

RUSSIAN IMMIGRANTS IN PHILADELPHIA AS ENGLISH SPEAKERS AND PHILADELPHIANS

Michael L. Friesner and Aaron J. Dinkin, University of Pennsylvania
friesner@babel.ling.upenn.edu, dinkin@babel.ling.upenn.edu

Our topic

- The acquisition of local features by Russian immigrants
- Whether speakers with obvious foreign accents acquire the same regional dialect features that native speakers do, and vice versa
- What social variables are favorable to acquiring both a native and a local accent

Previous studies

- *Localness*. Payne (1980): non-natives can acquire Philadelphia variables but not usually short-*a*; degree of acquisition correlated to age of arrival
- *Nativeness*. Thompson (1991): foreignness of accent correlates to age of arrival in the United States
- *Localness of foreigners*. Lee (2000): Korean immigrants in Philadelphia do not acquire local variables (look only at short-*a*)
- *More on localness of nonnatives*. Blondeau et al. (2002): Anglophone Montrealers acquire some local features (phonological, morphological, and lexical) but only the most immersed acquire native-like distributions

Our hypothesis: Nonnative speakers may acquire regional features, even while retaining their foreign accents.

Methodology

- In-depth sociolinguistic interviews with four female Russian-speaking immigrants to Northeast Philadelphia
- Further interviews with four Northeast Philadelphian native English speakers and one additional Russian immigrant

Table 1: Our Subjects

NAME	AGE OF ARRIVAL	AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW
Marina	12	25
Gulya	12	18
Felixa	14	18
Alyona	17	34

Variables being examined (Payne 1976, Labov 1994, Conn 2005)

- Fronting and raising of /aw/
- Fronting of /ow/
- “Canadian raising” of /ay/ before voiceless consonants
- Raising and backing of /ahr/
- Split short-*a* system

Table 2: Our subjects and the variables

	Age of arrival	Age at interview	/aw/	/ow/	/ay/	/ahr/	Phila. features
Marina	12	25	ACQUIRED	ACQUIRED	ACQUIRED	ACQUIRED	4
Gulya	12	18	NOT ACQUIRED	PARTIALLY ACQUIRED	ACQUIRED	ACQUIRED	2.5
Felixa	14	18	NOT ACQUIRED	PARTIALLY ACQUIRED	ACQUIRED	ACQUIRED	2.5
Alyona	17	34	NOT ACQUIRED	NOT ACQUIRED	NOT ACQUIRED	ACQUIRED	1

Short-*a*

Recall Philadelphia pattern:

- tensing before tautosyllabic nasals and voiceless fricatives
- *except* function words and irregular past tenses
- tensing in *mad, bad, and glad*

Nasal pattern (Payne 1980)

- tensing before *all* nasals
- lax elsewhere

Our speakers

- Three of our speakers have an apparent nasal pattern
- Felixa has no apparent short-*a* pattern at all
- Three of our native Philadelphians also have an apparent nasal pattern, therefore Russians not acquiring nasal pattern does not necessarily mean non-acquisition of a local pattern

Some possible explanations

- outcome for communities with ties to both Philadelphia and New York (Ash 2002)
- the “default”/general American pattern falling out from some other aspect of the American vowel system (Ash, p.c.)

Localness

- Our speakers do acquire Philadelphia features
- Those who arrived at the earliest age tend to have the most Philadelphia features
- Speakers who have “thick” accents still may have local features

Pilot survey

- Designed to test our impressions of “thick” accent
- Also, could Philadelphians be sensitive to local features, even in a speaker with a thick foreign accent?
- 26 sounds clips drawn from female speakers (our 4 Russian Philadelphians, 1 Russian non-Philadelphian, 2 native Philadelphians, and 1 non-Philadelphian native speaker)
- 9 Philadelphian respondents rated them on a 5-point scale for two qualities: how much sounded like native English speakers, and how much they sounded like their English-speaking years had been spent in Philadelphia.
- All native speakers were given high ratings for nativeness; all non-Philadelphian speakers were given low ratings for localness.

Table 3: Pilot survey results

	Age of Arrival	Age at Interview	Localness	st.dev	Nativeness	st.dev
PHILA. NATIVES	N/A	18, 25	4.14	1.02	4.44	0.81
Marina	12	25	4.03	0.97	2.19	1.17
Felixa	14	18	3.50	1.00	2.42	1.20
Gulya	12	18	3.14	0.96	3.11	1.17
Alyona	17	34	2.51	0.79	1.33	0.74

(dotted line = not statistically significantly different)

Key findings of pilot survey:

- Respondents’ impressionistic judgments of nativeness agree with ours, and their judgments of localness correlate with the number of Philadelphia features we found in our analysis of the speakers’ vowel systems.
- Philadelphian native speakers of English are capable of perceiving local dialect features even under “thick” foreign accents.
- Judgments of localness and nativeness are not necessarily correlated.

Conclusions

- Contra Lee (2000), non-native speakers *can* acquire local features
- Though non-native speakers don’t acquire the Philadelphia short-*a* system, not particularly problematic
- Local dialect features can be acquired even while retaining an obviously foreign accent
- Both localness and nativeness correlate somewhat to age of arrival, but clearly other factors come into play

Further research

Other relevant factors

- Both may correlate to length of time spent in Philadelphia
- *Foreignness*: “critical period,” skill
- *Localness*: social networks (Marina is a central member of her social network; Alyona is the most peripheral)
- Degree of contacts with native speakers (Blondeau et al. 2002); does not seem to fit so far for localness; may for foreignness:

Table 4: Language of Daily Interaction

	High School	Higher Education	Friends	Family	Religion	Work/Volunteer	Degree of Eng. Contact
Marina	ENG	ENG	RUS	RUS	N/A	RUS/ENG	2.5
Gulya	ENG	ENG	ENG	RUS/ENG	ENG	ENG	5.5
Felixa	ENG	ENG	ENG	RUS/ENG	ENG	ENG	5.5
Alyona	RUS	ENG	RUS	RUS	N/A	ENG	2.0

References

Ash, Sharon. 2002. “The Distribution of a Phonemic Split in the Mid-Atlantic Region: Yet More on Short *a*.” *U. Penn. Working Papers in Linguistics* 8.3, 1-15.

Blondeau, Hélène, Naomi Nagy, Gillian Sankoff, and Pierrette Thibault. 2002. “La couleur locale du français L2 des Anglo-Montréalais.” In J.-M. Dewaele and R. Mougeon (Eds.). *Acquisition et Interaction en Langue Étrangère* 17, 73-100.

Conn, Jeffrey C. 2005. *Of “Moice” and Men: The Evolution of a Male-Led Sound Change*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.

Labov, William. 1994. *Principles of Linguistic Change. Volume 1: Internal Factors*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Labov, William. 2003. “Words Floating on the Current of Sound Change.” Paper presented at NWAV32, Philadelphia.

Lee, Hikyoungh. 2000. *Korean Americans as Speakers of English: The Acquisition of General and Regional Features*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.

Payne, Arvilla Chapin. 1976. *The Acquisition of the Phonological System of a Second Dialect*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.

Payne, Arvilla C. 1980. “Factors Controlling the Acquisition of the Philadelphia Dialect by Out-of-State Children.” In Labov, William (ed.) *Locating Language in Time and Space*. New York: Academic Press.

Thompson, Irene. 1991. “Foreign Accents Revisited: The English Pronunciation of Russian Immigrants.” *Language Learning* 41:2, 177-204.