

Ethnolects and the city: Ethnic orientation and linguistic variation in Toronto English

Michol Hoffman and James Walker (2010)

This paper is focused on the effect of ethnicity as a social category on informants' patterns of linguistic behavior in Toronto English within and across the communities of Italian and Chinese speakers.

The paper starts with a short review on sociolinguistic categories – sex, age, social class and ethnicity, and their redefinition throughout the years since Labov's study in Martha's Vineyard. (Labov, 1963). The authors then move their focus on how ethnicity is treated in the area of linguistic variation and change, and state that their approach merges methods of variationist sociolinguistics and social psychology.

In defining ethnicity in studies of language variation and change, Hoffman and Walker combine etic/objective and emic/subjective approaches. The first one is based on the idea that ethnic groups are previously established categories and all members share the ethnicity equally, while the second takes into consideration the conceptual system of the ethnic community (Mendoza-Denton, 2002).

Based on the existing definitions in the literature they list three main points:

- a) perception of difference by both outsiders and insiders. "Thus, names, labels and stereotypes as serve as ready-made icons of particular ethnic identities" (p. 40);
 - b) sharing qualities and values within the group – language, religion, race, homeland or origin, culture, interests and goals;
 - c) participation in shared activities – cultural or religious celebrations, etc.
- => We should speak about "degrees of ethnicity which vary from individual to individual" (p. 41).

The study

60 participants grouped by language (Chinese, Italian), first and second/third generation, ethnic origin and sex. (Table 1, p. 44). There was also a control group of 20 participants of British/Irish origin.

The aim

To identify linguistic features that are used by different ethnic groups (Chinese, Italian, British/Irish) and how they are used to convey ethnicity.

The multigenerational approach aims to draw a baseline for the features brought from the minority languages. This is done through comparison:

- a) within groups: first-generation speakers' patterns (minority-language dominant) with those of second/third generations (English dominant bilinguals/English monolinguals) in order to find out whether minority language transfer is carried on in the next generations
- b) across groups: Chinese and Italian groups are compared with the British/Irish group in order to find whether differences are due to language transfer or to "the degree of exposure to mainstream English form ongoing changes in Canadian English." (p. 45)

Methodology

- Sociolinguistic interview and ethnic orientation questionnaire approach.
- Linguistic variables: two well-studied phenomena – d/t deletion and the Canadian vowel shift.
- Ethnicity is measured by external factors as lineal descent and neighborhood but also through a questionnaire that aims to measure the participants' perception about their ethnic orientation (EO).

Results

Ethnic orientation: Chinese have higher EO than Italians. In both groups first generation has higher scores of EO than those of second/third generation. The second/third generation Chinese has higher score of EO than 2/3 third generation Italians.

High EO participants express their belonging to the ethnic group through self-identification, social networks, language use and community activities.

Stable variable: t/d deletion

There is not much difference between generations in either Italians or British/Irish groups. Greater difference though is found between first generation and second/third in the Chinese group. Linguistic factors are all significant but the phonological effects are stronger than morphological effects.

First-generation Italians and Chinese exhibit stronger morphological effects than phonological ones compared to British/Irish first-generation speakers.

Second/third generation Italians and Chinese exhibit constant linguistic conditioning regardless EO.

Change in progress: The Canadian Vowel Shift

First-generation Chinese seem to not participate in this ongoing change unlike first-generation Italians who are participating with retracting of [æ].

Women favor both elements of the shift: [ɪ]-> [ɛ] and [ɛ] -> [æ].

Conclusions

The linguistic analysis proves language transfer in the first generation. Differences between generations within ethnic groups though suggest that this language transfer does not persist.

Ethnolinguistic variation in multilingual and multiethnic environment is not so much influenced by the level of mastering the majority language as by the way in which speakers of those minority languages “actively construct and express ethnic identity”.

REFERENCES

Hoffman, Michol and Walker, James. 2010. Ethnolects and the city: Ethnic orientation and linguistic variation in Toronto English. *Language Variation and Change*/22:37-67.

Labov, William. 1963. The social motivation of a sound change. *Word*/19:273-309.