

Composite on Two Levels: The Case of Obstruent Devoicing in Pennsylvania Dutchified English

Composite linguistic systems arise in speech communities which use two (or more) language varieties when aspects of each variety mutually exert linguistic “pressure” on the other variety; the effects of such bidirectional influence between language varieties results in something quite distinct from simple unidirectional transfer effects. Often, in cases like this, speakers reach some kind of linguistic compromise between a linguistic feature’s realization in the two varieties, thus creating new norms of realization which are exactly like those of neither language variety. The phonology and phonetics of obstruent voicing/devoicing in Pennsylvania Dutchified English (PDE), a little-studied dialect spoken in southcentral Pennsylvania, show the formation of just such a composite system, with clear bidirectional influence traceable to both (Pennsylvania) German and to American English. On the phonological level, influence from Pennsylvania German is clear in that PDE has incorporated the well-known German feature of syllable-final obstruent devoicing (e.g., “dog” = [dɔk]); however, PDE devoices obstruents in a much wider variety of phonological environments (for example, obstruents in onset position in an unstressed, word-internal syllable are also devoiced: “habit” = [hæ.ɸɪt]) and only allows obstruents to preserve voicing when they occur at the left edge of a metrical foot (e.g., “habitual” = [hæ.bɪ.tʃu.əl]). This “strong” prosodic context where voicing is preserved is, not so coincidentally, the same environment in which American English applies aspiration (Davis and Anderson 2003). At the phonetic level, PDE also shows a compromise between German and American English in its treatment of obstruents: PDE obstruents occurring in “weak” positions (i.e., not at the left edge of a metrical foot) do not show evidence of the same kind of tinkering with the ratio of the duration of the obstruent in question in comparison to the duration of its preceding vowel that has been documented for German (Port and O’Dell 1985) and English (Port and Dalby 1982) in order to cue voicing/devoicing. Instead, PDE relies on cues from obstruent duration alone. In light of this data, this paper argues that a working model of language contact and shift for this particular speech community must necessarily take into account these traces of bidirectional transfer effects and the resulting development of a composite system.

REFERENCES

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