

/ai/ Monophthongization on the Alabama Coast

Previous research on Southern speech provides a wealth of information about Southern American English phonology. In particular the “Southern Vowel” monophthongized /ai/ stands out as a salient marker of Southern speech. Traditionally in White Southern Vernacular English /ai/ is present before voiceless consonants, however this vowel frequently is monophthongized before voiced consonants. This variation has been said to be an indicator of social class, or as Feagin says /ai/ is the “Shibboleth for class status in the South” (2000). Recent studies (Feagin 2000, Melancon and Wise 2005) have suggested that speakers are reverting to the diphthong variant. Feagin’s research indicates that younger middle and upper class speakers favor the diphthong. Melancon and Wise found that the variation was associated with age rather than class, with younger speakers using the diphthong /ai/ more regardless of the speaker’s social class. The change to the diphthong variant /ai/, in all linguistic environments, suggests that speakers are adopting a ‘less southern’ dialect.

The Gulf Coast of Alabama has a different linguistic and social history than other regions of Alabama. Two issues this study seeks to examine are: will findings from the coastal region of Alabama replicate those from other areas of Alabama and how will these findings fit into the broader spectrum of Southern English. The present study investigates /ai~/a:/ variation in an Alabama community on the Gulf Coast. In particular I am concerned with the use of monophthongal /a:/- as a marker of ‘Southernness’. In my investigation, I draw on data from 30 informants stratified by age, sex and social class. Each informant participated in a sociolinguistic interview that was followed by a reading passage and word list designed to elicit the /ai/ variable. All three sources were transcribed and analyzed for tokens containing the /ai/ variable. In carrying out an acoustic analysis using PRAAT, I use values for F2 to make a binary distinction between monophthong and diphthong.

The results show that /ai/ monophthongization does vary in this corpus. In particular younger speakers from the middle and upper class seem to disfavor the use of the monophthong in all environments. This confirms Feagin’s research and indicates a move away, I argue, from the Southern dialect. Furthermore, though working class speakers in general are using the monophthong variant more than middle and upper class speakers, results show some younger working class speakers are adopting the diphthongal variant /ai/ in both voiced and voiceless contexts. I consider the implications of the linguistic behavior of these working-class speakers. Does this change represent an attempt by these speakers to distance themselves from the working class, or is it a move away from southernness, or both? Older speakers from this corpus have higher rates of monophthongization with one exception: middle-class, middle-aged speakers, both men and women, pattern with younger speakers in their heightened use of diphthong. This finding patterns with results from Melancon and Wise, and shows that loss or retention of the monophthong /a:/ is related to both age and social class.

References

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