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It's not just the Valley Girls: A study of California English

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In the 1950's, when David Reed instituted the Linguistic Atlas of the Pacific Coast (LAPC), nothing could be said about California or the West Coast in general that was specific to the area. Studies during that time concentrated on how the West Coast speech patterns reflected Eastern demographic origins. It was also the popular belief among Californians in the '50's and '60's that California had no regional speech traits. That belief has now changed, both among Californians and people elsewhere in the nation. In a recent article by Preston (1986), it was clearly demonstrated that Americans perceive California as a distinctive speech area. Preston says that this new perception is "certainly in part from the popular culture caricature of the state and its population--surf, hot tubs, Hollywood, cults, Silicon Valley, flower children, and so on" (p. 229). The characterization of California as a speech area is also attributed to caricatures of California speech patterns in the media--these are usually parodies, such as the Marin County speech satirized in the novel "Serial", the recording "Valley Girl", by Frank Zappa with his daughter Moon-unit, and "Surfer Chick", by Whoopi Goldberg.

There is, then, a discrepancy between what the lay public believes about the status of California as a distinctive speech area, and the published works from the '50's and '60's by dialect geographers. It is the intent of this paper to explore the issue of whether present-day California is or is not a speech area.

Parodies. Two famous parodies of the speech of California teenagers, one by Zappa (1982) and one by Goldberg (1985)¹, display a number of notable phonological traits. Those relevant to this study are:

(1) Fronting of (o) and (u) in words like *totally* [t^h e^u teli], *Encino* [ensɪnc^u], *know* [nɪv], *spoon* [sp^u n], etc. ;

(2) lowering of (i) and (e), as in *bitchin'* [bečɪn] and *forget* [forgeʔt]. Some items are backed, as in *confession* [kɪnfʌʃɪn], *them* [ðʌm].

(3) lowering and backing of (æ), as in *handle* [handel], *to the max* [maks], and *Catholic* [k^hæθəlɪk].

LAPC Survey. In the 1950's, fieldworkers for the LAPC interviewed 270 native-born speakers in 78 California towns and cities, using Kurath's methodology. A list of 608 vocabulary items was elicited from each speaker, and the responses were transcribed phonetically. In this data from the '50's, there is virtually no indication of the sorts of vowel qualities that we observe in the present-day parodies. If California speakers do in fact exhibit these vowel shifts, the shifts have occurred *since* the '50's.

The 1986 Seminar. A graduate seminar in Spring 1986 did a pilot study of the speech of native Californians, predominantly young middle-class speakers, with the majority from the Bay Area. We studied aspects of the vowel systems of these speakers, and compared them to the phonetic transcriptions done in the 50's by Reed and his associates, to determine whether the vowels of the two groups differed. Also, a collection of tapes made by Greet in the '20's of people from all over the United States reading the story "Grip the Rat" provided us with some important bases of comparison to the nation as a whole. Interviewers spoke with 37 people, aiming at acquiring samples of informal, unselfconscious speech. 22 of these interviews were selected for common analysis, on the basis of recording quality and presence of informal narrative. We concentrated primarily on the speech of young people, where we expected to find these shifts most prominent. Thus 19 of the speakers were high-school or college students, ranging in age from 16 to 22. Three other speakers were older: aged 27, 40, and 63. Each seminar student chose a particular vowel or set of vowels for study².

Vowel quality was scored subjectively, with an agreed-on quality for a zero-point, and scores given to each token of 0, 1 or 2 depending on the degree to which a token differed from the zero-point. (For some variables, scores were given on a scale of 0 to 1.) For each speaker, scores for the tokens of a given vowel were added together and then multiplied by a constant, so that overall scores could range from 0-200 -- 200 representing extreme shifting.

/u), (ʊ), and (o)/. It is quite clear that California vowels are in motion among people under 30. The most obvious difference from the '50's are the back vowels, specifically (u), (ʊ) and (o), which are clearly more front and less rounded than their 1950's counterparts (as indicated by LAPC transcriptions). The vowels heard today also exhibit frequent truncation of the offglide. Thus we hear in young Californian speakers such pronunciations as [gɪd] for "good", and [tʰoʊtɪli] for "totally". (/ʌ/ was not studied, but informal observation indicated that it too is fronting, one notable pronunciation being [stɪki benz] for "stickey buns".) Bremner compared scores on fronting and unrounding of /u/ and /ʊ/ in the 1986 California interviews with scores based on her hearing of the Greet tapes; these tapes show some degree of fronting for speakers from parts of the south and midlands, and to a lesser degree for speakers from the midwest. There was virtually no fronting in the Northeast or along the eastern seaboard. The first two bars on Figure 1 show the percentage of tokens with fronting/unrounding in Greet's survey. This can be taken as a baseline against which the present

Figure 1. Percentage of tokens that showed some degree of fronting in 3 linguistic surveys

study can be measured. The LAPC transcriptions indicate that about one fourth of the speakers used some (but only a few) slightly fronted versions of /u/, transcribed as [u^ɰ] or [ʊ^ɰ]. Very rarely did the fieldworkers write the more fronted [ɨ^ɰ]. The LAPC data looks much like the overall scores from the Greet tapes. As the right-hand bar on Figure 1 shows, the percentage of tokens that show fronting in the 1986 survey is very high indeed for our sample.

Luthin examined LAPC records briefly and found virtually no fronting for /o/ there, but found a marked degree of (o)-fronting in young California speakers today. Figure 2 shows scores for (o)-fronting for the subjects of the study, arranged by age. For those subjects with scores above 60 points, all are middle-class, Anglo (or in two cases Asian), all are in the 16-22 age-range, and all were

Figure 2. Overall (o)-fronting scores by age, for 22 subjects.

raised in urban or suburban settings. The three oldest speakers all had low scores, with the oldest one (age 63) approaching 0. For the four young speakers who scored low, one is Hispanic, one Black, one comes from a small rural town in Northern California, and the last--Waldo³--discussed at length his disdain for the California Speech Style (parodying it with skill, but keeping his natural speech swept clean of the new variants under study here).

Both Luthin and Bremner observed that the back vowels before /r/ and /l/ do not front at all. This is true in the parodies as well.

The phenomenon of fronting with its accompanying unrounding and truncation figures highly in the recorded parodies of California speech heard earlier. The findings of the seminar show that fronting in natural speech, while of course not as extreme as its parodies, is nevertheless an observable characteristic of the speech patterns of young middle-class Anglo (and perhaps Asian) Californians.

Front vowels. The parodies show lowering and some backing of the front vowels. The seminar findings for front vowels are more complex. Van Clay studied variation in the short front vowels (e) and (i), and Lerner studied (æ). They found that the front vowels exhibit both lowering and raising. First of all, phonological environment plays an important role: as shown in Figure 3, speakers raise (e) after velars (as in *get*); and (i), (e) and (æ) are all raised before nasals (as in *bend* or *thanks*), or with spontaneous nasalization of the vowel, as in *actually* /æ^hkʃhli/. Before /l/ and /r/ the front vowels are lowered and backed (as in *fell* /fe^hl/).

Interestingly, three of the same young individuals who received the lowest scores for fronting--the Black speaker, Hispanic speaker, and rural speaker--all displayed the highest scores for raising. The oldest speaker, Bernie, also exhibited high raising scores. For (e), Van Clay separated urban speakers (LA and the Bay Area) from people who grew up elsewhere (smaller towns and cities in California), and found that the urban speakers raise much less than the others. Lowering scores, on the other hand, seem not to be affected by whether the speaker is urban or rural. Note from Figure 4, however, that urban speakers lower more than they raise, while the rural speakers raise more than they lower.

It seems apparent from the findings by Lerner and Van Clay that vowel lowering, while not as dramatic as fronting, is nevertheless present in California, and is especially observable among the same

Figure 3: Environmental effects on raising and lowering

Figure 4: Raising and lowering of (ε) by urban or rural childhood home

group of speakers that front the most-- young middle-class Anglo urban Californians. And although this same group raises front vowels in certain phonological environments, they raise less than rural Californians do.

(ɔ). One widely-noted characteristic of Western American speech is the merger of /ɔ/ and /a/. The Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE) states that there is no /ɔ/-/a/ distinction in the Western half of the United States. In the '50's, David DeCamp (who worked with LAPC and wrote his dissertation on San Francisco speech) wrote, more conservatively: "It is possible that the peculiar use of fronted allophones of /ɔ/ is an indication that this coalescence is beginning in San Francisco." (Decamp, 1953: 555).

It might be expected that this merger, so characteristic of Western speech, would form a distinctive part of the California speech style and would be parodied by Zappa and Goldberg. But findings by Corcoran and Moonwomon indicate that the merger is *not* complete, and while movement of /ɔ/ towards /a/ is indicated, it is not especially vigorous. Furthermore, there is no exaggeration of the (ɔ) variable in the Zappa and Goldberg pieces--their pronunciation of (ɔ) seems to be about the same as natural speech by our subjects.

Moonwomon and Corcoran concentrated on those cases where /ɔ/ variably fronts and lowers.⁴ They found that lowering of /ɔ/ is strongly inhibited when /l/ follows, as shown in Figure 5. Due to the

Figure 5. phonological influences on lowering of (ɔ)

peculiar history of this phoneme, over half of all tokens with the (ɔ) variable are in this environment. Thus phonetically, (ɔ) is alive and well in California, although it may well be on its way toward

redefinition as an allophonic variant of /a/. Nevertheless, even in environments where lowering is not inhibited, scores are quite low, the most extreme speaker receiving an overall score of 100 out of 200.

One interesting finding by Moonwomon was that lowering increases in careful speech: there is more lowering in reading and elicited wordlists than in informal monolog. In Figure 6, lowering scores are shown for 5 speakers, for informal speech (I), reading (R) and elicited words in isolation (E). This finding indicates that the lowered variant is a target toward which speakers are moving. However, this shift is not rapid, and comparison with LAPC findings shows surprisingly little progress from the '50's. (ɔ), then, does not seem to have much significance in the vowel shifts of young Californians. It is an older change in progress, moving quietly along without much speed.

Summary. To recapitulate, we find that among young California speakers, particularly urban middle class Anglos, back vowels are

Figure 6: lowering scores for (ɔ)
for interview, reading,
and elicited words

shifting forward very noticeably; front vowels have raised variants in some phonological environments and lowered variants elsewhere, with lowering not very dramatic, but nevertheless most prevalent in the speech of the people who also front the most. Lowering of /ɔ/ toward /ɑ/ is occurring slowly in the population as a whole, but does not play an important role in the speech of young Californians, nor is it parodied.

Discussion. None of the shifts discussed here are actually limited to California. Fronting of back vowels is reported in Philadelphia (Labov, 1980) and Detroit (Eckert, 1986), as is lowering and backing of /ɪ/ and /e/ (but not /æ/). Eckert further notes that competing movements of front vowels are occurring among the Detroit youth, with a tendency for speakers who might be associated with the middle class to lower more, and a tendency for lower-middle class or working class youths to raise more.

Beyond these geographically specific studies, Labov, Yaeger and Steiner (1972) have established some general principles of vowel shifting that fit the California shifts well: the two relevant principles are (1) in chain shifts, lax vowels usually fall, and (2) back vowels move to the front.

Thus it appears that California is not doing anything particularly unusual. We must wonder if perhaps the youth of California does not have a regionally specific vowel system after all. A deeper comparative study is in order here, to determine whether this chain shift is more extreme in California than elsewhere, or has different characteristics. Eckert (1986) suggests the possibility that the lowering of (ɪ) and (e) in Detroit has spread from the West. To what extent California is leading this shift, if it is leading at all, is not clear.

The only facts we can be certain of at this point are that the vowels are shifting, and that these shifts are perceived to be characteristic of California. It will be very interesting to see, over the next few decades, whether this perception will itself play a role in sound change, by serving as a self-fulfilling prophecy. The chain-shift occurring here in California is so new, that it is not yet possible to determine whether it is a youthful phonological fad like some of the vocabulary that accompanies it, or whether we are really observing sound change in progress.

More interesting yet are the complex attitudes expressed toward

what is perceived as the California speech style. On the one hand, it is the speech of a privileged group of young people-- Anglo, urban, and financially secure. On the other hand, a good deal of ridicule attaches to the speech style, and attitudes expressed both in the parodies and among a number of our subjects associate this speech style with a vapid, irresponsible, hedonistic approach to life. A recent interview on KALX⁵ with a musical group from Seattle demonstrates this attitude:

Arnie: We actually heard a real LA girl talk, a Valley Girl.

Ashley: She said a whole paragraph, and it was amazing. We were standing and staring at her, and I think she thought we were listening to her but really we were just amazed at her "rully" sort of sounds that came out...."

Andrew: It's like some kind of cultural bastardization, y'know it's like it has nothing to do with the English language.

Arnie: Yeah, it's just "mellow cloud, cloud language."

This sort of ridicule suggests the possibility that the sound shifts are stigmatized. On the other hand, Preston's study shows that even though his respondents tend to associate California speech with hot-tubs and Valley girls, when asked to rank the U.S. speech areas in terms of overall correctness, California always comes out on top. The caricatures that all respondents refer to in their characterization of California as a speech area, then, do not indicate stigma at all. On the contrary, California is seen as a center of prestigious speech patterns.

It is quite possible, then, that these new sound shifts will progress along the lines of many other California phenomena, becoming more extreme and spreading geographically. Gerti Thomas, member of the new California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem, put it like this during her defence of the task force against the ridicule being heaped upon it: "We're the leaders. We have great minds thinking above the rest of the world, and people may say, 'There goes California again,' but nine times out of ten the rest of the world follows." (The Tribune, Feb. 9, 1987.)

NOTES

¹Many thanks to Monica Macaulay, who provided us with tapes of Zappa and Goldberg, and found the full references for them.

²Details of their results can be found in unpublished papers by Bremner, Corcoran, Lerner, Luthin, Moonwomon, and Van Clay.

³Names given here are pseudonyms.

⁴They did not look in detail at (ɔ) before /r/, where the vowel appears to be merging with /o/.

⁵Thanks again to Monica Macaulay, who conducted this interview of the musical group Uncle Bonsai, from Seattle, in February 1986. She also provided us with a transcription of the relevant portions.

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