

The Low-Back Merger in the Steel City: African American English and Pittsburgh Speech

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The low-back merger, which neutralizes the contrast between /ɑ/ and /ɔ/, extends across a large portion of the Northern US and Canada, and is expanding to areas in the Southern US as well (Labov et al., 2006). Despite the fact that a great deal is known about the merger and its distribution among White speakers, few studies have investigated the status of the merger in African American English (AAE). Those studies that have examined the process in regional varieties of AAE have found that African Americans maintain the contrast between the vowels, even if the merger is underway in White speech in the area (Bernstein, 1993; Fridland, 2004; Thomas, 2001). Such results corroborate the claim that African Americans do not participate in local sound changes (see e.g. Labov et al., 2006).

In Pittsburgh, PA, the low-back merger is reported to be complete, with the contrast lost for White speakers in all environments in both production and perception (Labov et al., 2006), and is one of the characteristics which distinguishes the region from others in the Midland. Moreover, unlike other merger areas in the US, in Pittsburgh the resulting vowel is the backed and rounded /ɔ/ rather than /ɑ/ (Labov et al., 2006). The current paper examines the extent to which the merger has taken place within African American speech in Pittsburgh. To answer this question, I consider word list data, for which participants were asked to read pairs of words aloud and judge the sounds to be the same or different. The list included /ɑ/-/ɔ/ pairs in two environments: preceding /n/ (*pond*—*pawned*) and preceding /t/ (*cot*—*caught*). Preliminary analyses indicate that like their White counterparts, African Americans in Pittsburgh have lost the contrast between /ɑ/ and /ɔ/ in both environments. Given the “minimal tendency” for African Americans to collapse this distinction (Labov et al., 2006, p. 299), such results are unexpected.

I explore several avenues to account for these findings. One explanation is purely structural: since the resulting merged vowel in Pittsburgh is /ɔ/, and /ɑ/ is backed in some African American speech, particularly before /r/, the backing of /ɑ/ to /ɔ/ in other environments may have been facilitated. This would not be the case in regions where the merged vowel is the more front /a/. A second explanation may be that the merger has been complete in western Pennsylvania for decades (Kurath, 1949; Kurath & McDavid, 1961; Labov, 1994), whereas in other areas it is still in transition (Labov et al., 2006). Finally, while in other regions the low-back merger may function as an ethnolinguistic marker, in Pittsburgh, highly salient features such as /aw/-monophthongization serve this purpose instead (Gooden & Eberhardt, to appear).

This paper contributes to the small but rapidly growing literature on regional phonological variation within AAE and provides further counter-evidence to the belief

that African Americans do not partake in sound changes in the regions in which they reside (Anderson, 2003; Jones, 2003; Thomas, 1989).

Works Cited

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