

The α/ω Merger in Suburban Atlanta as a Case of Phonological Leveling

The merger of / α / as in 'cot' and / ω / as in 'caught' is widespread in American English. Thomas (2001: 26) describes the merger as resulting from partial or full unrounding of / ω /. He reports that the merger has been documented in eastern New England, western Pennsylvania, West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, central and southern Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, the Western U.S. eastern Minnesota, western Missouri, Oklahoma and notes that it is spreading. Terry Irons (2005) reports it for Kentucky. The South, unlike many areas of the country, is generally not considered to be α/ω merger territory, but a few researchers report its spread here. Bailey, Wikle, and Sand (1991) and Bernstein and Gregory (1993) report it for Texas, and Fridland (1998, 2000) reports it for Memphis. This paper reports that the merger has spread to the Atlanta area.

Roswell (a suburb of Atlanta), once a tiny mill town, has experienced massive population growth; today's population is four times what it was in 1980 (Childs et al. 2004; McTyre and Paden 2001). This paper reports that, along with new industry and new faces, the merger has indeed moved to Roswell. A multi-dimensional view of the acoustic space shows that older (Native) speakers maintain the distinction for / α / and / ω /, not just in the F1 and F2 dimensions, but also in the F3 dimension. The younger (Native) speakers, in contrast, show overlap in all three acoustic dimensions.

Extensive fieldwork reveals that older residents continue to maintain tight-knit, locally based networks. Younger speakers, in contrast, have looser social networks that include outsiders/migrants. We see a changing contact situation from the older to the younger generation in which younger speakers frequently interact with outsiders while older speakers do not. This sets the stage for frequency effects (i.e. input of words containing merged low back vowels) to structure the phonological systems (Bybee 2001) of younger speakers who show the low back vowel merger for the lexical items in this case study. The analysis treats the merger as a case of phonological leveling, a frequent outcome of language and dialect contact resulting from situations of migration and mobility.

(345words)