

Not conforming to what? Competing norms, local identity, and the decline of /aw/-monophthongization in Pittsburgh

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Changes from above the level of awareness have not been the subject of much sociolinguistic investigation since Labov's (1966) investigation of New York department stores. However, many dialect 'contractions' show aspects of change from above, as in Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1995). These contraction studies usually focus on relatively isolated speech communities which are either coming into contact with another, more robust dialect, or a speech community that is disappearing because its speakers are leaving the community.

Labov (2001:516) suggests that language change is driven in large part by an abstract social value of *nonconformity*. However, in these situations, what does nonconformity mean? In this paper that we argue that an understanding of the role of sociolinguistic norms in the spread of sound change needs to be able to model *competing* norms, and the indexical meanings of variants that drive them.

Our argument is based on an analysis of /aw/-monophthongization – the variable (aw) – in Pittsburgh, PA, USA. (aw) is above the level of awareness, to the point that it is often used to represent localness in the media in this region (Johnstone et al. 2002). It is commonly believed that it is 'dying out,' and that speakers who use the local variant are older steelworkers.

In order to begin to understand the patterning and possible change of this variable, we performed a random telephone survey of the Pittsburgh metropolitan standard area. We obtained responses from 50 speakers, whom were asked to answer questions about local knowledge. The answers to the questions were known to have features of the local dialect; for (aw) there were six such answers.

The survey results indicate that monophthongization is clearly retreating, with men lagging behind women in this retreat. In addition, there is a significant difference between the birthplace of respondents, with those from the city significantly different from those outside the city. Surprisingly, there is only a small effect for class.

We argue that the contraction is due to a change in norms: Those younger speakers who continue to use monophthongization are not being nonconformist, but rather are orienting to a local norm. Many other younger speakers are beginning to orient to a regional or national norm ('prestige'). Either of these groups can be seen as non-conformist, which suggests that we need a less abstract concept than 'conformity' for describing norms. Our data support Eckert's view of linguistic change that "the crucial dynamic is not so much the construction of prestige and stigma as the construction of identities, all of which are positive" (2000:227). Part of that identity is an orientation to community-wide norms. Pittsburgh shows that these norms may compete, and language change is part of that competition. Studies of dialect contraction, and insular dialects, suggest a similar view of norm competition.

References

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