

On the role of social factors in the loss of phonemic distinctions

Maciej Baranowski (*University of Manchester*)

This paper discusses the role of gender and social class in the *cot-caught* and the *pin-pen* mergers currently in progress in Charleston, SC. It is based on the speech of 90 informants analysed acoustically. The minimal-pair test results and F1/F2 measurements are subjected to a series of multiple linear regression analyses, with social class, gender, age, and style as independent variables.

While Charlestonians over the age of 50 distinguish between the two low-back vowels in perception and production, speakers around the age of 20 and younger are usually merged. Speakers aged 25-50 are variably merged. Women show a lead over men and there is a curvilinear pattern for social class. There is an apparent lack of social affect associated with this merger: there is little style-shifting and there are no overt comments from the informants.

In the *pin-pen* merger, on the other hand, multivariate analysis reveals a strong social class effect in addition to age, but no gender difference. The degree of merger appears to be inversely correlated with social class, with higher classes displaying a lower degree of merger. There are also overt comments from the informants, indicating that there is some awareness of the *pin-pen* merger and a possible association of this feature with the inland South. This suggests that while mergers are usually devoid of social affect, some mergers, possibly those associated with a particular region or social group, may be above the level of social consciousness.