

Can One Vowel Make the Difference? Regional /o/ in North

Carolina

This paper examines sociophonetically the variation of /o/ in North Carolina. Though often overlooked in terms of its diagnostic status, it is one of the most symbolic vowels in terms of a range of social and ethnic variables. Previous research by Kurath and McDavid (1961), Thomas (1989), and Thomas and Wolfram (2002) has found that /o/ fronting was occurring in the late 18th Century in the northeast coastal region while in the Piedmont region /o/ was farther backed. The centralization and lowering of the nuclei of back vowels, including /o/, is considered to be a part of the Southern Vowel Shift (Labov 1991). The glide of /o/ in the Southeastern US has become fronted more recently (Labov, William, Yaeger, and Steiner, 1972; Thomas 1989; Thomas 2001). Is /o/ in North Carolina conforming to the traditional specifications of the Southern Vowel Shift? Does its conformity vary regionally?

Using acoustic analysis, this paper attempts to answer these questions by looking at the speech of European Americans from twelve sites scattered throughout North Carolina. These sites roughly represent the major dialect regions of the state in an attempt to map the fronting and raising of the nucleus and glide of /o/ regionally. Conventional wisdom holds that the nucleus of /o/ in North Carolina is becoming more fronted and lowered in accordance with the Southern Vowel Shift. However, the results of this comparative analysis show that this is not universally true for North Carolinians and that the trajectory of change for /o/ varies regionally throughout the state. For example, /o/ fronting was previously less advanced in the western part of the state but young speakers from that area are now showing a high degree of /o/ fronting while speakers from areas like Hyde County, a coastal area, have younger generations showing increasingly backed nuclei for /o/. State wide, however, the range of possible values narrows among the younger speakers while the older speakers are much more varied. This variation could indicate that the possible vowel space for /o/ is becoming more static as the feature has undergone a change and is now settling into a vowel space that is shared statewide.

This analysis focuses on a single feature and includes both a large quantity of subjects engaged in conversational speech and a broad-based geographic analysis with a representative sample of subjects for each region. This representation allows for an in depth analysis of each speech community so that instead of representing each community as a homogenous group, intra-community variation is accurately represented in a way that allows for regional comparison. For example, the younger generation in Hyde County can be divided up into those who have a fronted glide for /o/ and those who do not. This study looks at correlations between site specific variables and represents these correlations geographically allowing for a regional evaluation of intra-community variation. By incorporating geography into sociolinguistic inquiry this study contextualizes intra-community variation within the larger regional dialect, showing how macro- and micro-variables need to be factored into variation analysis.

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