Marietta, Ohio: Speech Island or Sociocultural "Oasis"?

1.0 Abstract

After collecting phonological and lexical data via interviews with 5 older residents of Marietta, Thomas Clark (1970) compared that data with Guy Lowman's data from an interview with a Marietta resident thirty years earlier. Overall, Clark concluded that Marietta was a New England speech island that had been surrounded by South Midland speech. Features of South Midland speech, in turn, were being replaced with "northern" features as Midland influence became more prominent.

Although Clark's work has proven invaluable, several inconsistencies within his study, as well as between his and other studies (Kurath & McDavid, Jr., 1961; Hartman, 1966), call for a closer analysis of the data. Indeed, when Clark's work is viewed with the benefit of knowledge gleaned from sociolinguistic inquiries and historical studies over the past 40 years, patterning that puzzled Clark becomes clarified. Specifically, rather than competition between New England and South Midland features of speech, the linguistic diversity Clark observed may be better interpreted as variation aligned to social variables such as the subjects' ages, genders, educational levels, degree of social integration and level of involvement with literary styles of speech.

Thus, the aim of this paper is to offer an alternative interpretation of the Marietta speech island. By examining the subject profiles, providing a deeper historical analysis and reviewing linguistic data on consonant and vowels, I aim to justify the possibility that Marietta may be a sociocultural, rather than a speech island.