The City as Speech Community

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The "speech community" is a fundamental unit of sociolinguistic studies. However, the speech community is not a clear-cut concept. As noted by Buchlotz (1999), a speech community may be a socioeconomic stratum, a network of neighbors, or a group of friends. A researcher's definition of the speech community may dramatically affect the types of sociolinguistic variation they are able to observe and the facts about sociolinguistic variation that they discover. While all sociolinguists must be critical of the illusory nature of the speech community, it has particular consequences for dialectologists and variationists working in so-called "First Wave" sociolinguistics (e.g., Eckert 2012), who often seek to characterize language variation and change in densely populated urban areas or over relatively wide geographic spaces.

This research combines two traditional dialectological and sociolinguistic methodologies—the paper survey and the sociolinguistic interview—to examine the cohesiveness of linguistic practices across a large metropolitan area. The Kansas City metropolitan area—a community of more than 2 million people spread across two states, nine counties, and 119 cities—is shown to be a community of distinct areal ideologies, with residents viewing one another very differently depending on which side of various physical and political boundaries they live on. Data is then examined from 186 responses to a paper survey based on Gordon (2006) to explore conscious evaluations of several vowel mergers, and lexical and grammatical innovations. Measurements from vowels taken from sociolinguistic interviews with fifty residents from fifteen different cities in metropolitan Kansas City are also examined to compare phonetic productions.

The two methods provide different perspectives on Kansas City as a speech community. In paper surveys, the metropolitan area appears to be remarkably cohesive. Two cities—the upscale suburb of Shawnee and the military-based suburb of Leavenworth—are regular outliers, but responses from all other communities within the metropolitan area are statistically identical. Responses show this level of agreement on phonological, lexical, and grammatical variables. However, acoustic measurements of vowels show statistically significant differences between cities, which are best accounted for by factors like distance of the city from the center of the metropolitan area and cities' average per capita income.

We argue that these findings suggest that research examining language variation and change by accessing conscious "knowledge" of language—to include surveys, studies of language attitudes, and minimal pairs tasks—can treat the speech community in very broad terms areally, so that large metropolitan areas can be thought of as a unified speech community. However, studies of linguistic features that presumably operate below the level of consciousness—such as phonetic productions—must take a much more local purview on the speech community, demanding the careful sampling methods advocated, e.g., by Labov (1966).

References

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