Vowel Variation in Long Island English

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While the NYC dialect region has been described in detail (Labov 1966; Labov, Ash, and Boberg 2006), little research has been done on the specific variations of Long Island, NY. Current studies have alluded to the differences between New York City English (NYCE) and Long Island English (LIE), but have not demonstrated any specific differences.

The area examined, east end Long Island, is made up of mostly upper-middle-class families residing in the Hamptons and working-class families residing to the west of the Hamptons. This area serves as a popular summer vacation spot for Manhattanites; consequently, local Long Islanders feel a divide between themselves and the vacationers. This divide is becoming apparent in their speech. The younger speakers are exhibiting fewer distinctive NYCE features such as the vocalization of /r/, which is still present in the speech of the older generations.

This paper focuses on the lowering of /iyC/, /iyF/, /i/, /eyC/, /eyF/, and /e/ in Suffolk County, Long Island. This lowering is traced in apparent time based on the speech of 30 native white Long Islanders. The data are based on word lists, short sentences, and several hours of natural conversation. F1/F2 measurements are taken and linear regression analyses are done for the independent variables of age, gender, and socio-economic class.

To date, the data show that /iyF/ and /eyF/ exhibit the most lowering, where /iyF/ is encroaching on /eyC/’s space and /eyF/ is encroaching on /e/’s space. Additional data suggest /i/ and /e/ are lower before voiceless consonants. It appears that the youngest speakers of the working-class families are leading the change, trying to remove themselves from the Hamptons/NYC scene, while the upper-middle class speakers try to blend in and adopt a more ‘city’ pronunciation. In this paper, I will provide evidence supporting this hypothesis.

References