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Explaining Changes in Register in Middle Tennessee: More Than Just Formality

Introduction

Since the field of linguistics is fundamentally based on the classical grammarian tradition, which evolved to study classical languages, the concepts of formal and informal speech are frequently used to analyze register change in modern languages, such as English, that do not indicate formality structurally. This notion of formal and informal speech, embedded in the traditional Western conceptions of language, stems from the feature of Romance languages (in addition to other European languages, such as Russian and even Finnish) in which different pronouns and verb forms are used for the second person depending on the degree of familiarity between the speaker and the listener; for example, in Spanish one uses *tú* with friends and *usted* with strangers and superiors. However, since English has lost this feature, the literature uses another linguistic feature to fill the slot in the classical grammarian tradition for formality: register change, or the use of differing linguistic varieties in different social settings. According to this model, a standard dialect is spoken around superiors, and a folk dialect is spoken around friends, analogous to the use of different pronouns and verb forms in many European languages.

I hold that the classical model of formality does not aptly describe the nature of register change in Southern English; the comparison with the Romance languages

inherent in the usage of terms such as “formal” and “informal” registers hinders a better understanding of the true factors at work. Instead of considering the shift from a folk dialect to a standard dialect as a measure of formality, I will demonstrate that the causes for such a shift are in fact much more complicated and include more than a single variable. Indeed, if formality is the basis for register change, then the entire register should change as a whole for a given social setting, when in fact phonological features are changed in some circumstances, grammatical in others, and different speakers exhibit either process to different degrees. In place of this rigid model, one can envision a continuum between the nonstandard and standard dialects consisting of phonological and lexical/morphological features that change depending on various social factors, such the speakers’ cultural allegiances, sense of social standing with respect to the listener, and linguistic competence in the given register. While formality is indeed reflected by certain variable elements contained within this system, different speakers, depending on their particular social backgrounds, express formality in different ways, and other social factors at work, such as the shifting cultural elements mentioned above, are obscured by the use of the classical concept of formality.

In place of the model of formality, I propose a model that includes as variables cultural allegiance, perceived social standing, and linguistic competence in the required register, and it is according to these variables that phonological and morphological characteristics change for the given register. Furthermore, I will show that morphological and phonological features, due to their separate perceptions by the speakers themselves, will change independently depending on the setting; phonological changes normally take place with respect to cultural allegiance, and morphological changes take place with

respect to social standing. Linguistic competence, then, is the degree to which a speaker can effect either of these changes for a given register.

Methodology and Previous Research

In this paper, I refer to the dialect of Southern American English spoken in the Eastern Highland Rim region of Middle Tennessee. I chose this language variety because, as a native of this region, I have a personal familiarity with it. Counties in which this dialect is spoken include Franklin, Coffee, Warren, Moore, Cannon, and DeKalb. In particular, I focus on the features that differentiate this dialect from “General American English” (GAE), which is the variety of American English spoken in the national media. Eastern Highland Rim English (from here on referred to as EHRE) bears a close enough resemblance to “Southern Appalachian English” as described by Ellis (2006) and Hazen (2004) to be considered a subdialect of the latter. Indeed, EHRE bears a close resemblance to many of the dialects spoken throughout the southeastern portion of the United States, as well as to those spoken in regions farther to the west of the United States, such as in the Ozark Mountains.

I collected my data in informal interviews or during conversations with informants who had lived their entire lives within my specified region of study. I had access to informants of all ages and from all socioeconomic backgrounds. There was, however, a substantial rate of migration within my specified region, and, for that reason, it is difficult to specify which informants came from which counties; I can, however, estimate that most of my data on the older speakers reflect the language of Warren county in particular, since most of my oldest speakers grew up there and only moved to other

counties later in life. My data on younger speakers are based mostly on informants from Coffee and Franklin counties. During a previous study I found that, while Appalachian English does indeed vary from General American English both phonologically and morphologically, the same speaker may only display these speakers in limited environments. In general, I found that Appalachian English speech characteristics were most likely appear in the speech of older informants, less educated informants, and in informal settings. That said, Appalachian phonological features, such as the monophthongization of /ai/ and the Southern Chain Shift, were much more common in formal setting than Appalachian structural phenomena, such as the conjugation of many strong preterits in GAE as weak preterits in EHRE (e.g., “knowed” in place of “knew”).

Background

Language versus Dialect

In linguistics, the terms "language" and "dialect" are problematic, for there is no clear distinction between the two. In general, a "dialect" is a mutually intelligible variant of a given "language", which is understood to be the prestige dialect of an indefinite number of total dialects. However, the term "dialect" frequently carries the connotation of a corrupted "language", and the prestige dialect is often regarded as the true, pure language. In reality, apart from social prejudices, as no language is the superior of any other, so no dialect is the inferior of any other in expressive capacity. An official dialect carries its prestige by virtue of its speakers' contemporary or historical economic or social prominence, not because of any linguistic purity. Furthermore, "colloquial dialects" do

not necessarily descend from the prestige dialect; in the case of English, for example, GAE, EHRE, and even British English can all be thought of as descending from a common ancestor, and the "colloquial dialects" inherited just as many features from that common ancestor as did the prestige dialects (Schilling-Estes 2006, McWhorter 1998). In order to avoid the unwanted connotations of "language" and "dialect", some linguists prefer to use the term "variety" for both, referring to the prestige dialect as the "standard variety" (Meecham et al. 2001). In this paper, I use "variety" and "dialect" interchangeably to refer both to GAE and EHRE, though GAE is understood to be the prestige variety; however, I consciously avoid the term "language" in order to evade any unwanted connotations it contains, and it must be remembered that, though I refer to "dialects", I do not imply the existence of a pure "language" from which the dialect has been somehow corrupted.

Origin of the Dialect

The majority of residents of the Eastern Highland Rim (and, indeed, of Middle Tennessee in general) trace their ancestry to Great Britain and especially to Ireland and Scotland. As stated by Kennedy (1995), "It is estimated that up to 75 percent of Warren County's early settlers (1800-1840) were of Scots-Irish origin." As most of the region is rural or urbanized only slightly, immigration is marginal, and many families have been living in the same area for several generations (Kennedy 1995, Womack 1969). Since the population is mostly sedentary and has experienced little immigration, it can be presumed that the speech of the modern inhabitants of the Eastern Highland Rim has been affected by the speech of the founder population. With respect to Southern Appalachian English in

general, many features, such as the use of "might could" for "might be able to" and the suffix "un" to form a noun from an adjective, can indeed be contributed to Scots-Irish influence. Other characteristics, however, can be traced to various regions throughout England; Montgomery (2006) holds that Southern Appalachian English and EHRE are perhaps best described as an American mix of various colonial English dialects as opposed to any particular one. It is important to note that EHRE has been in contact with prestige dialects since its genesis, which has both affected how the variety is used and demonstrates that register change is not necessarily indicative of an intermediate level of language assimilation.

Language Contact and Models for Exchange

A discussion of the relationship of EHRE with GAE must be accompanied by a discussion of language contact and change, if for no other reason than to define what exactly is taking place; language change or assimilation must be defined against shifting registers. The linguistic literature contains two classic models on the effects of language contact: transmission and diffusion. While the first refers to language change as a result of random, specific changes within a given speech community through time, the second refers to changes within a speech community as a result of contact with another speech community. In the case of EHRE, both models must be consulted, for, while EHRE has indubitably been affected by contact with GAE through the process of diffusion, the changes that occur, such as the realization of /ai/ as a diphthong, exist in the presence of the more traditional realization as a monophthong. That two separate phonological systems coexist and are emulated by new generations is an example of transmission.

Labov (2007) has attempted to reconcile the existence of two separate models of language change by theorizing that transmission takes place from one generation to the next, i.e., from adults to children, while diffusion takes place between adults, such as when an adult from one region picks up traits of speech of a region to which he or she has migrated. This theory will prove useful when I elaborate the differences between phonological change, which may be attributed to transmission, and morphological/lexical change, which can be attributed to diffusion. In addition, Sankoff (2008) has demonstrated that lexical items are the first to be traded by diffusion; phonological and structural elements then follow after a substantial number of loan words have been adopted. It is worth noting that education in Appalachia is a medium for language diffusion; indeed, even when a morphological element is adopted through education, such as “threw” in place of “throwed,” the speaker considers the new form as a choice between incorrect versus correct *words* rather than a choice between incorrect versus correct *forms* of the same verb. Thus, diffusion takes place in Appalachia by the adoption of lexical items, as is predicted by Sankoff. Language diffusion through education therefore provides an explanation for the use of standard morphological elements to demonstrate social superiority and for the fact that standard morphological elements appear in Appalachia at the same time as lexical elements, as will be important to note later on.

Changes in Register

The literature on register change among American dialects implies a formula with a single variable: formality. Accordingly, a speaker of American English will use what is generalized as a “folk dialect” in informal settings and change linguistic features on a

continuum toward GAE in increasingly formal settings. Joos (1961) goes so far as to expound five specific degrees of formality: “intimate,” “casual,” “consultative,” “formal,” and “frozen.” According to this model, all linguistic features are considered equally, and no further classification is offered besides those categories mentioned above—these are to encompass all the possible extant registers. Other writers, such as Bowie (2001) and Davis (1999) study specific traits of “Southern speech,” the monophthongization of /ai/ and lexical items, respectively, and use these singular features as indicators of formality. What is taken for granted in each case, of course, is that the notion of formality is sufficient for understanding register change and that linguistic features are all equally indicative of such degrees of formality; concomitantly, tracing the social settings in which a single linguistic trait is utilized it thought to shed light on the entire possible range of register change. I have encountered no study that takes linguistic features from different structural levels, such as morphology and phonology, and then seeks to develop a model of register change with multiple variables, which would break from the classical model to provide an original explanation for a phenomenon that is originally English and not to be found in any classical grammatical category.

Explaining Changes in Register in Middle Tennessee

In opposition to the totalizing model of formality to explain changes in register, I propose a system with three variables, which I refer to as “cultural allegiance,” “social standing,” and “linguistic competence,” within which an individual changes specific phonological and morphological features. While a full description of such features is beyond the scope of this work, I will use three phonological features, the Southern

Twang, the Southern Drawl, and the realization of /z/ as a flap before /n/ and nonstandard verb morphology as indicators of variances in the system of changing registers.

The "Southern Twang" refers to the monophthongization of the diphthong /ai/ to [a:] (Ellis 2006). The monophthongization of /ai/ is not, however, absolute in all contexts, and the same speaker may pronounce this phoneme as the full diphthong [ai], as [a:], or as [a] all within the same sentence; all of these realizations may take place in all circumstances and do not affect comprehension. For example, "bite" may be realized as either [bait], [ba;t], or [bat]. In this case, even if "bite" is realized as [ba;t], it does not form a homophone with "bat", since the [a:] is long in the former even though the following consonant is unvoiced; in addition, though [a] does not in itself constitute a separate phoneme from [æ], since it is realized farther back, it helps differentiate the many realizations of /a:/ from /æ/. It does not, therefore, normally produce homophones.

A second feature to which I shall refer is the "Southern Drawl," which refers to the diphthongization of the front vowels /æ/, /e/, and /i/ to [æj], [ej], and [ij], respectively (Hazen et al. 2004). Because of this feature, some monosyllabic words in GAE may be realized as disyllabic in EHRE. For example, "man" may be pronounced as [mejin]. However, while these vowels may be pronounced as two syllables in some circumstances, such realizations appear only in dramatically stressed syllables (such as in animated speech); they are more likely to be realized as the simple monosyllabic glides [æj], [ej], and [ij], respectively. For instance, "He hit him" in EHRE may be realized as [hej hijdim].

The "Southern Drawl" has led to the "Southern Chain Shift" (Hazen et al. 2004), in which the diphthongs containing /e/ and /i/ that result from the "Southern Drawl" are

tensed to [e] and [i], respectively. In compensation, unstressed /i/ and /e/ are laxed to [ji] and [je], respectively. Therefore, "pet" is realized as [pejt], "pit" is realized as [pijt], "Pete" is realized as [pejt], and "late" is realized as [lejt]. Both the "Southern Drawl" and the "Southern Chain Shift" are common among speakers of all backgrounds, though younger, educated speakers only use this pronunciation in informal registers.

The third and final feature to which I will refer in this paper is the use of an alveolar flap [d] in place of /z/ before /n/, such as the pronunciation of the words "isn't," "doesn't," and "wasn't," as "idn't," "doedn't," and "wadn't," respectively.

When I refer to non-standard grammar, I refer to any use of non-standard verb forms. This may take place either in irregular conjugation of verbs in the present, such as "you was" in place of "you were" or the use of "ain't," but is most common in the form of irregular preterits; for example, some verbs that are strong in GAE are weak in EHRE (such as "knowed" in place of "knew"), and some verbs that are weak in GAE are strong in EHRE (such as "drug" in place of "dragged").

Regardless of the sophistication of the models and terminology used by linguists to describe language varieties, speakers of a given variety of course do not think in those conceptualizations. That said, there does exist a popular framework for understanding language, of which all speakers have at least basic knowledge: the Western concept of "grammar," modified from its roots in Latin and Greek. This is the understanding of language that is related through education, and, with this medium in mind, two traits appear that are of interest in this paper. First, the theory of language taught in schools focuses almost entirely on *structure*; pronunciation is rarely considered. Second, "correct grammar" is perceived as the choice of one word over another, even when one choice is

in actuality a morphological variation of the same word. Thus, when speakers are taught that “knew” should be used in formal registers instead of “knowed,” they think in terms of using the correct *word* instead of using the correct *form* of the word. In this way, speakers pick up linguistic features out of the expected order; as discussed in Sankoff (2008), the normal progression of diffusion is lexical items first, phonological features second, and morphological features last—that standard verb morphology appears before phonological features in Middle Tennessee is due to their perception as lexical items.

A second result of education is that certain linguistic features, particularly nonstandard grammatical features (such as nonstandard verb morphology), are regarded as incorrect even in familiar circumstances. Therefore, the use of nonstandard structural features is conceptually attributed to either ignorance or laziness. As I shall address later, this adds a dimension to structural register changes that, though it cannot be attributed entirely to formality, is reminiscent of the classical notion of formality.

Cultural allegiances

By cultural allegiance, I refer to the social connections that a speaker seeks to invoke or distance him or herself from depending on the background of the listener. That is, a speaker will change registers according to cultural allegiances when he or she hopes to emphasize his or her regionality as “Appalachian” or “Southern.” This is the phenomenon that speakers refer to as “dropping” or “picking up an accent.” This “accent” is a manner of talking that falls outside of educational discourse—a speaker can be regarded as well educated by his or her selection of vocabulary and mastery of standard grammar regardless of his or her accent. Therefore, demonstrations of cultural

allegiance usually rely on variances in phonology. Put simply, an EHRE speaker will use Appalachian phonology in circumstances where he or she wishes to emphasize his or her “Southernness” and use more GAE phonology in circumstances where he or she wishes to downplay that “Southernness.”

As an example, I observed one eighteen-year-old young man in his first year of college converse in three separate settings: with friends, with his grandmother, and with a college professor over the phone. If register change were a measure of formality, then one would expect this young man, Carson, to speak with his friends in an informal register and with his grandmother and college professor using a formal register. However, I observed Carson exhibiting the same EHRE phonological system, one which employed a flap in place of /z/ before /n/, when he spoke with both his grandmother and his friends, and the GAE realization of /z/ before /n/ only when he spoke with his professor. In addition, I only observed Carson monophthonging /ai/ to [a:] in both the presence of his grandmother and his friends; when speaking with his professor, Carson used only the GAE diphthong. Thus, one can assume that factors besides formality are at work.

What Carson was emphasizing was his allegiance to the same cultural system as that of his friends and grandmother, who are all natives of the same region. In opposition, when speaking with his professor, Carson used GAE phonology in order to avoid the stigmatization associated with Southern speech as perceived by foreigners, as he had nothing to gain from his cultural ties in such environments. When asked why he spoke to local friends and family with a Southern accent, Carson responded that failure to do so would be “cold,” and when asked why he no longer used a Southern accent when speaking with his professor, he replied, “I don’t want to sound like an idiot.” Thus, the

use of EHRE or GAE phonological features depends on what the speaker stands to gain, either through emphasizing solidarity or denying a background that discloses ignorance by hiding a stigmatized dialect. It should be noted that EHRE phonology is only exchanged for GAE phonology in environments in which speakers are corresponding with people from outside the region; within the region of Middle Tennessee, EHRE phonology is used in all circumstances (if the speaker is capable of replicating it).

As another example, I observed a man in his fifties who spoke to me using a flap for /z/ before /n/, with the monophthongization of /ai/, and with the Southern Chain Shift. He used the same phonological system with customers on his car lot; the only linguistic features that he changed were morphological and lexical (I will discuss this later in full). While his language became more “careful” in my presence, his phonological system was unaltered. However, when a man walked onto the lot who said he was from Ohio, Bob, my informant, used a phonological system noticeably more similar to that in GAE (Interestingly, as I will explain later, his morphology became “lazy”). He spoke, for example, without the Southern Chain Shift and with less frequent monophthongization of /ai/. When I asked Bob why he changed his accent for this particular customer, he reacted with surprise claiming that he did not do so intentionally; when I asked him why he might *want* to change his accent around people from outside the region, he responded, “Well, I don’t want people to think I’m just some dumb hillbilly.” But why not just use GAE phonology all the time? Bob’s response was that people would feel more comfortable buying a car from someone who spoke like them. This exemplifies the change of phonological elements according to the cultural allegiances a speaker has with a listener.

Social standing

By social standing, I refer to a speaker's perceived social standing with relation to either his or her listeners or to an imagined ("lazy") lesser class. This social consideration often corresponds to education, which, as mentioned previously, affects only linguistic items than can be taught as lexical, such as specific morphological forms. In addition, these features are regarded as either "correct" or "incorrect," and the use of incorrect forms is attributed to either ignorance or laziness. Put simply, speakers use GAE morphology when emphasizing their education and, by extension, high social standing, and EHRE morphology when they feel that they can be "lazy" with their speech. The factor of expressing social standing is perhaps most reminiscent of formality as used by classical grammarians.

For example, I observed Carson speak with his grandmother. At one point, Carson made the utterance, "I wouldn't do that if I was him." His grandmother told him that correct usage calls for "were" in place of "was," and Carson apologized. While a degree of formality would be expected when speaking with one's grandparents, as such a change in register would be called according to a classical model of grammar, Carson used a flap in place of /z/ before /n/ and pronounced /ai/ as a monophthong in several instances, which does not correspond to the GAE phonology as would be expected in a formal register according to the academic literature. Indeed, in this environment, while EHRE phonology is expected as a show of allegiance to the same cultural system as the grandmother, "formal" GAE verb morphology is called for, as incorrect usage is regarded as lazy and, therefore, disrespectful, especially in a context in which the speaker has received sufficient education to have learned what is regarded as correct usage.

In another circumstance, I observed Carson speak with friends, during which he used EHRE phonological traits, such as a flap in place of /d/ before /n/ and the monophthongization of /ai/, and nonstandard verb morphology, such as “seen” as the preterit of “saw” and “come” as the preterit of “come.” Once again, such usage is the most closely reminiscent of the classical grammarian notion of formality; in such a setting, “laziness” in speech is a demonstration of a degree of intimacy with the speakers. When I asked Carson why he used “bad grammar” around his friends, he explicitly responded that it would be too formal to do otherwise. Thus, this is the aspect of register change that can be most closely likened to the sense of formality marked morphologically in many European languages.

As a final example, though Bob used EHRE phonological features with everyone from the surrounding region, he used only standard verb morphology with me, whom he regarded as highly educated; this is in contrast with his customers, with whom he habitually used “seen” in place of “saw” and “come” in place of “came.” Interestingly, this even took place when Bob spoke with the man from Ohio; even though Bob used a phonological system closer to that of GAE, he still used nonstandard verb morphology. When I asked Bob why he used “bad grammar” around his customers, he responded that he wanted to sound like a “normal guy” and that “customers will feel more comfortable buying a car from someone who’s friendly.” Thus, using EHRE morphological features around customers discloses a degree of closeness and trustworthiness.

Linguistic competence

Just as not all speakers have the background necessary to emulate “pure” GAE, I would not argue that all speakers are capable of speaking pure Appalachian English. Just as some people have not had enough exposure to General American English to emulate it perfectly, so speakers who come from backgrounds in which a variety very close to General American English is spoken exclusively will not be capable of covering every degree of phonological and morphological change on the continuum of linguistic features toward Appalachian English. Therefore, though all speakers in Middle Tennessee are likely to use differing phonological systems depending on the background that they hope to emphasize or differing morphological features in order to indicate a given degree of comfort or formality, the extent to which those different phonological and morphological systems differ depends on the particular background of each individual speaker.

If cultural allegiance dictates which phonological features are employed in a given social setting; and social superiority, which morphological and lexical features, then linguistic competence refers to an individual’s ability to replicate either EHRE or GAE features, that is, how far that individual can move along the continuum of linguistic variances toward either register. While the most obvious medium through which an individual can learn GAE (thus increasing his or her competence in that register) is education, one must remember that this is not the only medium, nor do I use linguistic incompetence to refer only to an individual’s partial ability to emulate GAE. Indeed, an individual placed in a setting that calls for an Appalachian register may not have the background in EHRE to fully emulate its phonological or morphological systems. That said, I observed that most speakers, especially younger ones, were capable of emulating both phonological and morphological systems rather extensively; therefore, most

speakers were capable of effecting at least some phonological changes depending on the cultural background they wished to emphasize and at least some morphological changes in order to indicate social standing or formality, though different speakers did so to different degrees.

For example, the phonological system that Carson demonstrated in the presence of his friends and grandmother exhibited an alveolar flap in place of /z/ before /n/ and the occasional monophthongization of /ai/; however, he very rarely exhibited the Southern Chain Shift. Indeed, even in registers where he wished to convey an allegiance to his regional identity, he did not use what might be considered a “pure” Appalachian phonological system. Similarly, while he did use some nonstandard verb forms in “lazy” or informal settings, he only very rarely used “ain’t” or used a weak preterit where standard usage calls for a strong one. For instance, even among friends he never used “knowed” for “knew” or “catched” for “caught,” as would be expected in “pure” EHRE. Thus, Carson’s speech, though it did change both phonologically and morphologically depending on the register, never exhibited fully EHRE features—his linguistic competence in the register was incomplete.

As another example, Bob demonstrated a more complete competence in EHRE, but less competence in GAE. He spoke to me using all three of the Appalachian phonological features I traced in this study: the substitution of an alveolar flap for /z/ before /n/, the monophthongization of /ai/, and the Southern Chain Shift. However, though the phonological system that he used with the man from Ohio did change to include more frequent monophthongs where the Southern Drawl might have been expected in EHRE, he could not replicate a fully GAE phonological system, and the other

features remained unchanged; he did not have full linguistic competence in GAE and therefore could not emulate the phonological features inherent in that language variety in the registers that called for it. In addition, even when he used more careful verb morphology in my presence, such as using strong preterits as they appeared in GAE, he still used nonstandard forms such as “ain’t”—once again indicative of what I call incomplete linguistic competence in the targeted variety. His particular register in a given setting was therefore different, however slightly, from that of Carson even though both are natives of the same region because of the differing linguistic competences of each.

Conclusions

In the above, I have attempted to demonstrate that changes in register in Middle Tennessee between GAE and what I have called EHRE cannot be attributed entirely to a system of formality comparable to that in many European languages, as is often implicitly indicated in the academic literature by using such terms. Instead, I have proposed a model of register change that alters specific linguistic elements depending on multiple variables, such as the cultural allegiance and social standing of the speaker in relation to the listener, which are additionally influenced by the extent of a speaker’s background in each register. Thus, while formality may indeed play a part in the register chosen by the speaker, it does not account for every perceptible linguistic alteration.

Furthermore, according to this model, a given register does not so easily fit into any number of hierarchical “speech levels,” for the presence of multiple variables makes the possibility of such a paradigm impractical. Therefore, there is no apparent useful application for the notion of structurally-marked formality, as is seen in the Romance

languages in addition to other European languages that have influenced the mainstream, classical linguistic model; indeed, even those models that stretch the classical concept using more than only two levels of formality are revealed as inadequate. As there is no specific structural marker in English that signifies formality, forcibly fitting phenomena such as register change is unproductive. Although the model I have produced in this study is tentative and is not intended to represent in exhaustive totality a model that accurately describes every element of register change in Middle Tennessee, it does demonstrate that the classical model of register change contingent upon a single variable is at best inadequate, if not entirely specious.

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