

‘On de farm’: Sociolinguistic meaning in town and country

Mary Rose

This paper, based on ethnographic research in an upper-Midwest farming community, argues that variables come to mean geographically because speakers assume a multiplicity of stances toward the past, present and future meanings of a place. It is a study of the social meaning of a consonantal variable among senior citizens who have lived through many changes in their dairy-farming community. I show how the variable, replacement of interdental fricatives with stops ((th)), comes to index the local place via its prominence in German-influenced dialects spoken by generations of farmers in the area.

Many studies suggest that linguistic variables and other social practices are recruited in local contestation over the meaning of the landscape. With the exception of Frazer (1983), however, no studies examine how town-country divisions influence language change outside of cities. Here, I show that ‘town vs. country’ is a social boundary that contributes to the social meaning of linguistic variables, though not via a simple binary opposition. It is based on a study of older people in Jamestown, a small Midwestern town defined by its historical role in the state’s dairy industry. All informants are over age 65. The paper is based on two data sets, one observational study of naturally-occurring interactions, and one from 40 tape-recorded interviews with 20 men and 20 women. The observational data set consists of frequency counts made over three months of observing card games, some of whose participants were also interviewed. VARBRUL analysis shows that men in general, and both men and women with a farming background more often use dental stops for interdental fricatives in both function words and lexical items. Those who spent their lives in town use [th] more often.

(Th) is commented on by both outsiders and locals as part of a local way of talking that includes the tag question ‘ain so?’ and other features of German-influenced dialects. Conversation with community elders reveals how multiple possible meanings of these features emerge over a long lifetime. Along with hard work, smelling of the barn, and playing certain card games, (th) is part of a construction of ‘country’ that residents may rally around, reject, laugh at, or align themselves with in part or whole. Townspeople comment about the distinct smell of farmers, but they admire farmers and their wives as industrious. Retired farmers themselves exclaim about the radical changes that farming has undergone, and with it their reading of the landscape around Jamestown. The town’s identity as the ‘Hub City’ of regional industry was founded in dairy farming and cheese production, which have long been undergoing a shift to corporate ownership and operation. As a link to the smell of the barn, (th) and other features index a ‘country’ identity that some claimed and others escaped from or never wished to associate with. With its ability to capture a locally sustained and sustaining landscape, rather than a corporately occupied one, (th) indexes a local identity rooted in memory for both city dwellers and farmers.