The Persistence of Ethnic Identity in Montreal English

Charles Boberg (McGill University)

This paper presents the final results of an acoustic study of ethno-phonetic differentiation among native varieties of English spoken in Montreal, Canada. The preliminary results, published in Boberg (2004), gave a tentative picture of phonetic differentiation among the three largest ethnic groups in the Montreal English speech community: people of British/Irish, Italian and Ashkenazi Jewish ethnic origin. The complete set of data is now available: a sample of 93 people from a broad range of social backgrounds, subjected to acoustic phonetic and multivariate statistical analysis. These data produce a more reliable and detailed view of how phonetic variables are correlated with ethnic origin.

Among the most important findings is that the Jewish community, which arrived a generation earlier than the Italian community, joins the British-origin community in displaying native Canadian features, such as the fronting of /uw/ (GOOSE) and the Canadian Raising of /aw/ (MOUTH). Many Italians, by contrast, continue to resist these features, preserving back vowels in /uw/ and low vowels in pre-voiceless /aw/, a likely reflection of substrate influence from Italian. Jewish speakers do, however, differentiate themselves from both groups by showing several phonetic developments associated by Labov, Ash and Boberg (2006) with the Southern Shift, particularly backing of /ay/ (PRICE) and movement of the nuclei of /ey/ (FACE) and /ow/ (GOAT) away from the periphery of the vowel space. Finally, British-origin speakers are the only group in Montreal to display allophonic variation in the height and advancement of /æ/ (TRAP), a normal feature of Canadian English outside Montreal.

These data contribute to our understanding of the evolution and composition of multi-ethnic and multicultural urban speech communities. They also underscore the difficulties faced by dialectologists in characterizing the speech of such communities for purposes of regional comparison.

References
