Language attrition and convergence in apparent time

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The literature on variation in endangered languages has largely focused on the structural and stylistic simplification that occurs when languages contract or on cases where variation is introduced through interference in the form of a non-native variant that exists alongside a native form (Dorian 1981, Campbell and Muntzel 1989, Aikhenvald 2002, among others). Researchers in language contact have often linked structural change in a language to eventual language death, and some have hypothesized that convergence is the process underlying language attrition (Myers-Scotton 2003). However, it is as yet unclear whether any and all types of structural convergence will necessarily lead to language attrition, and some have argued that phonological or morpho-syntactic convergence may co-exist with language maintenance (Gumperz and Wilson 1971, Hamp 1989). This paper further explores phonological convergence in the context of language shift by tracking a change in apparent time (Labov 1994) in a potentially endangered language.

Garifuna is an Arawak language spoken in disparate communities throughout Central America. It is a moribund language in most of the Garifuna communities in Belize, where speakers are variably trilingual in Garifuna, English, and Belizean Creole (BC). In the village of Hopkins intergenerational transmission of Garifuna still occurs but locals and non-locals alike believe that Hopkins will follow the path of nearby Garifuna communities in shifting to English and BC, abandoning the use of Garifuna entirely. Under the working definition that an endangered language is one where children are no longer competent speakers, Garifuna is an endangered language, and Hopkins is the only one of six Garifuna communities in Belize where the majority of children speak Garifuna as a first language. The data in this paper come from interviews with 37 speakers in the village of Hopkins, ranging in age from 6 to 81.

The variable in question is the Garifuna alveo-palatal phoneme commonly written *ch* (Cayetano 1993) and previously reported to be in free variation between a fricative and an affricate (Taylor 1955). This variation remains in the speech community today, but speakers under the age of thirty show increasing use of the affricative variant. Figure 1 shows the ratio of use of the affricative variant (the (ch) ratio) for all speakers. At first glance, an apparent time analysis of the data shows what looks like a regular sound change in progress, whereby the affricative variant is, over time, replacing the fricative variant. However, a closer look at the data shows that the upward linear trend line is as a result of the difference between older and younger speakers as a group, and in fact speakers over 30, shown in Figure 2, do not show any apparent time increase in use of the affricative variant, whereas speakers under 30 show almost categorical use of the affricative variant.

In this paper I propose that this pattern is indicative of the fact that young speakers have resolved phonetic variation in their Garifuna by borrowing a phonemic distinction from their English. This follows from Bullock and Gerfen's (2004) definition of convergence, in which "bilingual phonologies may become particularly permeable to inter-linguistic influence precisely where they are acoustically and perceptually unstable, and where they are already congruent to some degree." Thus convergence here is motivated by the fact that the two phonetic variants in Garifuna match existing phonemes in English.

Although all of the speakers in this sample are bilingual, and report using both Garifuna and English everyday, I hypothesize that this production data is evidence of the fact that a shift has taken place in speakers' phonologies. In addition to showing a structural change in Garifuna, this data then is also evidence of a shift in bilingual competence from older to younger generations, which itself may be the most likely harbinger of language shift in the community.

Figures and References

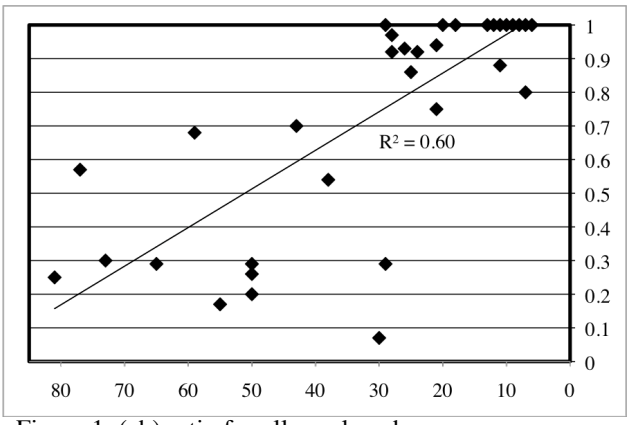

Figure 1. (ch) ratio for all speakers by age

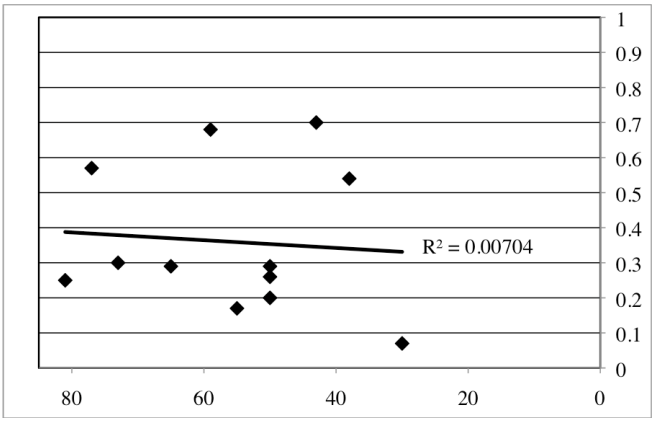

Figure 2. (ch) ratio for all speakers over age 30

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