

The Social Networks of Minority Ethnicity Group Members in Washington State

One persistent challenge in sociolinguistic research is characterization of the social networks of mobile, urban ethnic group members. Often, such speakers have been held aside from sociolinguistic samples on the assumption that they are not likely users of mainstream dialects; a choice sometimes justified, sometimes not. This presentation reports results for a study of the social networks of individuals from Washington state in the US Pacific Northwest (PNW hereafter). It draws out network patterns in local communities in which interethnic contact has long been present, but to different degrees. Cheshire and colleagues (2008) found that some speakers embedded in multiethnic friendship groups in London were advanced users of local urban forms, drawing on a linguistic repertoire not attributable to one particular ethnic group. Research into the networks of mobile individuals cannot directly utilize methods developed to investigate tightly-knit, monoethnic, geographically-bounded communities in which high levels of density and multiplexity enforce local social and linguistic norms (Milroy, 1980; Lippi-Green, 1989; Cheshire, 1978); or friendship networks alone (Ash and Myhill, 1986). In this study, we use social network techniques for assessing *network localness* and *range* (the latter indicating connectedness to a variety of types of individuals, cf. Bortoni-Ricardo, 1985) together with techniques from sociology that register *ethnic homophily*. Homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook 2001) refers to the tendency for individuals to form positive ties with people similar to them in socially significant ways (for “birds of a feather flock together”). Crucially, homophily effects have been shown to extend beyond *ethnic homophily* to *value homophily* (behavior rooted in common preferences, orientation toward local teams, liberalism/conservatism).

112 speakers identifying in five ethnic groups participated in the study: Japanese-, Mexican-, African-, Caucasian-Americans and Yakama Nation members. The dataset includes both social network and sociophonetic data. Each speaker completed a 21-item social network questionnaire, yielding a *network localness score* and an *ethnic homophily score*. Localness scores reflect speakers’ rootedness in local life. These were calculated over the traditional Milroyan network subsectors of kinship, occupation and voluntary association. Value homophily information was obtained from voluntary association information. A *percent homophily (PCThomophily)* measure was used to quantify the ethnic diversity of each respondent’s strong-tie contacts. One-way ANOVA confirms a highly significant difference between ethnic groups’ mean homophily scores ($F=25.89$ (16,6), $p=0.0002$). Interestingly, ethnic homophily is highest in the Caucasian subsample’s networks, followed by those of Yakama community members. Ethnic homophily decreases from the Mexican-, African- and Japanese-Americans in the sample, with the Japanese speakers maintaining the most diverse networks of all.

Acoustic analysis focused on three vowel system patterns associated with the PNW: (1) low-back merger of (a~ɔ) (Labov et al. 2006), (2) fronting of (u) (ibid.), and, (3) raising of (æ) and (ɛ) before voiced velar sounds (Wassink, 2015). Nonparametric correlation tests of the strength of association between advancement in the vowel changes and PCTHomophily score reveal that regardless of ethnic group, speakers with the most ethnically diverse networks tend to be advanced participants in linguistic change.

References

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