

Sound change in progress: On the role of gender and social class

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This paper discusses the interaction of gender and social class in a number of vowel shifts and mergers currently in progress in Charleston, South Carolina. It is based on the analysis of the speech of 100 informants (90 analysed acoustically), representing the socio-economic spectrum of the city. Spontaneous speech recorded during sociolinguistic interviews is supplemented by word-list reading and minimal-pair tests in production and perception. The minimal-pair test results and F1/F2 measurements are subjected to a series of multiple linear regression analyses, with social class, gender, age, and style as independent variables.

The study provides evidence supporting the generalisation that women tend to lead in vocalic shifts. Women are found to be ahead of men in the raising and tensing of short-*a* before nasals, as in *man* and *Sam*, and in the backing of short-*a* before oral consonants, as in *bad* and *sack*. They are also ahead in the fronting of the nuclei of the long back vowels /uw/ (*goose*, *two*) and /ow/ (*goat*, *so*). The fronting movement (increase in F2) shows a strong positive correlation with social class, which interacts with gender: men in the higher classes are ahead of women in the lower social strata.

The dialect is also undergoing a number of vocalic mergers, two of which will be discussed here. One is the unconditioned merger of the word classes of *cot* and *caught*, found to be expanding in many dialects of North American English. Charlestonians over the age of 50, distinguish the vowels in perception and production, whereas speakers in their 20s and younger are fully merged; middle-aged speakers are variably merged. Women show a slight lead over men in the acquisition of the merger. As found in previous studies, there is an apparent lack of social affect associated with this merger: multivariate analysis shows no effect of social class; there is no style-shifting and no overt comments from the informants.

Charleston is also undergoing the conditioned merger of the vowels of *pin* and *pen*, *him* and *hem*, etc., found throughout the South. Speakers in their 70s and older distinguish between the two vowels in perception and production. The majority of speakers below 70 are variably merged, with speakers below 20 fully merged in perception and production. As opposed to the *cot-caught* merger, multivariate analysis reveals a strong social class effect in addition to age: middle-aged uppermiddle and upper-class speakers lag behind in the acquisition of the merger, distinguishing between the two vowels at a higher rate than the rest of the population. There are also some overt comments from the informants, indicating that there is some awareness of the *pin-pen* merger, and, at least for some speakers, a possible association of this feature with the inland South. These results suggest that while in general mergers are devoid of social affect, some mergers, possibly those associated with a particular region or social group, may be above the level of social consciousness.