

A New Majority: Latino English and the Third Vowel Shift in Liberal, Kansas

Changes to the meat packing industry created population movements in the 1990s that introduced Latinx¹ populations to numerous small towns throughout the US (Kandel & Parrado, 2005), allowing linguists to analyze initial stages of dialect contact in communities where the population has shifted from minority- to majority- Latinx (Wolfram, Carter, & Moriello, 2004). New Latinx communities in Kansas contrast with similar Southern communities as Southern English is more salient than Midwestern English (Preston, 1993). Studies of Kansas communities can thus provide insight into how the structure and salience of regional varieties affects accommodation by new populations. This study examines Liberal, Kansas, a town where the Latinx community has grown from 19.5% to 59.1% of the population since 1990 (US Census). Despite a majority-bilingual population, our study demonstrates that Latinx English vowel systems are almost indistinguishable from the predominant regional variety, in contrast to sporadic accommodation found in similar communities in the South (Wolfram et al., 2004), but similar to (proportionally) smaller communities in the upper Midwest (Konopka & Pierrehumbert, 2008; Ocumpaugh, 2010; Roeder, 2010) and some communities in California (Holland 2014). Compared to recent regional Latinx English studies, these findings emphasize rapid alignment for non-Southern communities, regardless of whether such communities are a minority or majority Latinx.

We analyze the full vowel system for 18 Latinx and 8 Anglo adolescents from Liberal, KS. All participants have attended Liberal schools since age 6 and are native speakers of English. We additionally include Anglos age 12-93 from Kansas communities in which the population is over 95% Anglo as a comparison. Interviews were transcribed and force-aligned using FAVE. Over 30,000 vowels were automatically extracted at five time points and normalized using Lobanov (1971). We take a closer look at diphthongs by remeasuring the mid-tense vowels using a Praat script to extract 21 points across the vowel, obtaining detailed trajectory information. This analysis focuses on /æ/ in pre-nasal and non-prenasal contexts, /ɛ/, /o/, and /ey/ due to their documented role in other varieties of Latino English (Fought, 2003), and significant generational changes found among Anglo participants.

While new Latino communities in the South show sporadic accommodation to regional variants (Wolfram et al., 2004), regression analysis in R indicates that the vowel system of Liberal Latinx adolescents are indistinguishable from surrounding Anglo communities, with the exception of pre-nasal /æ/. This pattern can be attributed to a sound change in which the mid-tense vowels in Kansas are becoming more monophthongal, converging with Spanish pronunciations. Lack of salience also likely plays a role. Similar patterns have been found in long-standing Third Shift dialect regions in California (Holland, 2014) and new communities in the upper Midwest (Konopka & Pierrehumbert, 2008; Ocumpaugh, 2010; Roeder, 2010) in contrast to patterns found in older (Thomas, 2001) and newer Southern communities (Wolfram et al., 2004). Alignment between heritage language vowel systems and local vowel systems, as well as the saliency of the variety in question, all interact to produce overlapping systems, despite the stark demographic contrast between Liberal and surrounding Anglo-majority communities.

References

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¹ We use “Latinx” as a gender-inclusive form of Latino/a

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