

Chicano English in Michigan

This study provides an acoustic analysis of the effects of the Northern Cities Shift (NCS) on speakers of Chicano English (CE) in Lansing, Michigan, an area in which the NCS is prevalent. Focus is on the six vowels most commonly associated with the NCS, /ɪ, ʌ, ɔ, ɑ, æ, ε/. Although several recent studies have examined Mexican American dialects in the Midwest (Frazer 1996, Gordon 2000), little emphasis has been put on the possible role of the NCS in the formation of these dialects. Results are based on a subject pool of 40 Mexican American speakers, evenly distributed across gender, age and socioeconomic status.

Both the NCS and Mexican Spanish appear to be influencing the vowel space of these speakers, particularly affecting the mid vowels /ε/ and /ɔ/. /ε/ is significantly lowered and backed, often overlapping extensively with the low front vowel /æ/. Although this type of movement is common in the NCS, it is more pronounced in these CE speakers than expected, especially since the fronting and raising of /æ/ and the fronting of /ɑ/, both of which have been said to precede /ε/-movement in the NCS, are not very advanced in many of those interviewed. Since Spanish does not have either /æ/ or /ε/, first generation learners of American English may have difficulty with the two initially. One might expect association of /ε/ with /e/ and of /æ/ with /a/. Because /æ/ and /ε/ are closer perceptually in a NCS system than in other dialects of American English, however, the possibility of a learner confusing them with each other is increased. Flege (2004:10) found confusion of the same two vowels with one another among adult Italian speakers learning Canadian English, another variety where /ε/-lowering and backing occurs.

With respect to the mid back vowel /ɔ/, consistent lowering and fronting towards the low vowel /a/ is occurring, which could also be the result of the combined influence of the NCS and Mexican Spanish. The Mexican Spanish /a/ is a front or front-central vowel (Whitley 1986: 13), perceptually close to a fronted NCS /ɑ/. Therefore, this vowel would be quite recognizable to a Mexican Spanish learner of English as a second language. The mid back vowel /ɔ/ is not found in the five vowel Spanish system, and because it is often lowered and fronted in the NCS, it is closer to the low vowel /ɑ/ in that dialect than to the mid vowel /o/.

Previous studies suggest that it may be difficult for a second language learner to create a new phonetic category for an L2 vowel that overlaps with the vowel space of an L1 vowel (Bosch et al. 2000: 215-216), and these data suggest that that overlap is exaggerated by NCS input to these learners. This study and other studies of L2 learners in specific dialect contexts suggest that local norms in the environment of the learner play an important role and should not be overlooked.