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Linguistic correlates of Irish-American and Italian-American ethnicity in high school and beyond



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ABSTRACT

Young Irish-American and Italian-American women from South Philadelphia were recorded in their senior year of high school and then in their freshman year of college. Despite the relative longevity and increasing cultural integration of the Irish and Italian communities in South Philadelphia, some linguistic differences obtain in the Philadelphia English of women from these two groups. In the 1970s (Labov, 2001), the only Irish or Italian ethnic effect on Philadelphia vowels was found in Italians' relatively retracted BOU/BOAT and BOO/BOOT. This was supported in the present study for BOAT, for which Italian-Americans are less fronted than Irish-Americans. Yet other ethnolinguistic differences were unexpectedly also found in the speech of these young women. For instance, Irish-American women and 'tough' Italian-American women exhibited more retracted BITE-nuclei than their peers. Ethnicity also conditions the alternation between alveolar and velar variants of suffixal (ing), with Irish-Americans more likely than Italian-Americans to use the non-standard alveolar variant. However, the strength of this effect on (ing) attenuates after high school, when ethnicity becomes a less salient component of the speakers' self-presentation. The article discusses the importance of bringing ethnographic observations to the study of within-White ethnicity, and emphasizes the dynamic nature of 'ethnicity' as it is constructed and re-constructed across the individual lifespan.

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1. Introduction

The story is in general a simple one: ethnicity differs from age, gender, social class, and neighborhood in that it has little systematic effect on language change in progress. For most of the sound changes, there are no ethnic effects.

(Labov, 2001, 257).

In the 1970s, Labov and his students undertook a large-scale study of language variation and change in the speech of over a hundred white Philadelphia informants (Labov, 2001 and references therein). Ethnicity was limited to white ethnic groups, such as Italians, Irish, Eastern European Jewish, Germans, and White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASPs).

Other social factors considered in their analyses included socioeconomic status, age, gender, immigrant generation, social network scores, and neighborhood. The study combined numerous field methods including a telephone survey, sociolinguistic interviews, tests of production (e.g. reading passages, word lists, minimal pairs) and social evaluation (e.g. self report, commutation test) and social network analysis (Labov, 1984). The research group examined the vowel system and three non-vocalic stable sociolinguistic variables.

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It is worth noting that the division of speakers into 'ethnic' groups in the 1970s study suggests that linguistic correlates were *expected* to be found, as was the case in Martha's Vineyard (Labov, 1972) and in New York City (Labov, 2006 [1966]). Indeed, these earlier studies may have given rise to the prevailing view in early variationist sociolinguistics that 'ethnolects' were fixed and discoverable linguistic varieties (see Becker, 2014). After all, in many communities speakers find ethnicity to be socially relevant, and sociolinguists justifiably hypothesized that ethnic differences would be reflected in speech. And indeed, where immigration has been recent or ongoing, as was the case in mid-twentieth century New York, linguistic correlates of ethnic difference do emerge fairly clearly in the majority language (for recent work see e.g. Drummond, 2012; Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Hoffman and Walker, 2010).

Yet in monolingual communities where immigrant populations have been well-established and integrated for several generations, the degree of perceived and/or actual linguistic difference between ethnic groups may be minimal, though sometimes identifiable (Laferrriere, 1979; Meyerhoff, 1994; Britain, 1998; Kiesling, 2001; Boberg, 2004; Hall-Lew, 2010; Hoffman and Walker, 2010). Despite the wide scope of the study and the multiplicity of field methods used, Labov (2001) found almost no linguistic correlates of ethnicity in his survey of Philadelphia. In one exceptional case, speakers of Jewish heritage were slightly less likely than members of other groups to produce alveolar variants of (ing) (Labov, 2001, p. 100). The only other significant effect of ethnicity on the linguistic variables studied was a negative correlation between Italian ethnicity and the fronting of the nuclei of words in the *BOO/BOOT* and *BOW/BOAT* lexical sets.¹ Labov concluded, in the quotation above, that ethnicity had 'little systematic effect on language change in progress' in Philadelphia.

As I will show in this paper, although sound changes in Philadelphia may not be strongly conditioned by (White) ethnicity at the macro-level, this does not mean that such conditioning is completely absent from the speech of White Philadelphians. Linguistic variation in Philadelphia within the White ethnic category is in fact discernible at a finer granularity: when it is examined within a single gender, a single city district, and a single age group, and when it is carefully interpreted within those particular constraints. In exploring within-White variation, I draw upon the perspective afforded by 'third wave' sociolinguistic studies (Eckert, 2012; Benor, 2010), which build on the repeated refinement since the 1960s of 'ethnicity' as a concept in sociolinguistics and in other social sciences (see Noels, 2014). The third wave views macro-social categories such as gender, age, sexuality, social class and ethnicity as non-static and compositional, constructed through verbal interaction and other symbolic practices to create linguistic 'styles' or 'repertoires' (see Becker, 2014 for more on the intersection of style and ethnic identity). Fix (2014) provides an excellent example of the fluid and constructed nature of speaker ethnicity, describing White women who adopt – to varying degrees – African-American English linguistic features. Emphasizing speaker agency, she argues that, "AAE phonological features function as an available symbolic resource with which white participants may reflect ethnic allegiance and cultural alignment with the African American community." Fix's study is one of a relatively few in which Whites are considered as anything other than the norm against which the language use of other ethnic categories is measured (although see e.g. Bucholtz (2011) and Cutler (2010) for other case studies of minority ethnic group linguistic features by Whites). Becker (2014) refers to this ideology among language scholars as 'the hegemony of whiteness'. Under this view, she points out, White becomes a 'supralocal' and 'unmarked' category representing the regional dialect of the speech community, while the language of minority racial/ethnic groups are considered ethnic dialects. Thus it is rarely the case that White dialects are considered 'ethnic', unless – as previously mentioned – some of those Whites are recent immigrants and/or non-native speakers of the majority language. No doubt a generational shift in scholarship will occur, at least in the United States, as Whites become a statistical minority.² Until that happens, we should constantly question our assumptions about Whiteness as a social category, and about ethnicity more generally.

I will also argue in this paper, in line with third wave sociolinguists, that ethnicity can be mediated through other factors such as occupation (Dubois and Horvath, 2000; MacKinnon, 1985; Milroy, 1987), gender (Fought, 1999, 2003; Conn, 2005; Sharma, 2011), religion (McCafferty, 1998; Benor, 2004, 2010; Baker and Bowie, 2009), education (Rose, 2006; Bagwasi, 2012) and community of practice (Bucholtz, 1999; De Fina, 2007; Marra and Holmes, 2008; Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Drager, 2009; Cutler, 2010; Guy and Cutler, 2011; see also Fix, 2014, for a discussion of social practice). As I will discuss here, speaker ethnicity must also be examined through the prism of age. The extent to which speakers feel ethnic, perform ethnic identity, and reflect ethnicity in their speech may be dependent on the age of those speakers and the peer group norms within which they situate themselves. Just as speakers can adjust their socioeconomic status over their lifespans – by gaining higher education or switching careers, or even by 'marrying up (or down)' – so speakers' ethnicity is also subject to modifications over time. One might move away from one's residential ethnic enclave (Baugh, 1996); attend a new school with a different proportion of ethnicities than before (Carter, 2007); or become politically active in favor of minority rights (Rickford and McNair-Knox, 1994), all with linguistic consequences. These are just a few of the life events that might change a speaker's self-perceived ethnic identity, as well as the way in which others interpret that speaker's ethnic affiliation(s). Cutler (2010) describes cases in which young white speakers deliberately adopted some of the features of African American English and New York Latino English in order to reinforce their hip-hop identity, despite their having few or no African Americans in their immediate social network. As stated earlier, ethnicity is not a static, inherent property of speakers, but a dynamic one that is open to constant reinvention over the individual lifespan. Indeed, Fix (2014) argues that a speaker's

¹ Labov (2001 and elsewhere) uses the following alternative notation: *BOO* class = (uWF), *BOOT* class = (uWC), *BOW* class = (oWF), *BOAT* class = (oWC).

² <http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/population/cb13-112.html>, accessed June 15th, 2013.

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