

The Status of Raised /ɔ/ among Bergen County (New Jersey) Korean Americans and its Social Meaning

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The raised /ɔ/ is one of the features of New York City Metropolitan Area English (NYCE, hereafter) (e.g. Labov 1966; Labov, Ash, and Boberg 2006), and a number of recent studies examining the status of raised /ɔ/ in the New York City Metropolitan Area (i.e. Becker 2010, Coggshall and Becker 2010, Wong 2012, among others) argue that NYCE /ɔ/ of White speakers is showing a linguistic change towards lowering its nucleus in apparent time, and several other ethnic groups are also showing a similar trend, sometimes showing associations with ethnic identities of ethnic minority groups. This study examines occurrences of /ɔ/ from sociolinguistic interviews taken with 24 Korean Americans from a major Korean American community in Bergen County (in which the county is included in the NYC Metropolitan area, bordering Manhattan), New Jersey, to examine the status of /ɔ/ among Korean American participants. Among the three dependent variables (the F1 of /ɔ/ representing the nucleus height, speaker Pillai scores between /ɔ/ and /ɑ/ representing the degree of distinction between the two vowels, and speaker Euclidean distances between /ɔ/ and /ɑ/ representing the direct distance between two vowels), the speaker Euclidean distance reported a significant correlation with speaker age ($p < 0.05^*$), indicating that the distance between /ɔ/ and /ɑ/ is decreasing in apparent time. Among the social factors, speaker gender showed a significant correlation with all three dependent variables, indicating that female speakers produce greater /ɔ/ F1 (thus lower height) than that of male speakers ($p < 0.05^*$), and shorter distance between /ɔ/ and /ɑ/ (shorter Euclidean distance, $p < 0.001^{***}$) and more overlap between /ɔ/ and /ɑ/ (lower Pillai score, $p < 0.001^{***}$) than those of male speakers (while each speaker Pillai score indicated that no participants showed any evidence of low back merger). Also, speaker religion showed significant effect on the variation of /ɔ/ F1 ($p < 0.01^{**}$), where speakers who are affiliated to Korean ethnic religious institutions retaining more Koreanness are associated with lowering the /ɔ/ nucleus to a greater extent, while speakers who are affiliated to Korean ethnic religious institutions retaining lower level of Koreanness are associated with not lowering the /ɔ/ nucleus. Additionally, Korean Americans who were not affiliated to any religious institution showed the most raised /ɔ/ nucleus. Based on a number of sociological studies on the crucial roles of Korean American ethnic religious institutes in retaining the Korean Americans' ethnic identity (e.g, see Min 1992, 2010; Chong 1998; Park 2001; Suh 2003), and my ethnographic fieldwork in the community, the /ɔ/ height seems to be associated with the ethnic identity of Korean Americans in Bergen County Korean American community. This study on the /ɔ/ of Bergen County Korean Americans suggests that Bergen County Korean Americans also might be showing their participation in the regional trend of lowering the /ɔ/ (indicated indirectly by the correlation between the speaker age and /ɔ/-/ɑ/ Euclidean distance) which is led by female speakers. Also the lowering of /ɔ/ nucleus seems to be associated with the ethnic identity of Bergen County Korean Americans, where lower /ɔ/ is associated with speakers' stronger Korean ethnic identity.