

The Southern Shift in a marginally Southern dialect

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This paper, based on a community study of 100 speakers, aged 8-90, representing the socio-economic spectrum of the city, reports on the extent to which the dialect of Charleston, South Carolina, has been affected by the defining characteristic of Southern phonology, that is, the Southern Shift. The shift consists of the monophthongisation of /ay/ (PRICE) before voiced obstruents and word finally and of the laxing and lowering of the nuclei of the front upgliding vowels /iy/ (FLEECE) and /ey/ (FACE) (Labov, Ash, & Boberg 2006).

The degree of /ay/-monophthongisation is measured impressionistically for 100 speakers. This is supplemented by a rapid and anonymous survey conducted in downtown Charleston, in which tokens of /ay/ were elicited by asking passers-by the time of day at around 5:25 pm. The second linguistic variable is the laxing and lowering of the nucleus of the front upgliding vowel /ey/ (FACE), which was measured acoustically as the distance between the nuclei of /ey/ and /e/ (DRESS) and their relative positions in phonetic space for 43 speakers.

These results were subjected to a series of multiple regression analyses in which the age, gender, and social class of the speakers were entered as independent variables. The level of /ay/-monophthongisation in Charleston is very low in comparison with the Inland South. It is inversely correlated with social class. Age is also a significant factor: /ay/-monophthongisation appears to be decreasing in apparent time. There is limited laxing and lowering of /ey/ (FACE) in Charleston in comparison with the Inland South. Similarly, social class and age are correlated with this feature, indicating that the Southern Shift is in retreat, and confirming the results of other studies, such as Labov, Ash, & Boberg (2006), Fridland (1999, 2001), and Thomas (2001). In conclusion, Charleston shows little involvement in the Southern Shift and as such remains a marginal Southern dialect.

In addition, the study provides evidence for the lack of a structural relation between the chain shifting of the front upgliding vowels, also found in a number of other English dialects, such as Cockney, Australian English, and New Zealand English, and the fronting of the back upgliding vowels /uw/ (GOOSE), /ow/ (GOAT), and /aw/ (MOUTH). Charleston is a dialect which resists the Southern Shift, though it is in close contact with dialects affected by it; yet it shows advanced fronting of /uw/ and /ow/ (Baranowski 2006). This provides support for treating the two processes as separate phenomena and has implications for the study of other dialects of English.

References

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