

Selection of Interference Features in the Formation of a New Dialect
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In studies of how language contact creates new language varieties, linguists are often forced to study the community in which the new variety was created after the initial generations have died. In addition, studies of ongoing language contact situations seldom take advantage of advances in phonetic analysis now available to variationists.

Furthermore, language contact studies frequently focus on a narrow range of variables. We attempt to address all three of those shortcomings by examining English spoken in a Mexican American community in southern Texas, starting with the first generation that learned English, and examining a broad suite of features representing segmental, prosodic, and even morphological variation, using acoustic techniques when appropriate. We also compare Mexican American speech in this community with the contact dialect, spoken by what is now a minority Anglo population.

Acoustic measurements demarcated clear differences in vowel quality between Mexican American and local Anglo speech. Anglos show most classic features of the “Southern Shift,” such as lowered nuclei of /ej/ (as in *bait*), monophthongization of /aj/ (as in *bite*), and fronting of /uw/ (as in *boot*) and—to a lesser extent—of /ow/ (as in *boat*). Upgliding /ɔ/ (as in *bought*), and upgliding [æɛ] in words such as *pass* also occur. Older Mexican Americans seldom or never show these variants. Moreover, they show categorically higher realizations than Anglos of /æ/ (as in *bat*), /ɛ/ (as in *bet*), and /ɪ/ (as in *bit*), the latter two corresponding closely with Spanish /e/ and /i/. They show no difference in quality between pre-nasal and non-pre-nasal /æ/. Younger Mexican Americans show the same realizations of /ow/, /ej/, and /aj/ as older Mexican Americans and lack a difference between pre-nasal and non-pre-nasal /æ/. However, they show a chain-shift lowering of /æ/, /ɛ/, and /ɪ/, probably in accommodation to Anglo norms.

Two prosodic variables are analyzed, also acoustically. One is the degree of stress-timing vs. syllable-timing. Here, Mexican Americans of all ages tend to show a greater degree of syllable-timing than Anglos. The other is an intonational variant, the presence of slowly rising F₀ in prominent syllables—a feature of Mexican Spanish—for which we focused on phrase-final tones. It is maintained in the English of younger Mexican Americans to some extent.

Finally, we examined a consonantal variable, consonant cluster simplification (CCR), which interacts with verb morphology, as in [mɪs] for *missed*. Older Mexican Americans show both widespread CCR and frequent lack of past-tense marking, even in contexts not affected by CCR, such as *headed*, and the marking may be affected by verbal aspect. Younger Mexican Americans have moved strongly toward patterns common in Anglo English, though.

The status of Mexican Americans as the majority ethnicity in southern Texas has allowed them to develop a distinct dialect. However, they have shown some selectivity in developing it. In general, its characteristic features represent substrate features from Mexican Spanish. It has, however, discarded some interference features, particularly when they are stereotypical or disfavored by schooling, and appears to be stabilizing now.