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Co-occurrence of sociolinguistic variables and the construction of ethnic identities

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the debate over the nature of linguistic varieties by assessing the validity of two prominent models of ethnolinguistic variation against empirical data drawn from a community study of Polish New Yorkers. As a direct comparison of the models, I examine the co-occurrence of ethnolinguistic and regional variables of New York City English in the speech of two generations of Polish immigrants. The results suggest that Polish New Yorkers employ both ethnolinguistic and regional variables in their expression of ethnic identities. These findings challenge the predictions of the *ethnolectal model*, which would expect ethnic groups to engage in linguistic practices that maximize the group's distinctiveness, and align well with the predictions of the *pool/repertoire approach*, which affords speakers the flexibility to draw on a wider range of linguistic resources.

Keywords: Ethnicity; Identity; Sociophonetics; New York City English; Polish immigration

1. Introduction

Ethnicity has long been recognized to affect linguistic variation, akin to other social factors, such as age or gender. Yet, the linguistic correlates of ethnicity have been understudied, and perhaps as a result, there is little unanimity about the nature of ethnolinguistic variation. Sociolinguistic studies have operationalized ethnicity in diverse ways that reflect competing conceptualizations of ethnic identity and of ethnic minorities' linguistic practices. At the definitional level, speakers' ethnicity has been determined by such disparate characteristics as phenotype (e.g., Bernstein, 1993; Rickford, 1985), language spoken at home (e.g. Fought, 2003; Mendoza-Denton, 2002), and religion (e.g. Benor, 2001; Fader, 2009; Yaeger-Dror, 2014). At the methodological level, ethnolinguistic variation has been studied from a qualitative perspective with a focus on language use in interaction (e.g., Harris, 2006; Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Rampton, 1995), and a quantitative one that seeks to identify linguistic correlates of ethnicity (e.g., Blondeau and Friesner, 2014; Hall-Lew, 2009; Hoffman and Walker, 2010; Sharma and Sankaran, 2011). This range of definitions and methodologies underscores the complexity and fluidity of ethnic identifications, especially in light of more recent studies that have revealed the situational and dynamic aspect of ethnolinguistic variation.

Competing methodologies and findings have spurred a debate about the way that the speech of ethnic groups should be conceptualized. Traditionally, the speech of ethnic groups has been hypothesized to constitute a distinct variety, often dubbed an *ethnolect*, by analogy to other regional and social *lects*. Ethnolects have been argued to arise in situations of language shift characterized by a sustained period of community bilingualism. For example, Clyne (2000:86) defines

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ethnolects as ''varieties of a language that mark speakers as members of ethnic groups who originally used another language or distinctive variety''. The cross-generational maintenance of ethnolects has been related to the expression of group identities. In the United States, ethnolects have typically been associated with a particular immigrant background, but in Europe, some ethnolects have been argued to convey minority status for speakers with a variety of ethnic backgrounds, warranting the name of *multi-ethnolects* (Clyne, 2000:87).[1]

Much of the research on the formation of (multi)-ethnolects implies the existence of a separate language variety for ethnic groups, as evident in the adoption of a naming convention reminiscent of dialect studies, e.g., ''Cajun English'' (Dubois and Horvath, 2000), ''Chicano English'' (Fought, 2002), and ''British Asian English'' (Sharma, 2011). In the case of multi-ethnolects, the name often carries associations with urban or non-standard speech, as in ''Rinkeby Swedish'' (Kotsinas, 1988) and ''non-native German'' (Androutsopolous, 2001). The concept of a (multi)ethnolect successfully captures the broad range and systematicity of linguistic variables associated with speakers belonging to ethnic groups. For example, Clyne et al. (2002) found that most speakers of ''Greek Australian English'' displayed overlapping subsets of phonological features identified as constitutive of this variety.

However, the term ethnolect often implies linguistic and social homogeneity (Becker, 2014; Jaspers, 2008), which is at odds with the variation that has been reported for individual speakers (e.g., Rickford and Price, 2013; Sharma, 2011), and that is expected to occur given that identities are multivalent, rather than binary (Mendoza-Denton, 2002). Scholars working within the tradition of the ethnolect have attempted to account for the observed variation by arguing that minority speakers develop proficiency in standard and ethnic varieties and switch between them depending on the social context. Others have posited the existence of an abstract phonetic continuum that interacts with a sociolinguistic continuum, allowing speakers to shift the phonetic realization of variables in different contexts (Clyne et al., 2002). Regardless of whether speakers are assumed to shift between whole grammars or phonetic variants, the validity of the ethnolectal approach rests on the assumption that ethnolinguistic variables work in tandem, i.e. the presence of one feature entails the presence of another.

Recent linguistic and anthropological research has moved away from describing the linguistic practices of ethnic groups as coherent language varieties. Speakers have started to be presented as linguistic agents who shape their own speech by selecting variables from a *feature pool* (Mufwene, 2001) or an *ethnolinguistic repertoire* (Benor, 2010). Contrasting with the idea of a pre-defined, static, and bounded ethnolect, these new concepts assume ''a fluid set of linguistic resources that members of an ethnic group may use variably as they index their ethnic identities'' (Benor, 2010:159). Crucially, the feature pool or repertoire is hypothesized to provide access to distinctive linguistic features that are associated with ethnic groups, and to allow speakers to employ these features in the construction of their own identities. This view acknowledges the multiplicity of identities that speakers may adopt, ethnic and otherwise, and allows for identities to fluctuate over time.

The concept of a feature pool or repertoire seamlessly eliminates many of the shortcomings of the ethnolectal approach by accounting for inter- and intra-speaker variation. The grammar of each ethnic group is distinguished from that of other users by the group's (presumably statistical) preference for certain variables over others. Crucially, variables are not necessarily treated as a set: they may, but do not have to, co-occur. Individuals are afforded linguistic agency through the practice of *bricolage*, by which ''individual resources (in this case, variables) can be interpreted and combined with other resources to construct a more complex meaningful entity'' (Eckert, 2008a:456–457). The emergence of a group pattern is then seen as resulting from indexical links between particular variables and social meanings, as opposed to a common grammar. Unlike the ethnolectal approach, the pool/repertoire view predicts that members of ethnic groups should not be limited to ethnolinguistic variables in their construction of ethnic identity.

The hypothesis that speakers deploy a range of linguistic resources in identity construction raises questions about the perceived linguistic coherence of social groups. Indeed, Benor sees the extent to which individual speakers can manipulate distinctive features as an empirical question, and admits that the selective use of particular features is ''constrained by linguistic and cognitive factors'' (2010:173), the former being presumably structural in nature, and the latter pertaining to issues of awareness. The degree of linguistic coherence within ethnic groups emerges as critical to determining the nature of ethnolinguistic variation. Yet, linguistic coherence within social groups has rarely been explicitly tested (Guy, 2013).

This paper aims to contribute to our understanding of the nature of ethnolinguistic variation by investigating the social and linguistic coherence of a group of white ethnics who consider themselves as part of a community, i.e. Polish New Yorkers. I investigate whether the linguistic behavior of Polish New Yorkers is consistent with the distinctive feature set associated with an *ethnolect*, or whether their linguistic practices align with the *repertoire* model. I focus on three regional features of New York City English: one variable that can be considered distinctive for Polish New Yorkers (TH-stopping

[1] The designation of multi-ethnolect has been applied to urban youth language in Sweden (Kotsinas, 1988), Germany (Androutsopolous, 2001), the Netherlands (Hinskens, 2011), Finland (Quist, 2008), and England (Cheshire et al., 2011).