Second-dialect acquisition in southwestern Pennsylvania

Lisa Sprowls
lisa.sprowls@umontana.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/gsrc
Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

https://scholarworks.umt.edu/gsrc/2014/oralpres1c/4

This Oral Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in UM Graduate Student Research Conference (GradCon) by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
Second-dialect acquisition in southwestern Pennsylvania

**Overview:** Dialectology is a subfield of linguistics that deals with dialects, mutually intelligible forms of the same language. The study of first-dialects, the variety of language one is a native speaker of, largely investigates the effects of gender, social class, and similar constructs on language use. The field has a long history, beginning with key studies such as those by Wetmore (1959) and Trudgill (1972). However, the study of second-dialects, an investigation into whether speakers can learn a second variety of their native language, is a more recent and sparsely investigated field (Tagliamonte & Molfenter 2007; Nycz 2013). This project investigates southwestern Pennsylvania as a second-dialect area; in it, I examine whether native English speakers who moved to the area as adults have acquired any phonological features (sound patterns) considered unique to the dialect area. While the use of the southwestern Pennsylvania dialect among natives to the area has been heavily documented, it has never been examined as an acquired second-dialect. This is the first study to do so.

Previous research proposes two phonological features that are found in southwestern Pennsylvania, but are unattested throughout the rest of North America. The first feature is the merger of low-back vowels, with /ɑ/ and /ɔ/ both realized as [ɔ] rather than the usual [ɑ]; this, for example, causes both *cot* and *caught* to be pronounced using the vowel in *caught*. The second unique feature is the restricted realization of the diphthong /aw/ (as in e.g. *house*) as monophthongal [a] (Labov et al. 2006; Wetmore 1959; Johnstone et al. 2002). The diphthong, usually pronounced like *ow*, is often reduced to *ah* in this dialect area. If adults not originally from the area use these phonological features, it is good indication that they have acquired features of the southwestern Pennsylvania dialect, as these features are unique to the area.

**Data and analysis:** This analysis is based on speech data I collected from nine adults, all native speakers of English who have been living in the Pittsburgh suburbs for at least ten years and, crucially, are not originally from the area. Participants read a word list and a short reading passage that I adapted from the Pittsburgh Speech & Society project (Johnstone & Kiesling 2011). I analyzed words containing the low-back vowels and the diphthong using the Praat suite (Boersma & Weenink 2013), an acoustic program that extracts vowel frequencies. Using these frequencies, the height and backness of the vowels can be determined and plotted on a vowel chart, which visually reveals if a speaker pronounces certain vowels closer together or farther apart. For the low-back vowels, I also calculated the p-values for each vowel class; a statistically significant value indicates that the merger is not present, while an insignificant value indicates the vowels are merged. For the diphthong, I calculated the Euclidian distance, which tells us how much the quality of the vowel changes within the syllable. A larger value indicates a stronger diphthong, while smaller values indicate a pronunciation closer to the monophthong.

This analysis reveals that some participants did acquire features of the southwestern Pennsylvania dialect. Three participants have acquired the low-back vowel merger, while a fourth is showing signs of a shift towards the merger. Of the three with the merger, two also have a significantly weakened diphthong, which indicates they use more of a monophthongal pronunciation. Furthermore, a participant lacking the merger is showing signs of a weakened diphthong. These findings are in line with previous dialect studies, which show that a feature can be present, absent, or in the process of changing (Bigham 2010; Hall-Lew 2013; Nycz 2013).
Significance and implications: Findings from this project reveal that the southwestern Pennsylvania dialect is acquired as a second-dialect for native English speakers. This analysis not only adds to documentation specific to the dialect area, but also more generally contributes to the lesser-documented field of second-dialect acquisition. This analysis specifically shows that the southwestern Pennsylvania dialect features can be acquired. These methods can be applied to other dialects, showing that dialect features in general can be acquired and that the way we speak can change over our lifetime. The variety of our native language that we speak – our dialect – is often closely tied to ideas of locality and identity. In acquiring a second dialect then, speakers may be acquiring not only new ways of speaking, but also new ways of viewing themselves and the world around them.