

On the Fringes: Bridging Sociophonetics and Social Psychology in Southern Illinois

With Labov, Ash, & Boberg's (2006) *Atlas*, we now have a contemporary account of the dialect regions of North America based on major urban centers. However, what is happening among speakers in the smaller and more rural areas has gone largely unexplored in modern sociolinguistics. These are speakers for whom regional identities (often super-local hometown identities) are not only still important, but for whom, without any nearby urban centers, regional identity is constructed in tandem with social identity. I provide data that address the question of how language use among speakers in rural dialect-transition areas sheds light on issues of dialect diffusion and linguistic identity construction. Specifically, I combine approaches from social psychology and sociophonetics to examine relationships between language attitudes and language use among speakers in Southern Illinois.

Recent work on language attitudes (e.g., Niedzielski & Preston, 2003) has shown that it is not only what people sound like that is important, but what they *think* they (and others) sound like. While a person's attitudes and behaviors are deeply related, the effects of attitude on behaviour can vary from one person to another in complicated ways (Allport, 1954; Ajzen, 1988). Within sociophonetics, one relationship between behaviors and attitudes concerns how the evaluations of speech varieties can contribute to language change (Labov, 1972; J. Milroy, 1992). Briefly, speakers whose linguistic variety is devalued in a linguistic market, in terms of either prestige or solidarity, are often said to have "linguistic insecurity" (Labov, 1982). Taken from a social psychology of language perspective, Preston (2000) seems to suggest that "linguistic (in)security" is equivalent to "language attitudes" and can be measured quantitatively using the tools of social psychology to assess a speaker's evaluation of linguistic variation.

My research is located in Southern Illinois ('Egypt' in Frazer, 1987), roughly equidistant from St. Louis, Evansville, Memphis, and Nashville—a transitional region between northern and southern dialects. Using a Peterson & Barney-type word list reading task, tokens of the 11 stressed vowels of American English (i, ɪ, e, ε, æ, ɑ, ɔ, o, ʊ, u, ʌ) in two contexts (*h_d*, *b_t*) were measured for 50 high school students in Southern Illinois. The vowel plots of these speakers were then compared to their responses on a Likert scale survey regarding their perception of a 'Southern Illinois accent,' the 'Southern Illinois region' and their 'connectedness' to Southern Illinois. What my data show are not only the "mixed" or "fudged-lects" (Chambers and Trudgill, 1998) one might expect, but also what appear to be both Northern Cities and Southern Vowel shift pattern, varying from one speaker to the next depending on how each speaker evaluates her speech, the speech of those around her, and how 'close' she feels to the Southern Illinois region.

My data and results show that by combining these two distinct fields of inquiry, sociophonetics and social psychology, we can better understand how vowel patterns from relatively distant urban centers are diffusing into the small towns and rural areas where they are used to index the regional and social identities of speakers in these areas.