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1

Introduction

In the early decades of the twentieth century, large numbers of African American and White Southerners migrated from the rural South to the urban Midwest to work in factories (Berry 2000). Although these two migrant groups are separated by ethnicity, they share a regional affiliation with the South as well as Southern cultural characteristics (Anderson 2003). This situation provides an unique opportunity to examine ways in which the interaction of ethnicity and regional affiliation gives rise to systematic patterns of language variation and change and phonetic restructuring as a result of language contact. Patterns of use have been shown by sociolinguistic researchers to provide a window into group solidarity and ethnic identity, as well as to index social and linguistic relations within and among groups. A dramatic example of such indexicality is provided in the Midwestern cities by the distinctiveness of African American English (AAE) from Midwestern White varieties.

This investigation of the dialect contact situation between African American and Appalachian White Southern migrant groups and their descendants in the Detroit metropolitan area provides an explanation of the continuing distinctiveness of Southern migrant vowel patterns from those of Midwestern Whites in the city. Linguistic effects of large-scale migration for these two Southern groups across three generations of speakers are described and compared to the surrounding dialect norms of Midwestern Whites, through acoustic analysis of portions of the vowel systems.

The aims of this study are as follows. First, the study provides a description of portions of the vowel systems of six Detroit

African American and six Appalachian Southern migrant participants. Second, it provides a detailed analysis of the changes taking place in the vowel systems and attempts to contextualize the phonetic data both historically, with reference to the data collected by Wolfram in 1969, and within an account of local language ideology. Third, the results are evaluated with reference to current models of change in vowel systems, especially the principles of internal change proposed by Labov (1994). The effects of leveling in this dialect contact situation are also addressed. Finally, the relationship between internal constraints on and external motivations for language change is examined in a framework that is sensitive to contextual, or coarticulatory, effects from the following consonant on patterns of use.

The methodology is a combination of techniques used in variationist sociolinguistics and acoustic phonetics. The fieldwork with the African American participants and one of the Appalachian Southern migrant participants took place in inner city Detroit and in the adjacent inner suburbs of Warren, Taylor, Royal Oak, and Dearborn Heights with the rest of the Appalachian White participants. Data was extracted from 60 minutes of sociolinguistic interviews for each participant for the acoustic analysis, the methods of which are described in Chapter 5.

I analyze the acoustic results with particular reference to local language ideologies and ideological stances which emerged during the data collection phase of the study. I argue in Chapter 8 that vowel changes are internally constrained but subject to ideological intervention. Specifically, I argue that the fronting of /u/ and /ʊ/ is part of a widespread phonetic change taking place in many varieties of English around the world and no longer provide a “crucial site” (Phillips 2000: 233) used to express a local orientation for the Southern migrant participants in this study. In contrast, glide-weakened /ai/ functions as a socially salient ethnolinguistic boundary marker that is rich in local meaning. The results from the acoustic study indicate that, for middle-aged and younger African American participants, glide-weakening has expanded its territory to include the progressive pre-voiceless context. I associate both the fronting of the high and lower-high back vowels and pre-voiceless /ai/ glide-weakening, changes which have only recently been reported for African American speakers, with changes in the sociolinguistic landscapes of speakers following migration from the rural South to the urban Midwest. The

social group which became most relevant—the group from which African American and Appalachian participants saw themselves as most distinctive—were White Midwesterners. Furthermore, both groups display orientations to the South in culturally important ways. A linguistic alignment to a Southern norm which does not clearly distinguish between AAE and White Southern varieties therefore can be described in relation to the complex attitudes and ideologies emerging after migration.

This book consists of nine chapters. Chapter 2 surveys the work on language variation and change which underpins the study. Chapter 3 describes the research site, the history of migration of Southern migrants to Southeastern Michigan, and gives overviews of Appalachian English and AAE in both Southern and Midwestern (urban) contexts. Chapter 4 describes the pilot study. Chapter 5 describes field techniques, sociolinguistic methods, and acoustic methods. Chapter 6 gives the acoustic results for the high and lower-high vowels, and Chapter 7 gives the results for the low vowels. Chapter 8 situates the acoustic results within local and supralocal contexts, and situates the patterns of use revealed by the acoustic analysis with reference to local language ideologies which emerged during the fieldwork phase of the study. Chapter 9 discusses the limitations and contributions of the study and also gives an assessment of the broader implications of the study.

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