Is C[ø›]ffee T[ø›]lk L[ø›]st? BOUGHT-raising on Manhattan’s Lower East Side

Kara Becker (New York University)

This paper presents new data on a salient feature of New York City English (NYCE): the raising of the low back rounded vowel /ø/ in words like coffee (Thomas 1942; Hubbell 1950; Labov 1966; Labov, Ash, & Boberg 2006). Evidence from New Yorkers living on Manhattan’s Lower East Side suggests a change in progress for white NYCE, as few young white speakers produce raised BOUGHT. In contrast, speakers of other ethnicities, normally overlooked in work on NYCE, do produce raised BOUGHT.

The sixty speakers analyzed are native English-speaking, born and raised New Yorkers, ranging from age 18 to 83. They are long-term residents of the neighborhood and represent its dominant ethnic groups: Jewish, other white, Latino, Asian, and African American. The data come from interviews collected from 2007-2009. Normalized formant values extracted for the back vowels BOOT, BOAT, PUT, BUT, BOT, BOUGHT, BORE, and BALL yielded a total corpus of almost 5,000 words. Vowel plots (Labov 2009) determine BOUGHT’s location and glide direction in the vowel space, while t-tests verify that all speakers maintain the BOUGHT/BOT distinction. A linear regression analysis in RBrul (Johnson 2009) finds that age is the strongest predictor of F1 (the older the speaker, the more raised BOUGHT is). Crucially, ethnicity is another strong predictor: Africans Americans and Latinos have the most-raised BOUGHT, Asians the least-raised, while the white groups fall in the middle. Gender and generation were also selected as social predictors.

These results suggest a re-evaluation of the distinctive features of white NYCE: raised BOUGHT is lowering for young white New Yorkers. They also add to a growing body of evidence that ethnic minority speakers do use regional dialect features (cf. Fought 1999). Both angles reveal new directions for “c[ø›]ffee t[ø›]lk” on the Lower East Side.

References