

Peer Group Identification and Variation in New York Latino English /l/

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Early work on Puerto Rican English (Wolfram 1974, Poplack 1978) and later work on Mexican American English (Mendoza-Denton 1997, Fought 1999) coincide in showing how social practices relate to convergence with local English vernaculars. The growing diversity of Latino immigration and the presence of established Latino communities in cities such as New York provide new contextual shifts and complications. In the spirit of recent work identifying adolescent peer cultures as vehicles for crystallizing social practices (Eckert 2001), this research project explores the roles of peer identities and national heritages in the English of Latino students in a diverse New York City high school. Data were gathered in sociolinguistic interviews embedded in a two-year ethnography. The peer groups investigated for Spanish-English contact effects include hip-hoppers, skaters, geeks, and non-participants in local youth peer cultures.

Prior research on Latino English in the eastern US (including Wolfram 1974 and Poplack 1978) has yielded few features specifically indicative of Spanish-English language contact, by contrast with research on Mexican-American English in the southwestern US. Yet impressionistically, there is reason to believe that NY Latino English (NYLE) is distinct from AAVE and NY European-American vernaculars. In this paper, we discuss a previously unexamined variable: allophonic variation of /l/, which may behave distinctively in NYLE. The set of realizations found includes strictly apical allophones, which, although not unknown in US English dialects, are foreign to New York City English and native to Spanish. Unlike those pronunciations which characterize the L2 learner English of Spanish speakers which are entirely absent from L1 New York Latino English (e.g. velar nasals - /n/ → [ŋ]), these Spanish-like apical /l/s are frequent and tenacious in the English of a subset of our research participants.

In non-prevocalic environments, we find a three-way split between apical realizations of /l/ (strongly associated for this environment with bilingualism and Spanish-English contact), a vocalic realization, and a velar realization. The vocalic realization correlates in our data with hip-hop peer culture identification. Although it is a feature of AAVE, it is also present in some varieties of Caribbean Spanish. Velar /l/, typical of NY European American Vernacular, correlates with skater peer culture identification. Prevocalic realizations do not manifest the same three-way split. They include more than one apical allophone, given the presence of a dorsal raising gesture in general American English light variants of /l/ (Sproat and Fujimura 1993). There is no prevocalic /l/ which is specific to the hip-hop-affiliated group in our data.

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