A Diachronic Study of Monophthongization in Washington D.C.

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Glide shortening in vowels of the PRICE class (e.g., pry as 'prah' and prize as 'prahz') is attested in both Southern and African American English (Thomas, 2007; Bernstein and Gregory, 1993). While White speakers tend to shorten the offglide in PRICE before voiceless obstruents, AAVE speakers retain it (Bernstein and Gregory, 1993). However, glide shortening has been recently found to be spreading to the pre-voiceless contexts for AAVE speakers in Detroit and Memphis (Anderson, 2002; Fridland, 2003). Given this surprising leveling in communities in the South and North, we asked whether PRICE patterns similarly in Washington D.C., a place not easily categorized as North or South. We also asked if there was any significant change of glide shortening over time between two groups of four AAVE speakers.

We analyzed a 2008 corpus of 16 sociolinguistic interviews balanced for race and gender and compared the AAVE speakers' patterns with speakers from Fasold's 1969 corpus. We used acoustic and auditory methods to code for PRICE realization and included relevant linguistic and social factors in our analysis. We measured the degree of glide shortening in 1329 tokens by taking the Euclidean distance between the onset and offset of the vowel in a normalized F1-F2 plane.

Regression analysis shows that spread of glide shortening to traditionally disfavorable pre-voiceless contexts for AAVE speakers is not observed in our 2008 data. Although neither of these racial groups has extremely short glides before voiceless obstruents, the difference with other contexts is far greater for African Americans (1.28) than for White speakers (0.25). While the overall monophthongization level does not change significantly between these two corpora (p >0.05), the interaction between the corpus and the linguistic environments and speaker's gender shows scant but suggestive evidence that DC African Americans may be beginning to monophthongize PRICE in pre-voiceless contexts.

References