

Dialect Contact and Accommodation Among Southern Illinois University Students

Douglas Stephan Bigham, Ph.D.
The University of Texas at Austin, 2008

Supervisor: Robert D. King

Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIUC) is a site of linguistic diversity where speakers of three major dialects of American English—Northern, Midland, and Southern—are brought into contact with one another. The speech of undergraduates at SIUC is subject to the processes of dialect contact and accommodation; as a result, regional speech features are lost in favor of an overarching SIUC dialect norm or koiné.

The linguistic contact that takes place at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale is unique. Previous studies of dialect contact involve situations created by migrations of large populations of settlers moving to a new area. These “migrants” settle permanently in the new area and become isolated from their original anchor dialects. The dialect mixture that arises from countless single instances of interpersonal accommodation will, under many circumstances, lead to koinéization or new dialect formation. However, the dialect contact situation at SIUC is different from these previous studies. First, the contact situation at SIUC is made up of fluid populations of highly mobile individuals—undergraduates. While the groups in contact remain consistent, individual students comprising the populations of these groups come and go every year. Additionally, rather than permanently relocating, the contact between the different groups at SIUC is interrupted by students leaving for three months of summer break and one month of winter break every year, thereby preventing speakers of the displaced dialects from becoming isolated from their original anchor dialects. The presence of these factors at SIUC provides a way to test and expand our existing models of language use and language attitudes in regards to dialect contact, accommodation, self- and group-categorization, and individual- and community-level notions of linguistic variation and language change.