Sound change under the radar: On not noticing mergers

Matthew J. Gordon (University of Missouri-Columbia)

Among sound changes, mergers distinguish themselves as masters of stealth, diffusing unnoticed through and across speech communities. Indeed, Labov (1994: 343-4) lists the “absence of social affect” among the general properties of mergers. This paper seeks to build on Labov’s insights by (1) empirically exploring sociolinguistic perceptions surrounding mergers, and (2) framing the issues in the broader context of ideologies associated with standardization and literacy.

The data come from two surveys. One is a perceptual dialectological study that examines the social connotations of several linguistic variables including two active mergers (“the pin/pen and the cot/caught mergers”). The other questionnaire is a more traditional dialect survey examining usage. The current database includes roughly 700 respondents to the former questionnaire and over 3,700 to the latter, all natives of the same region.

The perceptual dialectological study confirms the relative lack of social awareness borne by mergers. Patterns of social stereotypes associated with mergers are much weaker than those found with other variables (e.g. “warsh” for wash). The perceptual consequences of the two mergers are explored further in the usage survey, which incorporates a vowel-matching task that has respondents select words containing the same vowel as either bought or tin. These items were designed to complement the more straightforward minimal-pair questions (e.g. Are cot and caught pronounced the same?). The results from the vowel-matching task indicate much higher rates of both mergers than those from the minimal-pair task.

To explain these findings I look at how linguistic judgments of the type respondents are asked to make in these surveys are affected by language ideologies. From this perspective the minimal-pair test is seen as coming up against a widespread belief promoted by centuries of prescriptivism that differences of linguistic form should represent functional distinctions. This conflict is heightened by the fact that the questionnaire task is written, and I explore the role played by the ideology of literacy as well.

Reference