study was collected through interviews to evaluate how /h/ phoneme is pronounced or deleted from the spoken form. The participants for the study are students from a private sector university who participated voluntarily. The participants were asked such questions in an informal way to which they could reply in negation only i.e. 'nahin' (no). They were indirectly asked to speak such sentences in which 'mujhay' (me) and 'tumhain' (you) were also used to see phonemic deletion or pronunciation of the /h/ phoneme.

4.1. Phonemic Analysis in the Pronunciation of Females

4.1.1. Pronunciation of /h/ phoneme in 'nahin'

The collected data is transcribed which revealed that the deletion of the /h/ phoneme in 'nahin' is the most prominent feature of females' linguistic repertoire. Almost all the female participants pronounced 'nahin' as 'nai' no matter whether it was used at the beginning of the sentence or the middle. The data was collected in a natural setting so the focused words were also pronounced unconsciously and informally e.g.

- i. **Nai** muje bilkul bhi idea **nai** hai (No I didn't have the slightest idea)
- ii. Tumain jo kaam kaha tha kiun **nai** kia (Why didn't you do the work, you were asked)

- iii. Maira **nai** khayal (I don't think so)

However, it is revealed that 'nai' is pronounced spontaneously or unconsciously and when it is repeated or stressed or pronounced consciously, it at times changes into 'nahi' as well. But such examples are less than those of 'nai' e.g.

- i. **Nahi** na..(not at all)
- ii. **Nahi** to **nai** (no means no)

It is also worth mentioning that not only /h/ is deleted in 'nahi' but the first vowel is also missing in some cases. In these cases, it is sometimes preceded by another 'nahi' e.g.

- i. **Nai** muje **ni** pata tha (No, I didn't know)
- ii. **Nai** muje **ni** lagta k... (No, I don't think so)
- iii. Isay b kuch **ni** pata (He\She also doesn't know anything)

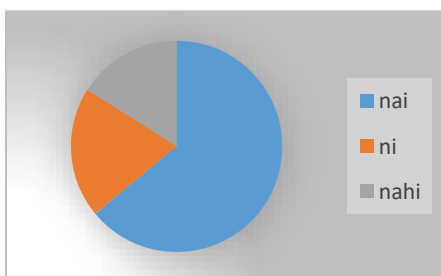


Figure. 1

The pie chart given above reflects that there is a great tendency in females to deletion of

/h/ phoneme in the pronunciation of 'nahi'. Although 'nahi' is pronounced consciously by

almost all the participants but unconsciously it is pronounced only by a few and that too is pronounced when it is meant to be stressed. The following table will give more detail to this difference in pronunciation.

Pronunciation	Percentage
Nai	64
Ni	20
Nahi	16

Table. 1

4.1.2. Pronunciation of /h/ Phoneme in 'tumhain'

The data collected for the pronunciation of 'tumhain' reflected the deletion of the /h/ phoneme to a great extent as it goes:

- i. Muje laga **tumain** idea hoga (I thought you would have an idea)
- ii. Kuch yad aya **tumain** (Do you remember something)
- iii. **Tumain** kal milun ge (I'll see you tomorrow)

It is noteworthy that in the above-mentioned examples 'tumain' is mostly used at the beginning of the sentences and only once or twice 'tumhain' was pronounced as 'tumain' while pronounced in the middle of the sentence. However, there are instances when /h/ is pronounced and it is only when to emphasize this word or when it is pronounced with deliberate effort e.g.

- i. **Tumhain** bara pata hai (YOU know it all)
- ii. **Tumhain** kiun bulaya hai (why are YOU called)

- iii. **Tumhain** kia pasand hai (what do YOU like)

In both sentences 'tumhain' is used at the beginning of the sentence and it is stressed, it is the focus of the sentence and the tone of the sentence also changes due to putting stress on this word.

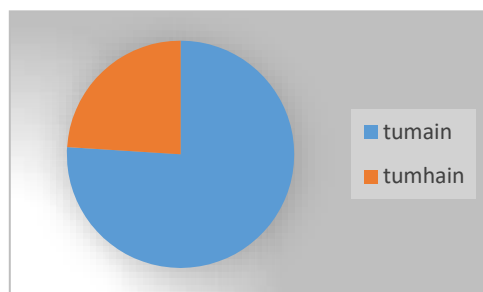


Figure. 2

This figure reveals the deletion of /h/ phoneme in the pronunciation of 'tumhain'. It reflects the

increasing tendency of deletion as the following table also mirrors it:

Pronunciation	Percentage
Tumain	76
Tumhain	24

Table. 2

Although the study has focused only on the deletion of the /h/ phoneme, however, it is also worth mentioning that even after the deletion of /h/ phoneme there is another change in pronunciation that 'tumain' is usually pronounced as 'tumay'. So the last sound of the word is also changed.

Another point discussed earlier is the link between the pronunciation of the word and its location. It is obvious from above mentioned examples that 'tumhain' when stressed is used at the beginning of the sentence and never used by the participants in the middle or at the end of the sentence. However, with the deletion of the /h/ phoneme, it is used in all three locations i.e., the beginning, middle and

end of the sentence.

4.1.3. Pronunciation of /h/ Phoneme in 'mujhay'

The deletion of the /h/ phoneme continues in the pronunciation of 'mujhay' as well. The collected data reveals that /h/ is often deleted when pronounced unconsciously e.g.

- i. **Mujay** ni pata (I don't know)
- ii. **Mujay** laga tumain idea hoga (I though you would have an idea)
- iii. Nai **mujay** ni lagta (No, I don't think so)

In all these sentences ‘mujhay’ remained unstressed so there is a deletion of the /h/ phoneme whereas where this particular word is stressed or emphasized it is pronounced as ‘mujhay’ but it happens rarely in the course of this study e.g.

- i. **Mujhay** he kiun (why me)
- ii. **Mujhay** to nai pata tha (I didn’t know)
- iii. Tum nay **mujhay** call ki thee (Did you call ME)

This variation in pronunciation is revealed through the following diagram:

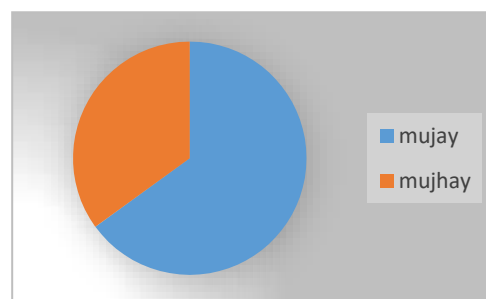


Figure e. 3

The deletion of /h/ phoneme is prominently less than its occurrence. Again, the location of this particular word in a sentence does not determine its pronunciation but the stress level matters a lot while dealing with this word. The following table illustrates the above diagram:

Pronunciation	Percentage
Mujay	65
Mujhay	35

Table. 3

The table also points out a significant difference in the pronunciation and deletion of the

/h/ phoneme in ‘mujhay’. It is gradually being deleted from spoken language as the collected data divulges.

4.2. Phonemic Analysis in the Pronunciation of Males

4.2.1. Pronunciation of /h/ Phoneme in ‘nahin’

The study suggests that the element of /h/ deletion is common in male participants as well. The male participant also did not pronounce /h/ in ‘nahin’ while talking unconsciously. However, there was a difference that none of the male participants pronounced ‘nahi’ as ‘ni’.

- i. Aj koi match **nai** hai (There is no match today)

- ii. Tumhain gari chalani **nai** ati (You don’t know how to drive a car)
- iii. **Nai** yar ab aisa bhi **nai** hai (No buddy! It’s not so)

The data explored that ‘nahi’ was uttered only when to emphasize this word or when it was repeated consciously e.g.

- i. **Nahi** jana yar (I didn’t have to go, buddy)
- ii. **Nahi** na (NO)
- iii. Kaha to hai k **nahi** pata (I told you I DON’T know)

Nevertheless, the data revealed their tendency towards this deletion as the following chart clarifies it:

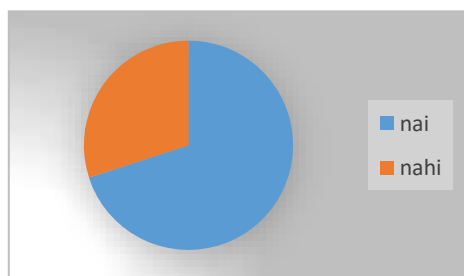


Figure. 4

There is an obvious difference in pronunciation and deletion of the /h/ phoneme as the following

table shows it:

Pronunciation	Percentage
Nai	70
Nahi	30

Table. 4

4.2.2. Pronunciation of /h/ Phoneme in 'tumhain'

The data gathered from male participants, reveals the deletion tendency of the /h/ phoneme in the pronunciation of 'tumhain' as well as where it is generally pronounced as 'tumay':

- i. **Tumay** btaya to tha (I already told you)
- ii. **Tumay** mein drop kr dun ga (I'll drop you)
- iii. Ma'am '**tumay**' bula rae hain (Ma'am is calling you)

The male participants admitted that '**tumay**' was easy to pronounce and they use '**tumhain**'

only when they want to put stress on this word e.g.

- i. **Tumhain** nai pata tha... don't tell me (YOU didn't know.. don't tell me)
- ii. **Tumhain** mujh pr yaqeen nai hai (YOU don't trust me)
- iii. Mein nay sirf **tumahin** invite kia hai (I have invited YOU only)

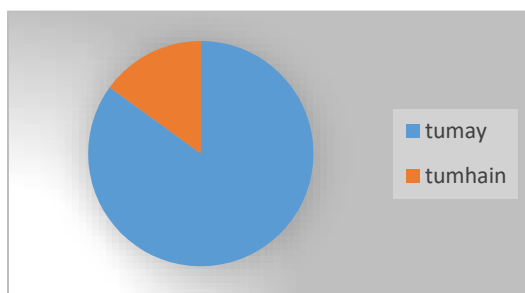


Figure. 5

The male students preferred 'tujhay' to 'tumay' as their language appeared to be closer to their mother tongue i.e. Punjabi. There is again a similarity that

the last sound of 'tumahin' is also converted to 'tumay' as in female participants.

Pronunciation	Percentage
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Tumhain	85
Tumay	15

Table. 5

4.2.3. Pronunciation of /h/ Phoneme in 'mujhay'

The last researched word was 'mujhay' which was also pronounced by the male participants with and without phonemic deletion of /h/. The data reveals that this word has less /h/deletion as compared to the other two words in male pronunciation e.g.

- i. **Mujhay** to pehlay he pata tha (I already knew it)

- ii. **Mujhay** kehtay to sai (You should have asked ME)

- iii. Tu nay kab bulaya **mujhay** (When did you invite ME)

The participants stated that they were unconscious of the /h/ deletion and they never did it intentionally rather unintentionally.

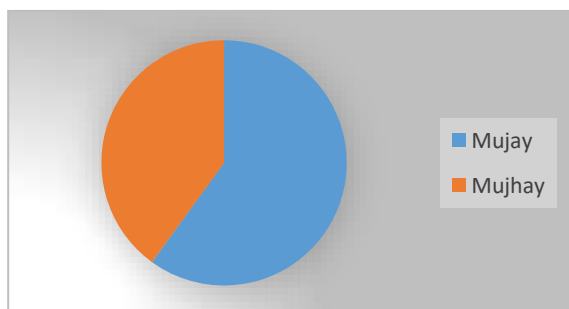


Figure. 6

It is worth noticing that the word 'mujhay' showed the least deletion of the /h/ phoneme as compared to the other two words and this was the only word where

there was less difference between deletion and pronunciation of the /h/ phoneme. The following table well explains this phenomenon.

Pronunciation	Percentage
Mujay	60
mujhay	40

Table. 6

4.3. Reasons behind Deletion of /h/ Phoneme

To trace the reasons behind this phonemic deletion short interviews were conducted which revealed the two main reasons:

4.3.1. Unconscious Deletion

The study exposes that the majority of the participants confessed that they were unaware of the reason behind this /h/ deletion as well as its occurrence as it was done unconsciously. They never bothered to think about their pronunciation of the words focused on in this research. However, they tried to come up with some solid reason but could not. The figure given below reveals the ratio of the participants who themselves were surprised due to the occurrence of phonemic deletion.

4.3.2. Simplification of Pronunciation

The participants initially failed to provide any logic or reason behind the change in pronunciation but when asked again they concluded that pronunciation with the deletion of the /h/ phoneme proved to be easier for them. It was easy for them to pronounce a word without the /h/ phoneme as compared to the pronunciation with /h/. They asserted that their articulatory system had been accustomed to simplification in pronunciation.

4.3.3. Social Status

Though social status also affects pronunciation, however, through interviews it was revealed that in the course of this study phonemic deletion of /h/ was not a matter of social stratification. It proved to be rather an unconscious activity and all the participants agreed that their social position did not play any part in determining their pronunciation.

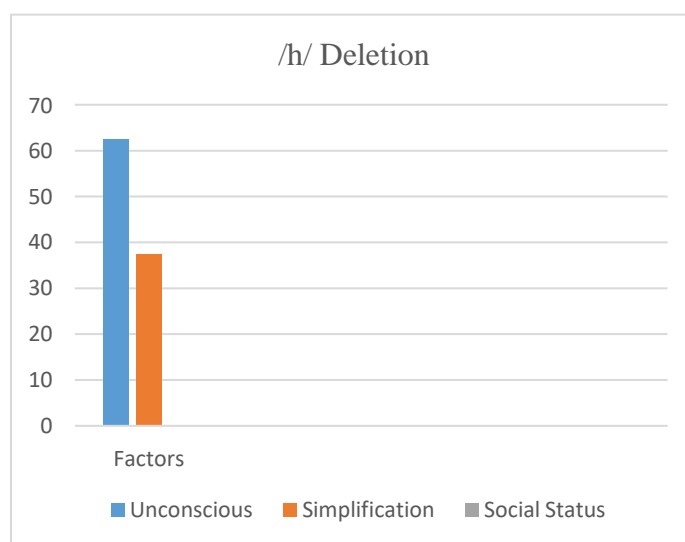


Figure. 7

This graph represents the difference between two main factors behind the phonemic deletion of /h/ i.e., unconscious pronunciation and simplification of language. The third element which was social

class failed to attract attention from the respondents. The following table illustrates the same phenomenon

Factors	Percentage
Unconscious	62.5
Simplification	37.5

Social Position

Nil

Table. 7

The majority of the respondents had no reason for the phonemic deletion as 25 out of 40 participants showed surprise when they discovered this /h/ deletion in their pronunciation. They were unaware of its occurrence and could not provide any logic. The rest of the 15 participants thought this deletion easy for their articulation system and felt it convenient to pronounce without the /h/ phoneme.

The change in pronunciation is a prominent feature of linguistic change. Sometimes this change is conscious, based on social class as Labov reflected through his studies (1972) (1966) and as Milroy revealed through his research (1992) but in this, it appeared to be a matter of beyond consciousness. The deletion of the /h/ phoneme reflects a gradual change in Urdu pronunciation which is beyond the participants' own choice even, as they accepted. The simplification in articulating sounds is the basic factor in this phonemic change. The study also revealed that the phonemic deletion of the /h/ is not restricted to the focused three words 'mujhay', 'tumhain' and 'nahi' but it appears in other words like 'bhi' (bi), sahi (sai) and 'hai' (ai) as well.

It is also worth mentioning that the deletion in the words under discussion does not remain in the /h/ phoneme but the last nasal sound of 'tumhain' also converts into 'tumay'. So, the study may suggest that the deletion of the /h/ phoneme is becoming a common practice unconsciously.

The change in pronunciation based on phonemic deletion can be due to the impact of the mother tongue of the participants i.e. Punjabi, which has brought a change in the pronunciation of Urdu words. But this goes with the word 'nahi' only and as far as 'tumhain' and 'mujhay' are concerned, they are not used in the Punjabi language in the way they are used in Urdu but they have a different version in Punjabi i.e., 'tainu' for 'tumhain' and 'mainu' for 'mujhay'. Hence, the notion of the influence of the Punjabi language on Urdu pronunciation does not apply to other words.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the deletion of the central /h/ phoneme is not a characteristic of standard variety but seems to be adopted by speakers for

their ease. The study asserts that the deletion of the /h/ phoneme is not restricted to either males or females but is adopted by both. Although there is a difference in the ratio of the phonemic deletion but that is not much prominent and hence, the study may suggest that the change in pronunciation is not gender-based but is adopted by both for the ease of the articulatory process.

The study is significant as it has evaluated the non-standard pronunciation of the words 'nahin', 'tumhain' and 'mujhay' as replacing the standard pronunciation. The study has focused on the occurrence of /h/ as the central phoneme only. However, future researches may focus on the occurrence of this phoneme at the end of the word where again it is deleted by speakers.

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