

Social class, convergence, and the vowel systems of Columbus, OH AA(V)E and EAE

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During the second half of the 20th century, the Columbus, Ohio metropolitan area grew increasingly segregated, particularly between working class black and white residents in the urban core (Foster 1997). Although we might expect increased segregation to lead to divergence in speakers' vowel systems, as in other areas such as Philadelphia (Graff, et al., 1986), previous studies (Thomas [1989]/1993, 2001; Durian, et al., forthcoming) have found conflicting patterns of both divergence *and* convergence between the groups in Columbus. Each of these studies found convergence among urban working class black and white speakers for fronting of the back vowels /uw/, /ʊ/, /ow/, and /aw/, while Durian, et al. (forthcoming) found a strong trend towards divergence for /ɛ/ and /ɪ/, with blacks showing raising and whites showing lowering, and for /ɑ/ and /ɔ/, with blacks showing fronting in comparison to whites.

However, as the focus of these studies has been solely on working class speech, little is known about the ethnic variation shown by these vowels in the speech of middle class residents, who have been less impacted by segregation during this time period. This paper reports on a pilot study that expands on the previous studies by exploring the issue of convergence and divergence in the vowel systems of middle class blacks and whites. In addition, it provides a broader view of class differences via the instrumental comparison of the vowel systems of 8 black and 8 white residents of both working and middle class backgrounds, further divided by sex and age, with data drawn from sociolinguistic interviews.

Results of the analysis reveal that our black speakers of both class backgrounds show strong tendencies towards convergence with our whites for fronting of /uw/, /ʊ/, /ow/, and /aw/. As well, our black speakers show a high degree of similarity to one another in the degree to which they raise /ʌ/, regardless of class background. Finally, our middle class blacks differ from working class blacks in showing stronger similarities with middle class whites, who show backed variants of /ɑ/ and /ɔ/ and non-raising of /ɛ/ and /ɪ/.

The results suggest that class, race, and age are all robust factors impacting vowel variation among both blacks and whites in Columbus. Our working class blacks show stronger signs of divergence overall from working class whites than the middle class blacks from middle class whites, with our youngest speakers displaying these two patterns most strongly. In terms of social motivations for the changes, our findings suggest greater integration among our middle class speakers may be leading to increasing convergence in their vowel systems. For our working class speakers, our findings suggest public school desegregation policies in the 1980s and 1990s may be one possibility explaining the increasing convergence for fronting of /uw/, /ʊ/, /ow/, and /aw/ between ethnic groups among the youngest speakers, while changes in white speech norms may be leading to the increasing patterns of difference for the observed patterns of /ɛ/ and /ɪ/ raising among blacks and lowering among whites.

References

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