Where education and salience meet, local dialects retreat

Two recent studies document the retreat from salient local dialect features. Labov et al. (2013) identify a retreat from several well-established Philadelphia sound changes, while Dodsworth and Kohn (2012) find a reversal of the Southern Vowel Shift (SVS) in Raleigh. This study investigates the role of education in these reversals; specifically, we test a recent hypothesis (Prichard and Tamminga 2012) that education interacts with salience in predicting speakers’ retreat from local features.

We adopt Prichard and Tamminga’s novel four-level education variable—high school or less, local community colleges, larger regional colleges, and prestigious national universities—to analyze subsets of both cities’ large sociolinguistic corpora (n=195 from the Philadelphia Neighborhood Corpus, n=105 from the Raleigh Corpus). For Philadelphia, three socially-salient local vowel variables were investigated: fronted and raised bad and bout, and raised bought (Labov 2001). These were compared to two less salient changes: raised bait and bite. For Raleigh, the variables are the five front vowels implicated in the SVS, all salient (Fridland 2004): retracted beet and bait, and raised and fronted bit, bet, and bat.

Figure 1 shows the Philadelphia results. While college-educated speakers retreat from the three socially-salient vowels, led by national university educated speakers, they move in lockstep with the community for the two changes which are still below the level of awareness. Linear mixed-effects modeling with random intercepts for speaker and word supports this finding; education is a significant main effect only for bad, bout, and bought. In Raleigh (Figure 2), national and regional college speakers retreat from all the SVS features more quickly than local college and HS speakers. Mixed models for each variable, with by-speaker random intercepts, return significant main effects of education and significant interactions with birth year. The exception is bat, where education is significant only for tokens occurring before voiceless stops.

Thus we find that speakers educated at national colleges lead the retreat from socially-salient features in both Philadelphia and Raleigh, but they do not reverse changes below the level of awareness. This confirms the hypothesis that a fine-grained measure of education can successfully predict speakers’ retreat from salient local features.

References
Figure 1: Speaker means for five Philadelphia vowels by date of birth & education. Vowels are Lobanov normalized. Front vowels plotted on a diagonal (Z2-Z1): higher diagonal = more fronted and raised.

Figure 2: Speaker means for five Raleigh front vowels, by date of birth and education. Vowels are Lobanov normalized and plotted on the diagonal.