

This talk will explore, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the range of social work being done with the linguistic resources offered by the Northern California Vowel Shift, in an ethnically heterogeneous preadolescent cohort. The general approach to minorities and regional vowel shifts has been to attribute the regional shifts to white Anglo speakers, and to examine whether or not minority speakers adopt aspects of those shifts. Such adoption is generally attributed to assimilation. In her study of young adult Chicano speakers' use of elements of the California Vowel Shift, Fought (1997, 1999) takes issue with this interpretation, showing social constraints on the fronting of /uw/ and the backing and raising of /ae/ that cannot be accounted for by some notion of assimilation.

We will carry this argument one step further, focusing on the entire Northern California Vowel Shift in the context of an ethnographic study of a preadolescent cohort at Steps Elementary, a poor multiethnic school in Northern California. Given that Latinos constitute more than a third of California's population, it is not clear that we can even equate Anglo speech with "California". The issue of ownership is not trivial. Certainly many features of Chicano and Anglo English are quite distinct, and ethnic distinctness is an important force in the community and in language use. At the same time, evidence from Steps Elementary suggests that the California Vowel Shift is not being propelled by Anglos and resisted by Chicanos; rather, it is being propelled by identity work within and across both communities. While some of that identity work is clearly ethnic, some transcends ethnic boundaries. Evidence from this cohort shows that Chicano speakers are not simply participating or not-participating in the California shift; they are making it their own. On the one hand, there are ethnic differences in nuances of the shift. For example, both Anglo and Chicano speakers front /U/, but in different directions. And while Anglo speakers tend to raise /ae/ before nasals and lower it elsewhere, an extreme Latino pattern lowers both. In the case of other vowels, a single variant may be used differentially by all speakers. The use of these vowels, even /U/ and /ae/, cannot be explained solely in terms of ethnicity, but must be understood at the intersection between ethnicity and participation in the peer-based social order.

The Steps cohort is in the process of moving toward an adolescent social order (e.g. Eckert 1996, 2002), appropriating normative power from adults, forming (multiethnic) alliances, reworking gender arrangements in the emerging heterosocial market. In the process, certain linguistic resources transcend dialect boundaries for the purposes of indexing qualities and stances, such as cuteness and toughness, that themselves transcend ethnic boundaries. One finds this in the use of a range of consonantal features, but also in elements of the California shift.