

Vowel Shift in Northern New Mexico Chicano English

Introduction

It is well known that Chicanos who speak Chicano English (=ChE) live in multilingual/multidialectal communities. Thus, there is much regional linguistic variation within the ChE dialect.¹ This pilot study uncovers one such dialectal variation spoken in Northern New Mexico (=NNM). In this particular region, the fluent ChE spoken as a first language most likely originated in the variety of English spoken by immigrants from Mexico who have learned English as a second language. This variety, however, became nativized by subsequent generations, and is often the only means of communication. (Peñalosa 1980: 118) Because the inhabitants of this predominantly monolingual environment are not recent immigrants from a Spanish speaking country, their English is not a result of language interference but is strongly rooted in the region transcending age, race and socioeconomic status. The main focus of this pilot study is to describe the vowel shift in the monolingual ChE spoken in NNM which I have found to be systematic, proving that the ChE spoken specifically in this region is a dialect of StE worthy of study independent of other dialectal variations of ChE. This is an important subject since there exists a large and rapidly growing population of monolingual ChE speakers living in the southwestern United States, yet there are comparatively few studies done in this area.

Subjects

The subjects used in this pilot study are all monolingual ChE speakers from Las Vegas, Sapello and Santa Fe; these towns are all located in NNM. The subjects consist of a thirteen year old chicana, a thirty-four year old chicana high school mathematics teacher, a sixteen year old chicano, a fifty year old homemaker, a twenty-six year old chicano hardware store worker, a chicano dentist of forty-nine years of age and a fifteen year old non-chicana. My subjects were chosen as a convenient sample, the only criteria being that they had lived most of their lives in this region and that they only speak English.

Methods

The data for my findings was gathered in Las Vegas and Santa Fe, New Mexico and consists of unscripted taped conversations at a high school basketball game, with shoppers downtown, and in a hardware store. Following these conversations, the subjects were asked to read lists of words in which vowel sounds appeared in every possible environment and position such as word initial, word final, stressed and unstressed positions.

The study

This paper is organized as follows: I will first show the phonetic representations (=PR) of each vowel as they occur in StE and the change that they undergo in ChE. Following the examples of these vowel shifts, a rule will be formulated for each vowel phoneme, and the shift will be diagrammed on an American English vowel chart.² Finally, once each vowel shift has been described separately, I will combine all of the data to illustrate the vowel shift pattern in NNM ChE. While each vowel phoneme has many distinctive features, I will only include those which are relevant to the study at hand.

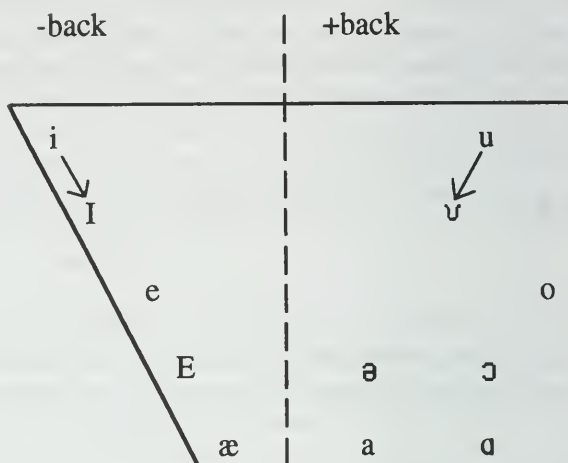
Analysis

I turn now to the analysis of the high tense vowels /i/ and /u/. StE vowel phonemes are compared with the ChE pronunciation of the same word to show the resulting PR of the ChE vowel.

<i>/i/</i>		(PR)	
		<u>StE</u>	<u>ChE</u>
		<i>/i/</i>	<i>/I/</i>
feel	-	[fiɸ]	[fIɸ]
eal	-	[iɸ]	[Iɸ]
seal	-	[siɸ]	[sIɸ]
congeal	-	[kəndʒiɸ]	[kəndʒIɸ]
conceal	-	[kənsiɸ]	[kənsIɸ]
surreal	-	[səriɸ]	[səriIɸ]
ideal	-	[aydiɸ]	[aydiIɸ]

/I/ =ChE (PR)

In ChE, the underlying representation (=UR) of the two StE phonemes /i/ and /I/ is different, yet they have only one PR before a velar /ɸ/. Also, it may be important



The next vowels on the chart are the [-high] lax vowels /ɪ/ and /ʊ/. These do not change in ChE. The [-high] [-low] tense vowels /e/ and /o/, which usually occur in StE when they are diphthongized as in the words *weight* and *boat*, are also stable in ChE; they behave the same as in StE. The next level however, which involves the [-high] [-low] lax vowels /E/, /ə/ and /ɔ/, does shift in ChE and is the focus of the next section of this study.

The following are examples showing the behavior of the [-high] [-low] [-back] phoneme /E/ which in ChE becomes the [+low] [-back] phoneme /æ/:

/E/		PR	
		StE	ChE
		/E/	/æ/
hell	-	[hEɪ]	[hæɪ]
bell	-	[bEɪ]	[bæɪ]
elderly	-	[Éldərli]	[ældərli]
elephant	-	[Éləfənt]	[æləfənt]

/æ/

(ChE - PR)

The preceding show that the UR of the phonemes /E/ and /æ/ have a PR of /æ/ in ChE when it occurs before a velar *ɛ*. This shift takes place once again on the

As shown in the previous data, all the shifts appear only the primary stressed vowel. In addition, we can now assert, by looking at the above ChE vowel shift chart, that, in every case studied, the shift consists in a drop of one notch on the vowel chart. All this data will now be combined to formulate these two constants into the least possible rules, in this case two. One for the [-back] vowels and another for the [+back] ones since there are only two major contexts in which these shifts take place: before a velar ɣ and before any consonant respectively.

$$\text{I. } \begin{bmatrix} \text{i} \\ \text{E} \end{bmatrix} \rightarrow \begin{bmatrix} \text{I} \\ \text{æ} \end{bmatrix} \quad / \quad \text{_____ } \text{ɣ} \\ \text{+stress}$$

$$\text{II. } \begin{bmatrix} \text{u} \\ \text{ə} \\ \text{ɔ} \end{bmatrix} \rightarrow \begin{bmatrix} \text{ʊ} \\ \text{a} \\ \text{ɑ} \end{bmatrix} \quad / \quad (\text{Co}) \text{_____ } \text{C} \\ \text{+stress}$$

Conclusion

The study of English dialects is rather complex. In this pilot study I have found a vowel shift pattern unique to a region whose communities are characterized by a situation wherein the use of ChE transcends age, race and socioeconomic status so that speakers include: teachers, doctors, the clergy, homemakers, radio announcers, business people, teenagers, blue collar employees and even non-chicanos. Since a dialect is defined as the form or variety of a spoken language peculiar to a region, community, social group, occupational group etc . . . and is regarded as being mutually intelligible, I propose that NNM ChE be considered a dialect of StE.³ Further supporting this argument is the fact that NNM ChE has undergone processes which are historically not new to dialects: vowel shifts are a well-known occurrence in languages;⁴ in addition, I believe that the dialect described in this study is the result of a situation where the first variety of a language (English as a second language spoken by immigrants from Mexico or from Spain via Mexico) became nativized by the subsequent generations. This is not a new phenomena either; it was

discussed in depth to describe the dialect of Brazilian Portuguese, Caipira Portuguese. (Parodi & Quicoli 1992)

Pilar Hernández

University of California, Los Angeles

NOTES

¹ This subject is dealt with quite extensively in *Form and Function in Chicano English* (J. Ornstein-Galicia 1984) and *Chicano English: an Ethnic Contact Dialect* (Penfield, J and J. Ornstein-Galicia 1985).

² The American English Vowel Chart used in this study was taken from Peter Ladefoged's *A Course in Phonetics*. 1982.

³ This definition is in Webster's New World Dictionary. 1980. 389.

⁴ These vowel system changes are summarized in Francis Katamba's *An introduction to phonology*. 1989. 137-140.

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