

Is it Dead Yet? Re-examining Dialect Recession in Ocracoke

Though dialect recession in small, historically insular communities has now received considerable sociolinguistic attention, this process still needs detailed scrutiny in real time. How do groups and individuals manifest language variation during the terminal stages of dissipation? Can moribund dialects be revitalized or reconfigured to preserve sociolinguistic uniqueness? We consider these questions by re-examining language change on Ocracoke Island, the site of one of the most extensive studies of dialect recession more than a decade ago (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1995; 1997; Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1999). Since our original study, we have been engaged in one of the most sustained efforts ever undertaken by sociolinguists to inform a local community about the state of its traditional dialect. Has this dialect awareness effort had any mitigating effect on the erosion of the language variety?

We interviewed more than 45 speakers in our re-examination of Ocracoke speech, including (a) a subsample of speakers from our original subject pool; (b) a subsample of subjects representing different generations within the same family; (c) a sample of the current adolescent and teenaged population; (d) a social network of males now in their 20s and 30s who are in some ways reminiscent of the “poker game” network described in earlier studies. Ethnographic interviews have also been conducted to determine how the Ocracoke Brogue is viewed in light of the heightened awareness and the media attention now given to the dialect.

The data indicate that the dialect awareness programs have been effective in terms of elevating the recognition and esteem of the local dialect and that it has been commodified as a symbolic emblem of traditional island culture. At the same time, this has not apparently altered its overall erosion, and once-prominent dialect markers, such as the backed nucleus of /ai/ and the glide-fronting in /au/, have largely dissipated among younger speakers. Nonetheless, a couple of features are persisting in the face of this overall recession, most notably static locative *to* (e.g. *She's to the store*) and negative past tense *be* leveling (*She weren't there*) so that linguistic focusing may be active in dialect reconfiguration. The comparison of dialect structures for speakers re-interviewed after more than a decade indicates relative stability in the life cycle of these speakers, though younger speakers do show more shifts as they move into adulthood. Perhaps the only local social network characterized by the perpetuation of a more traditional version of the dialect is a group of males in their 20s and 30s who endorse some traditional island values. There are, however, isolated adolescent and teenaged speakers who may project a more traditional version of the dialect based on idiosyncratic values and social circumstances.

The examination of language change in Ocracoke in real time confirms the significance of both group and individual factors in describing dialect recession as well as the critical need to examine in ethnographic detail a full range of community values and behaviors in explaining the process of dialect dissipation.

References

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