

## Phonetic variation & speaker agency: *Mexicana* identity in a North Carolina middle school

Recent studies in the emerging field of sociophonetics have elucidated the relationship between phonetic variation and salient locally-situated social meaning. In contrast to a strictly dialectological framework of language variation, empirical findings reported in the sociophonetics literature strongly suggest an agentive component to the speaker-variable interface. Rather than attributing the source of variation to regional and ethnic differences alone, zeitgeist sociophonetics instead is showing that individual speakers also employ fine-grained phonetic variables to situate themselves, or to reflect their situation, within desired social groups (Zhang 2005; Eckert 2000; Mendoza-Denton 1997).

The current investigation is a case study focusing on the speech of one adolescent Mexican American female, “María,” whose “dialect” underwent a nearly three-year overhaul, following the unexpected trajectory from “less” to “more” Latino. In addition to ethnographic observation, four sociolinguistic interviews were collected in English and Spanish with the speaker at two time points (T1, T2) separated by nearly three years. During the first interviews (T1), “María” was 10 years old and attended a majority-white elementary school in a majority-white suburb in central North Carolina. Contemporary interviews (T2) were conducted 34 months later; “María” is now 13 years old and is attending an urban, majority African American and Latino middle school.

Segmental and suprasegmental variables were analyzed from data collected from T1 and T2. In order to account for modifications in “María’s” vocalic production, three variables were selected for acoustic analysis: 1) /u/, 2) pre-nasal /æ/, and 3) /æ/. These variables were selected because of their saliency in both Southern and Latino varieties of English (Thomas, Carter, & Cogshall 2006; Fought 2003; Thomas 2001). Midpoint measurements were taken for F1, F2, and F3 for a minimum of 25 tokens of each variable from T1 and T2 using PRAAT phonetics software (Boersma & Weenink 2006). To account for vocal tract changes between T1 and T2, vowel data were normalized using the bark-difference model (Syrdal & Gopal 1986). Because prosodic rhythm has been identified as a salient aspect of some Latino varieties (Thomas & Carter 2006; Carter 2005; Fought 2003), “María’s” rhythmic production was analyzed using the Pairwise Variability Index (Lowe & Grabe 1995), a method that quantifies syllable- or stress-timing by comparing the duration of adjacent syllables while controlling for speaking rate. Over 400 rhythm measurements were taken and compared to data from a large NC corpus.

Changes in F1 and F2 for all vocalic variables were statistically significant—/u/, fronted during T1, was backed during T2 while both allophones of /ash/ were lowered and backed from T1 to T2—all in the direction of vocalic productions characteristic of Latino English. Conversely, no statistically significant difference was found in the rhythm production between T1 and T2; both were heavily syllable-timed and significantly different from European and African American productions.

This paper provides further evidence of the apparent agentive component in phonetic variation. “María” is now linguistically ‘more Latina’ not because she adopted a new Latino English dialect wholesale, but because she was able to make use of socially meaningful linguistic markers of identity in order to situate herself in a new, racialized social milieu.

#### Selected References

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