

SUMMARY OF “/r/ AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF PLACE IDENTITY ON NEW YORK CITY’S LOWER EAST SIDE”

Becker (2009)

1. VARIABLE

The paper focuses on the investigation of non-rhoticity in NYCE.

2. SUMMARY

This article is an investigation of the link between speech behavior and their sense of place, where ‘place’ is defined as a space that has meaning attached to it.

The author begins by developing the concept of enregisterment (Agha 2003), that is the process by which speakers link linguistic features to a local variety. The key feature in this study is non-rhoticity, the locale is LES in New York City. B notes that several studies have shown that “People in the midst of social change are likely to highlight place identity” and she wants to provide a similar exploration here, one that goes beyond simply noting the typological function place, but shows how place is constructed through the linguistic choices we make.

Details

LES characterized by external and internal conflict, as seen in disinvestment, gentrification, and change in the ethnic make up of population. This competition seen in the names different groups use: Loisaida (L-Ams), East Village (urbanites), and LES. As a result, the sense of place of these white LESers is threatened by presence of minority groups or gentrifiers.

There are only 7 speakers in this study, which B acknowledges is a problem for the quantitative analysis. There are only two speakers in the younger group (in their 50s) and she cannot really come up with different class categories, everyone seems to be lower middle class. Nonetheless she attempts a quantitative analysis through the construction of an index: total of r instances divided by number of possible r’s. It’s not clear what this index serves, because she also goes ahead to provide a goldvarb analysis. The quantitative analysis can be very misleading. If you only have two speakers how can you even present the results?

I cannot put much stock in her significant factors. Still it is interesting that when the topic of the conversation is about the neighborhood, rhoticity goes down a good amount. Since non-rhoticity is a stigmatized variant, whose replacement by rhoticity is a slow change in NYCE (as compared to southern varieties), and still remains a salient marker of New York identity, B argues that the use of non-rhoticity is a way for LESers to claim authenticity in the face of pressure by other groups who are rhotic speakers. But then in footnote 9 she says that AfrAms and Lats are non-rhotic, but that is not connected to NYCE—how does she know?

This paper strikes me as one that promises more than it can deliver. The small number of participants is the biggest problem. There are some interesting observations, but again there is nothing really new here. There is one interesting excerpt, it seems that with a small number of speakers, the best approach would be to do a more in depth analysis of the interview portion a la Bucholtz.

REFERENCES

Becker, K., 2009. /r/ and the construction of place identity on new york city’s lower east side. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 13, 634–658.