

“Settling-Out” in Berrien County, MI:
An emerging regional variety of Chicano English

The present study investigates the vowel system of Chicano English speakers in Berrien County, Michigan, where a large migrant population that has been present for decades is beginning to “settle-out.” This setting provides an extremely interesting background for research into dialect accommodation, since most research on Chicano English has focused on the border states or large metropolitan areas. Meanwhile, much research on Michigan English has focused on the spread of the Northern Cities Shift (NCS)—a feature typically associated with white, middle-class speakers—from Detroit westward through larger cities. Conversely, the Berrien County study focuses on residents with ties to Benton Harbor, MI, a town which is over 90% African American and where unemployment rates have been reported as high as 33%. Thus, predictions would be that Mexican Americans in the Benton Harbor area would be ethnically, geographically, and economically insulated from the effects of the NCS.

Research shows that Chicano English speakers in Berrien County show some characteristics of the Spanish influence on the vowel system that typically characterizes this ethnic variety. However, length of residence effects are also found that indicate that the dialect is diverging from other Chicano English varieties. At present, it is unclear whether the new target for the dialect will pattern like that of Chicano English speakers in Lansing, MI (Roeder 2006) or like white, rural speakers who have only partially accommodated to the NCS (Ito 1999). What is clear is that, contrary to many early assertions about so-called “non-white” English varieties, the vowel system of Berrien County speakers is showing evidence of a new, regional variety of Chicano English.

- Ito, Rika. 1999. *Diffusion of Urban Sound Change in Rural Michigan: A Case of the Northern Cities Shift*. PhD Dissertation. E. Lansing, MI: Michigan State University.
- Roeder, Rebecca. 2006. *Ethnicity and Sound Change: Mexican American Accommodation to the Northern Cities Shift*. PhD Dissertation. E. Lansing, MI: Michigan State University.