

The Linguistic Contribution of the European-American Founder Population of El Paso County, Texas

Anne Marie Hamilton
University of Georgia

Salikoko Mufwene has argued for a “Founder Principle” of creole formation which emphasizes the initial and sustained influence of homesteading populations of non-standard English speakers in regions which later became plantation land (2001). But the notion of a founder population need not apply solely to the formation of creoles. Cultural geographer William Zelinsky’s Doctrine of First Effective Settlement predicts generally that the “specific characteristics of the first group able to effect a viable self-perpetuating society are of crucial significance to the later social and cultural geography of the area” (1992).

Until the approach and completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1881, the European American presence in the El Paso, Texas area was culturally negligible, consisting largely of men who either remained single or married into influential Mexican families and assimilated into Mexican culture. Since El Paso County, Texas only began to develop a substantial, enduring Eurocentric population base in 1881, the children and grandchildren of its European American founder population are still present. Culturally segregated from Mexican Americans, these first and second generation El Pasoans, who witnessed El Paso’s rapid growth period, formed their speech from a mixture of competing features predominantly from the Midwest and Texas.

This paper summarizes the results of a lexical and phonetic analysis of English spoken by forty European-American upper-middle-class El Pasoans born between 1914 and 1935, who either were born in El Paso or moved to El Paso before they were six years old. The sample consists of ten rural and thirty urban informants with equal numbers of men and women in each group. Using the Kruskal-Wallis H statistic of SPSS, following Ellen Johnson (1994), I tested for correlations between linguistic and socioeconomic variables. I found that parental origin correlated significantly with the incidence of many lexical features, such as ‘husk’ and ‘shuck,’ and ‘puny’ and ‘poorly.’ Further, I found that rurality correlates significantly with monophthongal /ai/, which indicates that rural El Paso preserves older linguistic features in spite of daily contact between urban and rural El Pasoans. Other socioeconomic correlates include occupation and biological sex.

In the discussion, I compare the incidence of lexical features in my El Paso English Sample with lexical features discussed in E. Bagby Atwood’s (1962) study of Texas lexicon, such as the prevalence of the address forms ‘Mother’ and ‘Daddy.’ Further, I compare the incidence of phonetic features such as monophthongal /ai/ and degree of merger of the vowels in ‘caught’ and ‘cot’ with published results from Guy Bailey and Cynthia Bernstein’s Phonological Survey of Texas (1989), with El Paso data from William Labov’s Atlas of North American English (ANAE, 2002), and with Hans Kurath and Raven McDavid, Jr.’s (1961) summaries of phonetic data from the Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States (LAMSAS). Finally, I evaluate the phonetic contribution of the European-American founder population to El Paso County in terms of Gordon and Trudgill’s (1998) notion of embryonic variants, features present in the speech of the founder population which later become characteristic of the area.

References:

Atwood, E. Bagby (1962). *The Regional Vocabulary of Texas*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Bailey, Guy and Cynthia Bernstein (1989). “Methodology of a Phonological Survey of Texas.” *Journal of English Linguistics* 22.1: 6-16.

Gordon, Elizabeth and Peter Trudgill (1999). “Shades of Things to Come: Embryonic Variants in New Zealand English Sound Changes.” *English World-Wide* 20: 111-124.

Johnson, Ellen (1994). *Lexical Change and Variation in the Southeastern United States in the Twentieth Century*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

Kurath, Hans and Raven I. McDavid, Jr. (1961). *Pronunciation of English in the Atlantic States*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. [rpt. 1982, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.]

Labov, William (2002). *Atlas of North American English*. Formerly the *Phonological Atlas of North America*, on the Internet at: http://www.ling.upenn.edu/phono_atlas/home.html.

Mufwene, Salikoko S. (2001). *The Ecology of Language Evolution*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Zelinsky, Wilbur. (1992; original 1973). *The Cultural Geography of the United States*, a revised edition. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.