

Phonetic cues to Localness in Hawai‘i English: Feature clusters influencing perception

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A large body of previous work has shown that different realizations of certain phonetic features can hold social saliency, and may be used by listeners to categorize interlocutors into perceived social groupings (e.g. Purnell, Isardi, and Baugh 1999; Clopper and Pisoni 2004; Foulkes et al. 2010). The present study builds on this body of work by examining how perceptions of Localness in Hawai‘i are socially indexed to phonetic features of Hawai‘i English (HE). It is demonstrated that monophthongization of the traditionally diphthongal English vowels /oʊ/ and /aʊ/ results in a significant increase in ratings of talker Localness when both vowels are presented as monophthongal, but not when only one or the other is presented as monophthongal.

While the concept of “Localness” in Hawai‘i can be quite nuanced and complex, to be Local generally means to have been born and raised in Hawai‘i and to identify closely with the encompassing supra-culture of the Hawaiian Islands. Work by Ohnuma (2002) and Fenton (1979) among others suggests that the projection and perception of Localness is particularly salient in social interactions in Hawai‘i, and may be required to gain entry into certain social situations. Despite the high saliency of this social categorization, little work has been done exploring what role speech might play in influencing perceptions of Localness in Hawai‘i.

This paper reports the results of a matched guise experiment designed to examine the effects of /oʊ/ and /aʊ/ monophthongization on ratings of talker Localness. 42 participants who self-identified as Local were presented with target and filler stimuli sentences spoken by a variety of talkers, and asked to rate the speaker of each sentence from 1-7 along several social dimensions—including Localness. The two target sentences contained one token each of /oʊ/ and /aʊ/ (counterbalanced for order of appearance), which were synthetically manipulated using Praat to form 4 conditions of each sentence. In the control condition neither target vowel was monophthongal, in two conditions only one or the other vowel was monophthongal, and in one condition both vowels were monophthongal. Linear mixed effects models were fit to the Localness ratings of the target stimuli to test the significance of condition as a predictor of perceived Localness.

It was found that while monophthongization of neither vowel alone significantly impacted perceptions of Localness, presentation of both vowels in the monophthongal guise resulted in a significant increase in Localness ratings as compared to the control condition ($p < 0.01$). It is argued that these results best support an interpretation in which the perceptual effects of these individual phonetic realizations are not simply additive, but rather that they function synergistically to influence listener perceptions of Localness. These findings are in line with a gestalt-like understanding of socio-indexicality (Eckert 2000, Levon 2007), and support the notion that, while work to date has been focused primarily on the socio-indexicality of individual linguistic features, social information can also be indexed by feature *clusters*—that is, particular configurations of certain linguistic features, which may or may not have indexical associations of their own individually.

References:

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