

Ungliding and the Status of /ay/ in Kentucky English

Terry Lynn Irons
Morehead State University

Variation in the realization of the /ay/ diphthong is a significant marker of regional dialects of North American English. Indeed, this diphthong figures prominently in contemporary changes in progress known as Canadian Raising and the Southern Vowel Shift. Ungliding, that is, weakening or monophthongization of the glide component of /ay/, is associated with the South and is an initiating factor for the Southern Vowel Shift. Although the South has been generally well studied, published research on the pattern of /ay/ ungliding in the Highland South is limited. Providing a broad outline of North American dialects, the recently published *Atlas of North American English* draws a generalized picture of the distribution of glide reduction for the diphthong /ay/ in this region of the South. It does not, however, claim to provide a detailed picture of local variation. The goal of this study is to fill in some of the gaps in this picture.

More specifically, drawing upon contemporary interviews and earlier work for the Dictionary of American Regional English, this paper presents information on the patterns of /ay/ realization across all regions of the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Acoustic analyses of real time data over the last century suggest some significant patterns of change in /ay/ ungliding. Four distinct /ay/ gliding patterns are found in the English of Kentucky speakers. The first pattern is characterized by the presence of full glides. The second pattern is characterized by the loss of the /ay/ glide in all contexts, full monophthongization. The third pattern is a split system, characterized by /ay/ allophony: the glide is completely absent in pre-voiced contexts, and the glide is fully present in pre-voiceless environments. In addition, the onset, or nucleus, for each allophone occupies a distinct position in acoustic space. The fourth pattern is characterized by general glide weakening across all or nearly all environments. Standard methods of regression analysis are presented to show the significance of coda segments on glide realization.

Although stigmatized, the pattern of unconditioned ungliding persists and is even strengthening as a marker of local identity in some isolated, largely rural communities. In other areas, there is some evidence to suggest that the pattern of ungliding is receding, especially in more urbanized areas. Although this conclusion must be considered tentative at best, it appears that the speech of Kentuckians is undergoing a significant reorganization, in a manner similar to that identified Thomas (2001) for Texas. Whereas features associated with “southern” appear to be receding in the Bluegrass region of the state that has become increasingly urbanized, these same features are strengthening or solidifying as markers of local identity in the essentially non-urban rural areas in the eastern and western regions of the state.

References

- Labov, William, Ash, Sharon, & Boberg, Charles. (2006). *Atlas of North American English: Phonetics, phonology, and sound change*. The Hague: Mouton De Gruyter.
- Thomas, Erik. 2001. *Acoustic Analysis of Vowel Variation in New World English*. PADS 85. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.