

Talking, listening and evaluating: A unified approach to understanding the Memphis speech community

Recognizing that linguistically and socially meaningful speech is formed within locally defined and constructed communities, recent research has highlighted the importance of pushing beyond descriptive accounts of local speech to an exploration of the perceptions and attitudes behind speakers' linguistic realizations. Along these lines, this paper presents the findings of a multi-project study on vowel variation, which, through acoustic analysis, perceptual tests and a folk-dialectology study, provides a unified account of the production, perception and attitudes surrounding local vowel shifts for U.S. Southern speakers from Memphis, TN. The first study investigates how the relative acoustic positions of vowels are shifting productively in Southern European-American and African-American dialects of English. Next, socio-phonetic perception tests using synthesized speech tokens were designed to investigate the social import of such shifts for local speakers, exploring the regional and ethnic salience of individual shifts. Finally, a folk-dialectology project directly elicited respondents' beliefs about local and national speech. This attitudinal portion of the study examined how Southern speakers' linguistic self-image played a role in assigning particular values to various aspects of the shift and to regional dialects more globally. Based on the results of these projects, a follow-up perception study was designed to investigate how these shifts have also become meaningful intra-regional prestige markers. Overall, this project attempts to provide information not typically available through production studies, perception studies or attitudinal studies alone. By incorporating all three aspects simultaneously within the same community, this research was designed so that each study could inform the others, making the picture of local variation and the motivations behind it emerge more clearly. The paper will summarize the cumulative findings from this work and discuss the next steps projects such as this one need to take