Changes in dialect and dialect perception in Cooperstown, New York

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Cooperstown, NY:

village in rural Otsego County, central New York State; population ca. 2000:
home of National Baseball Hall of Fame, nearby baseball summer camps, etc.

Like most Northern Cities Shift communities, Cooperstown is losing NCS:

Abrupt apparent-time retreat from TRAP-raising and LOT-fronting (Dinkin 2022)—a sharp distinction between Baby Boomers and post-Boomer generations.

Cooperstown experienced rapid growth in tourism in second half of 20th century; downtown businesses now mainly cater to tourists rather than locals (Anania 2016).


Data: 40 new sociolinguistic interviews collected summer 2018;
speakers grew up in Cooperstown school district from age 8 or younger.

Formants extracted, Lobanov-normalized with FAVE (Rosenfelder et al. 2014);
speakers coded as having positive, mixed, negative attitudes about tourism based on notes taken by research assistants transcribing interviews.

Mixed-effects models calculated in Rbrul (Johnson 2009):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>factor</th>
<th>coefficient</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>post-Boomer × wordlist</td>
<td>+40 Hz</td>
<td>&lt; 10^-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>post-Boomer</td>
<td>+20 Hz</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wordlist</td>
<td>-4 Hz</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
<td>-23 Hz</td>
<td>0.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>post-Boomer × positive tourism attitude</td>
<td>-11 Hz</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>post-Boomer × negative tourism attitude</td>
<td>+45 Hz</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive tourism attitude</td>
<td>+21 Hz</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>negative tourism attitude</td>
<td>-27 Hz</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>factor</th>
<th>coefficient</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>post-Boomer × wordlist</td>
<td>-80 Hz</td>
<td>&lt; 10^-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>post-Boomer</td>
<td>-79 Hz</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wordlist (including minimal pairs)</td>
<td>+22 Hz</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>has lived outside Inland North 5+ years</td>
<td>-51 Hz</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
<td>+46 Hz</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>post-Boomer × positive tourism attitude</td>
<td>+60 Hz</td>
<td>0.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>post-Boomer × negative tourism attitude</td>
<td>-67 Hz</td>
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<tr>
<td>positive tourism attitude</td>
<td>-52 Hz</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>negative tourism attitude</td>
<td>+19 Hz</td>
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</tbody>
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Results: TRAP F1 and LOT F2 show interactions of age with tourism attitude and speech style:

- Wordlist style leads change from NCS, more for post-Boomers than Boomers.
- Positive tourism attitude disfavors NCS for Boomers; attitude effect is absent or reversed for younger speakers.

So apparently the NCS has changed its social meaning:

- for Boomers, it indexes local orientation in opposition to the growth of tourism;
- for post-Boomers, it is a non-standard feature avoided in careful style.

Interviews subjects were also asked for metalinguistic beliefs about Cooperstown’s dialect status and similarity to other communities.

These also show change between Boomers and post-Boomers.

Does Cooperstown have a distinctive dialect or way of speaking?

- Only 6 out of 40 said yes
- All but 1 of those were Boomers with non-positive tourism attitudes
- Also all but 1 said it was similar to other parts of New York State or the Midwest

Four post-Boomers gave noncommittal or unsure answers like “maybe” or “probably”.

American Dialect Society annual meeting 5 January 2024
American Community Survey 2018 five-year estimates; “white collar” denotes census’s “management, business, science, and arts” category.

But Boomers mostly don’t report perceiving such a linguistic difference—they grew up when Cooperstown was just another rural community in Otsego County. Although tourism had been increasing since 1950, the growth of tourism-focused businesses began in the early 1980s (Anania 2016): when Boomers were adults but Gen X mostly children/adolescents.

This suggests a picture of how social change led to both dialect change and change in dialect perception in Cooperstown:
- Tourism in Cooperstown began to increase between the 1950s and 1970s, the childhood and adolescence of the Baby Boomers.
- Boomers perceived NCS as indexing the difference between locals and tourists.
- Boomers with high local orientation and antipathy to tourists maintained high levels of NCS, tourism-friendly Boomers accommodated more away from NCS.
- Younger generations perceived less NCS in Cooperstown than nearby towns.
- Nearby towns are less affluent, more working-class than Cooperstown, so post-Boomers interpreted NCS as a nonstandard feature.

Acknowledgements:
Thanks to my research assistants: Alyssa Blancha, Mitchell Celaya, Clara Fulks, Bea Morales, Matt Springer, Mike Stephens, and Shane Taylor. This research was supported by the University Grants Program and a Critical Thinking Grant at San Diego State University.

References: