

Ethnicity, gender, and place in Northern Vermont

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In the past several years, models for the analysis of social identity (e.g., gender, race) have been adopted expanding on the treatment of gender, ethnicity, etc. as a series of binary, mutually exclusive categories (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Fought, 2002; Mendoza-Denton, 1997, 2002; Milroy, 2002, 2003). These models have been especially useful when the division of linguistic data into categories for variationist analysis has been unsuccessful in providing a satisfying interpretation of the results. Such has been the case in a long-term project on Vermont speech. This area of the northeastern United States is inhabited by the Abenaki people, a Native American group, as well as European Americans. However, analyses of vowel tokens using a division of speakers into European American and Abenaki have not been at all successful in elucidating speech differences between or within these groups. Part of the challenge appears to be coming from the social position of the Abenaki, in that historical oppression by dominant European American cultures in combination with a current Abenaki cultural revival movement has resulted in attitudinal differences among those with access to Abenaki heritage. In addition, identity claims are confounded by a rural-urban division, which crosses ethnic lines while dividing long-term Vermont residents from more recent immigrants from other parts of the United States. Finally, gender plays a significant role in this proposed identity analysis as participation in the rural life described by natives of this area includes an emphasis on sporting events (e.g., hunting, snowmobiling) which is most typical of men in this area.

The current study seeks to resolve some of these issues by examining the speech of 10 men and women in Vermont, all of whom claimed some measure of Abenaki identity. Two checklists have been developed: The Rural Network Scale and the Abenaki Identity Scale. These tools comprise six items each and include such information as family history, travel experience, participation in Abenaki events, friendship networks, etc. Both checklists were administered, using interview information, and the vowel tokens of all speakers were analyzed using the Computerized Speech Lab (Kay Elemetrics). Variable included the centralization of long (ay), as in “kite”, fronting of (aw) as in “cow” and the division of short (a), as in “cat” into a raised vs. a backed variant. The results revealed, generally, that the use of identity attitude checklists was more useful in explaining the linguistic data than binary divisions of gender, ethnicity, and place. Specific findings included the following: 1. Women’s speech was more differentiated by attitudinal factors than men’s speech; 2. Vowel features with simpler distributions and local prestige were more affected by affiliation ties than vowels with more complex distributions and, arguably, less negative stigmatization.

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