Reversal and re-organization of the Northern Cities Shift in Michigan

The Northern Cities Shift (NCS) is a well-known rotation of American English vowels, characteristic of the Inland North dialect area (Labov, Ash & Boberg 2006). It is present in the dialects of approximately 34 million people, yet attracts virtually no metalinguistic commentary (Labov 2010). However, some reports in the last few years indicate that the NCS is receding (e.g. McCarthy 2011 for Chicago, Driscoll & Lape 2014 for Syracuse), leading Labov to speculate at NWAV 2014 that "the sun might be setting" on the NCS (Labov 2014).

In this paper, we report some initial findings from a study of the NCS in the Lansing metro area of lower Michigan. As in the other urban centers recently examined, the NCS appears to be undergoing re-evaluation and attrition. However, whereas others have found the NCS to be simply undergoing "exact reversals" of its vowel movements (Driscoll & Lape 2014), in Lansing we find two additional processes in addition to reversal: reorganization and continuation.

Our data are drawn from a sample of 27 speakers born 1908 to 1996. The sample combines sociolinguistic interviews conducted in 2014 with oral histories of automobile plant workers recorded 1992-2006, yielding almost a century of Lansing speech in apparent time. A total of 39,717 stressed vowel tokens were analyzed using the FAVE suite (Rosenfelder et al 2011).

Reversal affects the fronting of BOT, which has retracted more than 100 Hz from a mean of 1399 Hz in F2 for speakers born 1908-1945 to a mean of 1289 Hz for speakers born in the 1990s. Evidence from a perceptual dialectology experiment suggests that fronted BOT is now viewed negatively as "accented", and we also find that young speakers retract BOT particularly in formal styles.

BAT, meanwhile, is undergoing *re-organization* from across-the-board raising to pre-nasal raising (cf Labov et al 2013 for the same recent shift to the nasal system in Philadelphia). We speculate that this re-organization is in line with another development in Lansing that similarly brings the local dialect closer to supra-local norms: increased fronting of coronal-initial BOOT.

Finally, we observe *continuation* of an earlier NCS process. Lowering (but not backing) of BET continues to advance vigorously in Lansing. In contrast to BOT, this NCS feature is not evaluated negatively. In fact, young speakers lower BET *more* when reading aloud than they do in spontaneous speech.

The sun, therefore, is not quite setting on the NCS in Lansing. While young speakers may be rejecting BOT-fronting, BAT-raising persists in one phonological context, and BET-lowering is robust. Our findings to date show that the steps in the NCS chain shift are not always simply reversed. Nor is the NCS devoid of social meanings, as it has been characterized in the past. Rather, speech community members selectively reject, retain and reorganize parts of the shift, maintaining local distinctiveness even as they move toward some non-local norms.

References

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