The urban/rural distinction and so much more: Monophthongal (ow) in Minnesota

The study of urban and rural communities as well as comparisons between them in sociolinguistics is not a new avenue of research. Within the U.S., differences in language use based on urban and rural conditioning have been attested in different regions, such as the South and Southwest (e.g. Thomas, 1997; Tillery & Bailey, 2003; Hall-Lew, 2005) and the north (e.g. Ito, 1999; Gordon, 2001; Durian, 2007). In addition to research that has been done to elucidate the urban/rural distinction in linguistic variation and change, the dialogue on growing urbanization and increased mobility has begun in work such as Tillery, Bailey, and Wikle (2004) who propose that demographic changes across the U.S. work partially to change urban/rural distinctions. This study explores these particular topics within issues of language and place through the production of monophthongal (ow) among lifelong residents of the Minneapolis-St. Paul Metropolitan Area, who have experienced increased urbanization in recent history, and a small town north of this metropolitan area, which has a distinct history but has been influenced by modern changes.

The areas of Minnesota in this study belong to the Upper Midwest Dialect region (Allen, 1976) or the North (Labov, Ash, & Boberg, 2006). The production of (ow) in these areas has been described as monophthongal in previous work (Allen, 1976; Thomas, 2001, Rose 2006) and is characterized by a weakened glide in comparison to variants found in other regions, which contributes to its saliency among outsiders to this region. This dialect feature has not received much attention in past sociolinguistic research with one exception being Rose (2006) who found that the production of (ow) showed correlations to gender, education, occupation, and farming culture based on research in a small dairy farming community in Wisconsin, which provides evidence that this regional feature carries social meaning.

Within this study, I revisit this variable with a new approach to its measurement for data collected from sociolinguistic interviews. In an Rbrul linear regression analysis, the data indicates that there is a difference between speakers of the metropolitan area and the small town (N=807, $p = 0.0246$), but this difference does not provide a complete explanation for the production of this vowel and its social conditioning since age ($p = 9.21e-07$), gender ($p = 3.82e-05$), and occupation ($p = 0.00285$) were also contributing factors. Findings also point to a perception of standard and nonstandard speech in which monophthongal productions of (ow) and "sounding Minnesotan" carry some stigma, which is addressed through qualitative observations by the speakers. Additionally, the data suggests that younger speakers in the small town are not monophthongizing (ow) as productively as older speakers, which may imply that they are conforming to the metropolitan speech variety as its influence spreads. While this study shows that the urban/rural distinction as a cultural construct is substantiated, additional social conditioning points to a more nuanced construction of social meaning for these speakers.

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