Urbanization, social class, and the spread of linguistic variation: (str) in Columbus, OH

As recent studies (*e.g.*, Bailey, et al, 1996; Thomas, 1997; Tillery & Bailey, 2003; Tillery, et al., 2004) have demonstrated, as we head into the 21st century, an understanding of the ongoing process of urbanization has become highly relevant in the study of the transmission of linguistic change, as new kinds of socio-geographic spaces are created and urban life becomes the norm throughout densely populated areas of the United States where this had not been the case previously. Thus far, these studies, the bulk of which have concentrated on the South, have revealed that, as urbanization increases in large population centers throughout the region, previous established rural/urban dialect divisions are being leveled, while the use of innovative features are being promoted in its wake.

This paper attempts to increase our knowledge of the impact of urbanization on the transmission of change by focusing on the distribution of the variable (str) (the consonant cluster occurring word initially in "street" or word medially in "destroy") in Columbus, Ohio. In particular, we argue that the use of this variable provides evidence of the effects of urbanization on the transmission of change in neighborhoods across Columbus, as well as surrounding suburbs located on the outskirts of the city. This study is one of the first to address the effects of urbanization in the Midlands, as well as the impact of within-area migration and class-based dialect contact as secondary factors impacting this process. As a metropolis populated by 1.6 Million residents as of the 2000 Census (U.S. Census, 2000), Columbus provides a well-situated context for exploring these issues, as it has been transformed by a continuing process of urban expansion and development during the period 1950-2000 (Hunker, 2001).

Following previous studies of (str) in English (Labov, 1984; Janda, Joseph & Jacobs, 1994; Shapiro, 1995; Lawrence, 2000; Labov, 2001; Janda & Joseph, 2003), the alveopalatal [štr] is treated as the innovative variant and alveolar [str] as the standard. The data are drawn from an earlier rapid anonymous survey of 120 Caucasian store clerks modeled after Labov (1972) and casual speech elicited from interviews with 64 middle and working class Caucasian native English speaking metropolitan and suburban speakers.

The results of a GoldVarb analysis reveal that the innovative variant is more strongly associated with urban speakers, although its use appears to be increasing in all areas studied. The strongest social factors conditioning its variance are class, age, and the location in which the speaker was born and raised, with younger, lower class informants raised in urban Columbus exhibiting the most frequent use of [štr]. The strongest linguistic factor is the word environment in which the /_tr/ occurs, with word medial /_tr/ clusters preceded by a high, front vowel showing the strongest trend toward [štr] realizations. Ultimately, the results suggest [štr] may be used in this community as a marker of "metropolitan affiliation," with urbanization, within- area migration, and class-based dialect contact serving as the principle conduits through which its social and geographic spread has occurred.

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