

Urban Migration, Social Mobility and Phonetic Shift: a longitudinal study

Can adults change their phonetic repertoires after moving to a city where a change in progress is further advanced than in their home community? Previous studies that have dealt with migration and language change focus on an individual's ability to acquire features from a dialect markedly different from their own (e.g. Feagin 2003, Bowie 2000, Chambers 1992, Bortoni-Ricardo 1985). However, migration also brings in contact speakers of the same dialect who exhibit only gradually different phonetic forms.

To look at whether migrants acquire such non-categorical differences, we present a longitudinal acoustic study of (ae)-retraction in the speech of four women. Each woman moved from Parktown, a small, non-metropolitan town in Ontario to 3 larger cities within the province: Waterloo, Hamilton and Toronto. These are precisely the locations in which (ae)-retraction was first reported as part of the Canadian Vowel Shift (Clarke et al. 1995). Given that some linguistic changes begin in urban centers and gradually diffuse outwards into smaller towns (Bailey et al. 1993), migration from Parktown to these cities sets up the conditions in which the acquisition of a phonetic change in progress can be examined.

Word list data recorded during the participants' final year of high school is compared to readings made four years later during their final year of university. Results from ANOVA reveal significant differences in second formant frequencies across the two years. All four participants exhibited more retracted pronunciations of /ae/ in university compared to their productions in high school. However, the changes were found for /ae/ preceding nasal consonants and voiced velar stops - conditioning environments that are known to raise /ae/ in other dialects of American Englishes (Labov, Ash, and Boberg, forthcoming) and inhibit shifting in Canadian English in Ontario (Clarke et al. 1995, though see Boberg 2005 for Montreal).

These results support previous findings on phonetic drift in contact situations (Munro, M. et al. 1999) though this study shows that adults can also alter their vowel systems in gradient ways. In order to understand the social motivation behind the changes in (ae)-retraction, a comparative analysis is presented, looking at how the participants' high school-based community of practice (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992) evolved after they graduate from high school. We argue that social repositioning in response to the demands of a new marketplace (Bourdieu 1991) accounts for our findings. As teenagers, the women participated in a market that allowed them to advance through high school. When they moved, they participated in a new system and engaged in new social endeavors with other young urban women who exhibited larger degrees of (ae)-retraction.

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