

Partial mergers and near-distinctions: stylistic layering in dialect acquisition

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A near-merger occurs when speakers produce a distinction which they cannot reliably perceive, but it is also common for the degree of phonetic difference to be greatest in spontaneous speech and reduced or eliminated in more monitored styles (Labov et al. 1991). Near-merger and merger-in-progress do not always coincide, but in both cases a distinction in spontaneous production can persist despite the simultaneous adoption of a merged norm, as seen in studies of non-mobile individuals from communities undergoing change (Herold 1990; Hall-Lew 2009).

This paper argues that speakers who acquire a second dialect, due to migration or due to their peer group's variety not matching that of their parents, show the opposite pattern of stylistic variation. Though several studies (Chambers 1992, Sankoff 2004) have shown that distinctions are harder to acquire than mergers, they have not examined how such individual changes interact with speech style. We find that spontaneous productions, rather than lagging behind, approximate more closely to the pattern of the new peer group. In more monitored styles like minimal pairs, speakers reveal the persistence of their original norms, whether merged or distinct.

The data for our study consists of several groups. One is a set of adults who moved from Canada to New York City; their first dialect has the low back merger, while their current environment exhibits the distinction. We find that most of these speakers have developed a 'near-distinction': a phonetically-small word class difference that is greatest in spontaneous speech production, but which the speakers cannot perceive. Another adult with a similar trajectory, a native of Maine (merged) who has lived for decades in Rhode Island (distinct), showed a similar pattern.

We also examined the low back vowels of speakers who moved as adults from Rhode Island to a nearby (merged) area of Massachusetts. In this direction, no categorical change occurs (a smaller distinction is still a distinction), but the low back word classes are more closely approximated in spontaneous speech and remain more distinct in formal tasks.

Following Payne (1976), we note that children can modify their phonological productions more thoroughly than adolescents and adults. For a set of three brothers from Rhode Island with merged parents, the older the child, the greater his acquisition of the community distinction. For children of distinct parents growing up with a merged peer group, dialect acquisition proceeds much faster. Nevertheless, a judgment survey reveals that the categories first acquired by a child remain accessible, even many years later.

Unlike individuals with a near-merger, where spontaneous speech is the more conservative style, the spontaneous speech of our mobile speakers shows the greatest adaptation toward the current (second) dialect. More monitored productions (and judgments) more closely reflect the norms of the original variety. This pattern fits well within a hybrid model in which changes in exemplar-level representations lead changes in category-level representations. However, this re-emphasizes the anomalous nature of near-mergers, where a categorical reorganization seems to occur without a corresponding lower-level change.

References

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