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# Accommodative Tendencies in Multidialect Communication

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Malcah Yaeger-Dror<sup>2</sup>**

Articles in this volume examine accommodation within the context of dialect contact. While dialect change and dialect contact have been dealt with extensively elsewhere, this special issue consolidates ongoing work in sociophonetics as a means of testing conflicting concepts of the social psychology and sociophonetics of intergroup communication. In particular, the authors address accommodation in discourse settings to local or to nonlocal (global) features.

This issue expands on work initiated with the Speech group at MIT/Lincoln Labs, which focused on comparing given local koinés with the speech of demographically equivalent local African American speakers. We would like to thank that group as well as Erik Thomas, who has helped provide mentoring and NORM support to the authors of the first publication based on symposia held at the 2007 and 2008 annual meetings of the Linguistic Society of America (PADS 94: Yaeger-Dror & Thomas 2010). Thanks also to the authors of those PADS papers and to the authors of this volume for their careful analyses. The format of these articles is close enough to those in the PADS 94 volume so that different urban analyses are meaningfully comparable. We also received invaluable feedback from an anonymous reviewer and from the journal editors, whose patience has been unbounded.

Underlying this collection of articles is a particular understanding of the emerging body of research on social interaction (Sacks [1968] 1992; Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks 1977) and communicative accommodation theory (Giles 1973). It is well established that speakers are keenly aware of the need for social agreement between speaker and listener and that while conversations tend to be supportive, they also reflect remedial actions between participants (Goffman 1971), which social psychologists refer to as convergent and divergent language use (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland 1991). Speakers may use one measurable variant to index a specific identity ("referee design")

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or to demonstrate affinity with speakers' interlocutors ("audience design"; Bell 2001). Such convergence or divergence provides a nuanced picture of speakers' behavior: Bell (1984) and Coupland (1984) found that speakers may adopt or affect new linguistic patterns with the level of convergence mediated by the demographic background of the immediate interlocutor, the amount of contact with the group(s), and the degree of affinity with those groups.

One method used to tease apart multiple affiliations has been to examine variables that are local compared to those that are more regionally global. Using this methodology, African American English (AAE) speakers can be shown generally to contrast at least one or more locally salient vowel variants with one or two salient features indexing broader ethnic identity (Wolfram 2007; Yaeger-Dror & Thomas 2010). The vowel comparisons relevant to the studies here appear in articles about rural Louisiana (Wroblewski, Strand, & Dubois 2010), St. Louis (Majors & Gordon 2008), and New York City (Becker 2009; Cogshall & Becker 2010). Taking all these studies as a whole, we observe a general pattern whereby no one feature is universally chosen to index ethnic or local identity.

The articles in this volume use slightly differing field methods to focus on how speakers mediate their relation with others across group boundaries. As Milroy's (e.g., [1980] 1987) work has demonstrated, speakers maintain affiliation with several social groups and reveal their linguistic affiliation with these different groups by converging toward one audience or diverging from that audience to demonstrate group affiliation. Signaling multiple affiliations is often a fluid process, and we should be careful not to assume that all variables will covary in support of a single linguistic identity or audience. Each of the articles in this special issue demonstrates its relevance to a specific corpus being analyzed and to the expanding field of sociophonetic accommodation.

One difference in methodology is that several articles consider the age of the speakers and their embedding in the youth linguistic "market" as compared to the adult market. While as early as 1968 Labov carried out a thorough study of members of a New York City "youth culture" (Labov et al. 1968), it is the work of Thibault (1983, 2003) and Eckert (1989) and her students that emphasizes that teenagers are on the border between two sets of group memberships and linguistic markets. Alim (2009:104) adds to our understanding of this youth marketplace, claiming that we should consider "the simultaneity of multiple layers of identification." That is, young speakers' identities should be viewed as nested in situations simultaneously marked by change and diversity. Teens' unique position leads them to specific linguistic choices and sets of memberships that may not be overlapping and may have different rules of socioindexicality. Consequently, the linguistic choices of teenagers and young adults are of necessity even more fluid than those of adults, and younger speakers are less restricted in their linguistic choices. Within this volume, articles by Cecilia Cutler, by Douglas Bigham, and by Renée Blake and Cara Shousterman analyze the sociophonetic behavior of teens in calibrating speech to local, reference group, or more global norms.

The Bigham article focuses primarily on socioindexical choices expressing regional rather than ethnic identity within a college community. This article is particularly

innovative in its attempt to determine how rural youths' realization of particular vowels reflects their developing sense of identity, showing that phonological patterns can still be manipulated in late adolescence by those who wish to identify with a more dominant, local norm. Convergence is toward the locally prestigious out-group whose members form part of their community. Bigham demonstrates that it is not necessarily the number of speakers encountered, time interacting, or tokens of a given variable heard that is important but one's own sense of community that influences the linguistic choices. While Bigham's focus is on the linguistic choices of emerging adults, the articles by Blake and Shousterman and by Cutler show that within a given youth culture teenagers may "try on" specific identities inconsistent with their actual ethnicity—which may be rejected when the speakers join the adult linguistic market (Eckert 2000; Thibault 1983).

AAE has figured prominently in linguists' understanding of accommodation and multiple identities. Two foci of sociophonetic analysis of U.S. interracial accommodation have been postvocalic *r*-lessness and vowel phonology, both of which are discussed in this special issue, even by articles not directly studying AAE. In earlier studies, researchers felt that maintaining so-called *r*-less (as opposed to *r*-ful) patterns in AAE reflected divergence not only from the National Vernacular English (NVE) but from Local Vernacular English in formerly *r*-less Southern areas. Thus, the broader *r*-ful pattern may supersede the local pattern for the non-African American members of the community (Feagin 1990; Flood 2002).

The article by Thea Strand, Michael Wroblewski, and Mary Good investigates postvocalic /*r*/ variation in rural Louisiana, studying the *r*-ful, *r*-less, and diphthongal alternations of *schwar*. Their examination of Creole (African American), Cajun, and Native American Houma male speech patterns reveals significant ethnic, age, and education level variation and delayed accommodation to the dominant NVE by the oldest and poorest Creole speakers. The analysis provides evidence that in a highly segregated rural community, the oldest Creole men are less likely to accommodate to newer *r*-ful norms than their Cajun or Houma peers, and they retain an older coastal realization of the *schwar* vowel as [ $\wedge^Y$ ] before a consonant in words such as *bird* or *nurse*. The younger speakers all appear to be converging on the supraregional *r*-ful target whatever their ethnic background. Of course, the fact that overall *r*-fulness is increasing even in the sparsely settled Louisiana bayous is consistent with Trudgill's thesis (Chambers & Trudgill 1980) that the American geographical sprachbund is leading to greater *r*-fulness even in very rural Southern areas.

The degree to which identification with the hip-hop community may influence use of /*r*/ is discussed in both Blake and Shousterman (St. Louis) and Cutler (NYC). In the latter case, this accommodation takes place despite the fact that there may not be much actual contact between the would-be group member and the group whose speech is being emulated. Both of these articles appear to attribute the use of hip-hop-flavored /*r*/ to referee-designed accommodation; /*r*/ realizations are manipulated to index both ethnic and musical genre identities.

Blake and Shousterman also provide a diachronic analysis of *schwar* realizations in the AAE spoken in St. Louis and Memphis. While many believe that this linguistic

feature is a product of hip-hop, the authors provide apparent time evidence that the reduction of reduction of these instances to *schwar* has long been prevalent throughout the region. They also focus on the extent to which the hip-hop ideology values and fosters an emphasis on locally indexical and supralocal hip-hop features simultaneously.

The Cutler article examines accommodation by four young speakers who are white and either foreign-born or second-generation immigrants. Cutler shows that these speakers' wish to present themselves as members of the "hip-hop nation" (Alim 2009) is buttressed with linguistic *bona fides* from vernacular New York ethnic dialects. Her evidence reveals that all indexical variables are not varying in tandem, but all are shown to be implemented to varying degrees by each of the speakers. A perceptual component to Cutler's study demonstrates that the speaker with the highest percentage of sociophonetic and syntactic indexical variants is not necessarily perceived as most racially marked, suggesting that the features that are most salient to even a New York City college audience are not necessarily those salient within the in-group community itself. In addition, Cutler's perception results reveal that a given supsalient feature can alter listener conclusions.

Dominic Watt, Carmen Llamas, and Daniel Ezra Johnson's article demonstrates complex patterns of systematic intergroup linguistic variation taking place in a Scots-English border area. The authors were interested in seeing if the type of variation could be correlated with the linguistic level, but their evidence shows that both sociophonetic variation and lexical choice can reflect similar patterns of accommodation caused by their salience as a marker of local dialect, rather than by their linguistic status. Watt, Llamas, and Johnson analyze the speech of a Scottish woman interviewing men from the border region between Scotland and England and find her to be most successful in accommodating to her interviewees' speech with variables that are salient markers of Scottish identity, while not adopting the coda-/r/ realization of her interviewees. The authors reveal a very high level of accommodation by the interviewer, and they emphasize that perception studies will permit researchers to correlate the locally perceived "salience" with the degree of actual accommodation of a given variable to the speech of interlocutors. Their work demonstrates very clearly that both the social significance of a variable and its degree of variability influence the likelihood of identity-focused convergence.

This study, along with the companion analysis by Llamas, Watt, and Johnson (2009), provides evidence that manner of /r/-articulation does not merely reflect identity-free accommodation but may provide further evidence that manner of articulation is manipulable to index speakers' sense of local identity. As with Cutler, the comparison of features from different levels of linguistic analysis permits us to see if one level of linguistic change is favored as a locus of identity-free accommodation while another is more versatile. The analysis reveals that change is more likely to occur in less stable forms rather than in more stable ones, reinforcing conclusions drawn by Auer and Hinskens (2005) that no one linguistic "level" and no articulatorily "easy" choices are evident.

In each community examined in this special issue, speakers of a nondominant (e.g., African American, rural or more local) dialect vary their degrees of convergence to the local or the dominant norm while displaying at least one nonconverging feature. Both

referee and audience design evidence is presented beside identity-free accommodation to geographic “speech norms.” Within one speech community there may appear to be a consensus on one set of features for indexing a specific identity, but as Cutler shows that identity may not be recognized even by age-equivalent locals who are not members of the specialized community of practice. We hope these studies, along with papers in a special issue of *American Speech* (Yaeger-Dror & Purnell 2010), demonstrate that a more nuanced analysis of variation is a matter of immediate concern to sociolinguistic theory.

We dedicate this volume to the inspiration of William Labov and Howard Giles, without whose work these studies would have been impossible, and to our families who have made do—not always without complaint—while our attention has been directed elsewhere.

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