Ethnic Practice is Local Practice: Phonetic change in San Francisco, California
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Background

Chinese Californians: understood in linguistics
California English: newly emerging sound changes
This Study: California English variation in a majority ethno Chinese neighborhood of San Francisco

The Sunset District: physical geography shaped the social landscape

History:
- rapid residential development
- affordable single-family homes
- upwardly mobile San Franciscans
- local authenticity
- deep neighborhood pride
- particular ethnic distribution

Local Prestige

Irish Ethnicity

Consequences for Language:
Ethnically marked variables may indirectly index meanings of local authenticity

Methods

Semi-ethnographic participant observation
- January – June 2008; currently
- neighborhood meetings & events

Sociolinguistic interviews
- natiive/lifetime Sunset residents
- stratified for age, ethnicity, & gender
- 80 total 1-on-1 interviews
- 23 speakers analyzed phonetically

Linguistic Variables
- vowel fronting & low back merger
- coda-/l/ vocalization

Vowel Measures
- F1 & F2 at midpoint & off-glide
- LPC, script extracted
- Lehov normalized

Vocalization Measure
- perceptual coding
- 1 (L-flat) to 4 (vocalized/deleted scale)

Fronting calculation
\( (W_{23} - V_{13}) / (W_{L} - V_{L}) \)

Merger calculation
\( COT_{T_{23}} - CAUGHT_{T_{23}} \)

Results

logistic regression
coda-/l/ vocalization
- ethnicity: Asian > White (p < 0.05)
- merging back /o/ > other (p < 0.01)

low back merger
- No significant correlation with gender
- ethnicity: the correlation with apparent time is entirely due to Asian Americans
- European Americans are also variable, but stable by age

Conclusions

Phonetic production patterns reflect a locally constructed relationship between ethnicity and authenticity where Chinese ethnic practices come to index San Franciscan identities.

In California’s multiethnic landscape, ethnicity and place may be co-indexed in speech. Ethnic practices like /l/-vocalization become available to the wider local community. Regional practices like back vowel fronting become available to members of all ethnicities in the community.

Multiculturalism comes to define California as an imagined and lived community, complicating the notion of a single regional dialect that is distinct from ethnically marked ways of speaking.

Analysis

coda-/l/ vocalization
- Previously found in Ohio and Pennsylvania, as well as the UK, Australia & NZ; we now have evidence for California English (at least in SF)

While Asian Americans vocalize more than European Americans, the difference is not large; almost everyone is vocalizing to some extent. The most L-6d speaker, for example, is Asian American, so Asian Americans may be defining the envelope of variation for SF.

low back merger
- Despite early observations and more recent confirmation; the merger is still not yet complete; San Francisco is indeed a linguistic outlier in comparison to the rest of the West.

Asian Americans exhibit a change in progress in apparent time, while European Americans exhibit stable variation, with some speakers maintaining a distinction, regardless of age. Younger Asian American speakers may be orienting to a supra-regional norm, while older Asian Americans (and some Whites of all ages) are orienting toward the older San Francisco norm.

back vowel fronting
- One of the earliest group of sound changes attributed to San Francisco English; trends in apparent time suggest that /u/ is still a change in progress, whereas /o/ has stabilized.

These data also provide evidence for equal participation in regional sound change regardless of ethnicity. (r7 27)

References

10. No significant correlation with gender
11. No significant correlation with age, ethnicity or region
20. No significant correlation with gender
21. No significant correlation with age, ethnicity or region
25. No significant correlation with gender
26. No significant correlation with age, ethnicity or region