/uw/-monophthongization and Southern style

Chris Koops (Rice University)

This talk is concerned with fine phonetic detail in the fronting of /uw/ (e.g. shoe, boot) in Houston. Advanced degrees of /uw/-fronting are common in the speech of Houston Anglos of all ages. However, an analysis of the temporal contour of the second formant (F2) reveals two distinct types of fronted /uw/. Older speakers, notably those whose speech includes many traditional Southern features, show more sustained F2 steady states and little nucleus-glide differentiation, resulting in a quasi-monophthongal /uw/ (auditorily close to [y:], although some gliding remains). Younger speakers, by contrast, uniformly display early F2 peaks followed by relatively strong glides, especially in word-final open syllables (two, you). In addition to these gradient phonetic effects, the two types also differ phonologically. Only speakers who use the more monophthongal variant also display fronting in pre-lateral contexts (e.g. school, pool).

The distinctness of these two types of fronted /uw/ and their historical discontinuity in Houston contribute to the understanding of /uw/-fronting in the US overall. If we assume that the two /uw/’s are associated with different social meanings – such that the first one forms part of a distinctly Southern style while the second one does not – the ongoing, continent-wide fronting of /uw/ (e.g. Labov et al. 2006) need not reflect an originally Southern feature that somehow gained national currency. Instead, the process seems to go the other way around, with the traditional Southern pattern being abandoned in the urban South in favor of a different, less regionally marked type that may have originated elsewhere.

Reference