

MEXICAN-AMERICAN CHICAGO ENGLISH (MACE): A case study of four speakers

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Abstract

Many sociolinguistic studies have investigated claims that American speech varieties are diverging along ethnic lines and ethnic dialects, regardless of region and other social factors, exhibit uniform linguistic patterns. These two claims are known respectively as the “divergence hypothesis” (Labov 1987; Bailey and Maynor 1989) and the “uniformity controversy” (“American Vowel Phonology and African American Ethnicity” Symposium 2007). The majority of studies addressing these hypotheses examine African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Little work focuses on Mexican-American English and most of the work that does focuses on the Southwestern United States. In the Midwest, the mainstream dialect is different from that of the Southwest. In addition, the influx of Mexican immigrants to the Midwest is a recent phenomenon with its origins in the 20th century. Thus, the immigrant experience is a prevalent factor in the identity formation of many Mexican-Americans in the Midwest who are among the first generation in their family to be born in the US (Horowitz 1992). This study focuses on a Midwestern dialect of Mexican-American English. It describes the acoustic phonetic properties of vowels and intervocalic /l/ characteristic of four speakers of Mexican-American Chicago English (MACE). The data was obtained in Praat from fluent vernacular speech in three lengthy semi-structured interviews with each participant.

In an attempt to examine the nature of the divergence and uniformity hypotheses among Mexican-American English speakers, this paper compares these acoustic phonetic properties with six sound changes associated with the mainstream Standard Chicago dialect, known collectively as the Northern Cities Chain Shift (Labov, Ash, and Boberg 1997). It then compares these properties with similar findings for a Mexican-American dialect in Los Angeles, Chicano English (LACE or CE), and a Standard white mainstream Chicago dialect, Chicago White English (CWE). The preliminary results show that the four speakers of MACE exhibit a variety of local trends with regards to the acoustic qualities of their vowels that are not characteristic of Mexican-American English in the Southwest. One of the speakers exhibits three of the six Northern Cities Chain Shift changes, one exhibits in four of the changes and the other two exhibit five of the six changes. However, some of their vowel qualities are not typical of mainstream local Midwest dialects and the distribution of these effects varies by speaker. This varying distribution in use of NCS vowels corresponds to differences in identity construction with regards to ethnicity, region, class, age, sex, etc. across the speakers.

The second part of the study analyzes the acoustic properties of intervocalic /l/ in the four MACE speakers. It looks at the length, duration and first and second formants of the MACE speakers’ intervocalic /l/’s and compares these numbers with published data for mainstream American females, one mainstream Chicago English male speaker interviewed along with the four MACE speakers, and published data for mainstream Spanish. The numbers suggest that MACE speakers’ intervocalic /l/’s are clearer than mainstream American English intervocalic /l/’s but darker than those of the Spanish /l/.

References

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