Bypassing the effects of contact: deracialisation of the GOOSE vowel in middle-class South African English

Rajend Mesthrie (University of Cape Town)

Once tightly controlled, social networks of young people of middle class background are now deracialising in South Africa. An earlier paper at NWAV 2007 examined whether young people of the major ethnic groups, Black, Coloured and Indian, were simply adopting prestige White middle-class norms, adapting them, or resisting change by adhering to older norms associated with the different ethnic groups. That study involved Word List style of 24 female speakers of 4 ethnicities. The present paper gives the results of the completed study of 48 speakers of both genders and four ethnicities within a Labovian framework in relation to the GOOSE vowel (long /u/). Over 4000 casual style tokens were analysed acoustically using PRAAT and compared after vowel normalization procedures based on Watt & Fabricius (2003). Whereas the vowel is undergoing change internationally, the fronting was once associated only with White speakers in South Africa. The paper shows that the three ethnicities of middle-class speakers are now fronting the vowel, unlike the previous generation. However, there are differential effects by gender and ethnicity. Black speakers overall show greater accommodation than Coloured and Indian speakers. Females show greater resistance among Coloureds and Indians, but are in the lead among Black speakers. These findings are explained in terms of previous patterns of prestige and contact in the society and the degree of social change and new contacts within the different communities. Of direct relevance to the NWAV 2009 theme is the extent to which the effects of contact of a generation ago are being jettisoned by the new (upper and middle) middle-classes. Nevertheless there are some residual traces of contact from respectively Bantu languages, Afrikaans and Indian languages, mostly of a non-segmental nature.

Reference