Lexical diffusion in the early stages of the merry-marry merger

Laura Baxter (York University)

The conditioned merger of the vowels /ɛ /æ / before /r/ is prevalent throughout dialects of North American English with the well-known exceptions of Montreal and Eastern New England. This paper presents data from a small, rural, English-speaking community in Quebec’s Eastern Townships, situated southeast of Montreal along the border with the New England states. Although located geographically between two regions which maintain a distinction between these vowels, recent dialect surveys have found a near complete merger in the Eastern Townships today. Using data from interviews conducted by amateur historians in the late 1970s, I present an acoustic analysis of the vowel quality of /ær/ in the speech of elderly members of this community at that time.

Acoustic analysis of the mean values of the first and second vowel formants shows a great deal of variation in the production of /ær/ by these speakers. In some tokens it is clearly merged with /ɛr/, while in others the two phonemes remain clearly distinct. Further, this variation is found both between speakers and in the speech of individuals themselves. Thus, a speaker may pronounce certain words with a merged vowel, and others without, but each word is pronounced consistently across multiple tokens. Although not entirely homogenous, the speech community does appear to share general norms with regard to which words are or are not merged. Thus, for the verb carry, for example, all speakers but one have a merger. For marry, on the other hand, all speakers except one appear to maintain a distinction.

These results demonstrate that the /ær/-/ɛr/ merger was not a lexically abrupt, conditioned sound change which applied to all phonemes in a given environment simultaneously. Rather, the results are consistent with a theory of sound change via lexical diffusion, wherein a change gradually spreads throughout the lexicon. At a certain point the change may have reached a critical mass and become regularized and rule-governed, applying in all contexts.

References