Sounding “in” and blending in: phonetic reflexes of peer-group affiliation in a working-class suburb of Paris

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Anthropologically-oriented work on the social meaning of variation have called for studies of “a far greater range of variables than is commonly done in the field”, focusing also on what is not apparently a change in progress (Eckert 2008:472). In this study, the distributional and interactional properties of four variables are examined with the aim of accounting for phonetic variation that might enter in the construction of personal styles. Using interviews with twelve male and twelve female adolescents (11-16 years) in a working-class Parisian French community, speaker-specific social factors (age, gender, ethnicity, and network centrality), and interactionally relevant hearer-oriented factors, e.g. turn-taking and backchannel cues, have been examined. Results show that the raising of front-mid vowels in open syllables characterizes most speakers, while affrication of stop consonants (Jamin et al. 2006) and devoicing of high vowels (Fagyal and Moisset 1999, Smith 2003) are more frequent in peer-group leaders’ and French-Arabic and French-Berber bilinguals’ speech. The distribution of an unusual intonation contour exhibiting a sharp final fall (Lehka-Lemarchand 2007) shows an interaction between gender and ethnicity: it is more frequent in male than in female French-Arabic and French-Berber bilinguals’ speech, and is also used by male adolescents of non North-African descent. While bilinguals use the contour in a broader range of contexts (lists, statements, interjections), monolingual French adolescents use it as a backchannel cue signaling supportive stance in face-to-face interactions. The devoicing of high vowels, however, is the only variable subject to evaluative comments on style among adolescents. This suggests that only a limited amount of contextually-bound variation in the population is indexing “specific elements of character” (Eckert 2008:463). The bulk of systematic phonetic variation is of “first-order indexicality”, i.e. it corresponds to the phonetic reflexes of group affiliation, providing a backdrop to other salient markers and stereotypical features in speech.

References