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A majority sound change in a minority community

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1. Introduction

Many of the important theoretical developments in sociolinguistics have come from the study of majority communities, particularly from studies of speakers of Anglo ethnicity in urban settings. The study of variation in minority communities, however, is making increasingly significant contributions to the field. A logical sociolinguistic question is whether minority groups have any role in the sound changes characteristic of the majority community. Many sociolinguistic studies focusing on more than one ethnic group have reported that minority groups do not participate in the same local sound changes as Anglo speakers (Labov 1966; Labov and Harris 1986; Bailey and Maynor 1987). And Labov (1994:157) suggests that ethnic minority speakers are not oriented to the local vernacular development at all, but are instead oriented to a national pattern of koine formation within the nonwhite groups. However there are some studies that do show the use of local dialect features by minority speakers, such as Poplack 1978.

This study will focus on a group of Latino young adults between 15 and 32 years of age who mostly live in a single region of western Los Angeles. Many of them attend Westside Park (a pseudonym), the local continuation school for students who have had learning or disciplinary problems at the regular high school. I conducted sociolinguistic interviews in English with the monolingual English speakers, and in both English and Spanish (which I also speak natively) with the bilingual speakers. The data presented here focus only on the English of these young adults, which is a variety of the dialect known as Chicano English. The main question I will address is whether the features of the California Anglo Dialect play any role in the Chicano English of Los Angeles.
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time with.” It often applies to people who have family in gangs, who grew up as friends of the gang members, or who want to be in the gang.

An example of someone in this category is Reina, who has a brother in the Culver City gang. She told a revealing story about a time when she was almost shot by members of a rival gang who stopped her and her brother when they were driving through another area of the city. In the narrative Reina tells the gang members that she isn’t “from anywhere,” clearly indicating that she is not herself a gang member. And yet through her brother, she is affiliated with the gang and is involved in gang-related incidents such as this one. Her narrative appears in Appendix A. Another important subset of the people who know gang members is the group known as wanna-bes, such as David and Chuck, who are not gang members, but hang around with them and hope to be jumped in, i.e., initiated into the gang.

In contrast to people who know gangsters, there are those who have, and want to have, no association whatsoever with the gangs. In many places, young adults are by default not gang members because that choice would never present itself in their community. However, all the speakers I interviewed have had to make a choice determining whether or not they would be a gang member. I stress this point because I believe that the social category of “gang status” is as much a part of the linguistic identity constructed by the non-gang members, as it is for the cholos themselves. Linguistic behavior aimed at maintaining group boundaries comes from those outside as well as from those inside the group.

2.2. Non-gang Groups

The students who have rejected the gangs are generally more traditional in behavior and more law-abiding. The non-gang group, however, also includes the taggers, known mainly for creating graffiti, who are often anti-social. Nonetheless, taggers have no connection with the gang members or gang activities, and are perceived in the community as completely separate from the gangs.

Distinct from gang-related identity, although sometimes intersecting with it, is the category of parent or mom. This is not a category that one would assume a priori to be important among high school students. I knew that at Westside Park there would be students who had babies, and there is an infant care center at the school itself, which allows students with babies to continue going to class. But the mom identity was used as part of a description of an individual much more frequently than I expected. Though there may be additional categories at Westside Park that I was not able to observe, these were the most salient.

3. /u/-fronting in English

In order to address the question of whether these speakers are participating in sound changes characteristic of California, it is essential to know something about the English of the majority Anglo community. Hinton et al. 1987 compared a sample of young native Californian speakers with dialect materials from early in the century and from the 1950’s. They looked at several vowel variants, one of which is the fronting of /u/. They found that all of the vowels in the study had shifted in California since the early data were collected. My own interviews with young Anglo speakers from Los Angeles also show evidence of the variables mentioned in Hinton et al., with /u/-fronting being particularly salient.

To check for the presence of /u/-fronting among the Latino young adults, I did a preliminary analysis in which I collected tokens of four peripheral vowels in English: /i/, /u/, /æ/ and /a/, for 32 of the speakers. Using spectrographic data generated by an Autocorrelation analysis of speech samples, I took measurements of the first and second formant frequencies (F1 and F2) for each vowel token.

There was a great deal of variation in the location of /u/ on the F2 axis among the speakers. A comparison of two individual speakers can be used to illustrate the extremes of this variation. Ramon (Figure 1) shows a high level of /u/-fronting, while Avery (Figure 2) shows no significant fronting at all. Some of Ramon’s tokens are so far front as to overlap with his /i/ space,
One of the significant findings in the study is that at least some of the Latino speakers, for example, Ramon, are participating in a sound change that characterizes the California Anglo community.

In the main part of the analysis, I begin by looking only at the most favorable contexts for fronting: preceding alveolar stops and preceding palatals. The /u/-fronting variable involves both.

change observable in the majority community. Not to be overlooked in the general discussion, however, is the striking fact that at least some of the Latino speakers, e.g., Ramon, are taking part in a sound change that characterizes the California Anglo community.

quantitative analysis of the variable.

while all of Avery's tokens remain well back, none of them, for example, while showing little correlation in the general population, the data show a strong relationship between /u/-fronting /u/ and /a/ in the vowel space. Since /u/ and /a/ are diagonally opposite in the vowel space, they can be used together to normalize for differences in the sizes of the speakers' vocal tracts. For each speaker, I took the mean of their individual /u/ and /a/ tokens, and I calculated the degree of /u/-fronting.

The Pearson correlation coefficient is .78, p < .001, showing a strong relationship between the two measures (the Pearson correlation coefficient between the two fronting measures is .78, p < .001, and significant variation among the speakers of this community, I have included two Anglo speakers of the majority community). The chart shows a correlation for 4 of the speakers in the study. The chart shows a correlation for 4 of the speakers in the study. Figure 3 presents these values graphed each other.

Figure 3 presents these values graphed each other.
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Social Class

4.1. Bilinguals and Monolinguals

One of the most salient linguistic facts about this group of speakers

Before identifying the social factors that correlate with this
evaluation of which speakers sound like they have fronted /u/

The distribution generally correlates well with my own auditory

4.2. Social Class

Figure 4 shows the same /u/-fronting data with the speakers

is that some of them are bilingual and some of them are

is that some of them are bilingual and some of them are

socially ranked within the community, such as whether

on the basis of factors relevant to the community, such as whether

5.0

3.75

2.5

1.25

0.0

4.6

4.1. Social Categories and /u/-Fronting

If one of the factors that correlates with /u/-fronting is social

Before identifying the social factors that correlate with this

4.1. Bilinguals and Monolinguals

One of the most salient linguistic facts about this group of speakers

Before identifying the social factors that correlate with this
5. Interactions Among Social Factors

5.1 Interacting Social Factors and the Role of Gender

In addition to social class, gender is another salient factor that can influence language use. The chart in Figure 5 shows the relationship of gender to /u/-fronting, superimposed on the social class context. It reveals a trend where males tend to front /u/ more frequently than females, especially in lower social classes. This difference could be attributed to various factors, such as social norms or group affiliations.

4.2 Gang Status

Gang membership is another important factor in the study of /u/-fronting. Figure 5 superimposes the relationship of gang membership on the social class and gender variables. It indicates that gang members tend to front /u/ less than non-gang members, possibly due to the influence of group norms or external pressures.

4.3 Significant Findings

The analysis of /u/-fronting shows several significant findings:

- A positive correlation between /u/-fronting and lower social class.
- A negative correlation between /u/-fronting and higher social class.
- A decrease in /u/-fronting among females compared to males.
- A reduction in /u/-fronting among gang members compared to non-gang members.

These findings highlight the complex interplay of social factors in shaping language use.
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In the next section of the paper, I will show that men and women have different social constraints, parallel to the way linguistic constraints on a rule might be ordered differently in two communities. This result is significant as it shows that gender plays a crucial role in the social aspects of sound change. Interestingly, Sylviashows an even higher degree of fronting than Helena, the Anglo speaker. Many of these women were from lower socio-economic groups, a factor which in Figure 4 appeared to have a negative effect on fronting generally. However, for the gang-affiliated women, social class determines how much they front. Gang members with lowersocio-economic status fall at the bottom of the chart. Those with middle class status fall high on the chart. Table 6 shows the degree of \( u \)-fronting for speakers separated by sex and linked to show how the social factors intersect.

In sum, then, social class does not affect \( u \)-fronting for non-gang women, who all show some degree of fronting. But for gang-affiliated women, working class and low income speakers were combined as "working class," since this group showed a higher level of \( u \)-fronting. The speakers who were gang members themselves or who knew gang members also showed a higher level of \( u \)-fronting. The speakers who were non-gang members and knew gang members also showed a higher degree of \( u \)-fronting. However, for the gang-affiliated women, social class determines how much they front. Those with lower social status show a lower level of \( u \)-fronting, while those with middle social status show a higher level of \( u \)-fronting. Figure 6 shows the degree of \( u \)-fronting for gang-affiliated women, with social class and gang status labeled on the chart.
In looking next at the male speakers, it will become evident that the effect of gender is also clearly delineated, though it cannot be seen from a simple correlation with the linguistic variable. Figure 7, showing the men only, looks superficially very different from Figure 6, particularly as regards the group of highest fronters. The top 5 women /u/-fronters, for example, were mixed with respect to social class. But all of the top 6 men are from the middle class group, except for Richard, the Anglo speaker. The social class factor shows a significant correlation with /u/-fronting for men as a group, but not for women as a group. On the other hand, non-gang status does not have the same strong effect for men that it had for women. All the non-gang status women were in the high /u/-fronting region of the chart. For men, however, the non-gang factor is tied to social class. The non-gang men who are also middle class are the highest fronters, but those in the working class group, like Roberto, fall at the middle or low end of the /u/-fronting scale.

Diagram A: The Interaction of Social Factors in /u/-fronting
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There are other ways in which men and women differ regarding the ordering of social correlates of the linguistic variable. The effect of gang affiliation is much stronger for men. Gang-affiliated women had more or less fronting depending on their social class. However, none of the male gang members appears in the top part of Figure 7 (comparable to Amanda in Figure 6); this could be attributed to the fact that there are no middle class male gang members in the sample. However, there are two gang-affiliated speakers who belong to the middle class group, David and Chuck. These two speakers pattern with the gang members, in the lower part of the chart.

Generally, then, the men and the women show orderings of these two social factor groups (social class and gang status) that are mirror images of each other. Diagram A gives a visual representation of the ordering and interactions of social factors as they correlate with /u/-fronting. For women, non-gang status correlates consistently with a high degree of /u/-fronting. But within the group of women connected to the gangs, social class determines whether the speaker exhibits a higher or lower degree of /u/-fronting. For the men, gang affiliation correlates consistently with relatively low /u/-fronting. Within the non-gang group, social class determines the degree of /u/-fronting.

6. Implications

One intriguing result of this research is the fact that /u/-fronting, a sound change in progress in California, shows a pattern of social distribution in the Latino community that does not fit the traditional curvilinear pattern. In the studies of “untargeted” sound change done on majority communities, the interior social classes lead the change, as summarized in Labov (1994:156):

The pattern now seems clear, at least for cities in the United States. In the course of change from below, the most advanced vowel systems are found among younger speakers: young adults and youth in late adolescence. Furthermore, these innovators are found among “interior groups” - that is, groups centrally located in the class hierarchy. In terms of social class labels, this means the upper working class and lower middle class...

In an earlier section Labov (1994: 62) notes that “the occupational groups with highest and lowest social status disfavor the changes in progress”. However, in the Chicano English speaking community of Los Angeles we find that the group with the highest /u/-fronting includes women from both middle class backgrounds and very low socioeconomic backgrounds. This is partly due to the strong effect of non-gang status on /u/-fronting. Yet even the effect of gang status, which showed a stronger statistical correlation with the variable than social class, can only be understood completely when it is taken in conjunction with the other factors of gender and social class.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest some possible explanations for the differences in the ordering of constraints between men and women. In particular, non-gang status has a very high impact on fronting for all women, and for middle class men, but not for working class men. Why? It may be that the situation is parallel to that of adolescents in the Detroit area (“jocks” and “burnouts”), as reported by Eckert (1987:106-108). She notes that social pressure related to gender can conflict with social category membership:

Girls are still expected to be 'good' in other ways - to be friendly and docile... Boys, on the other hand, are expected to be physically powerful and able to defend themselves... Just as the jock boys are caught between conservative corporate social norms and 'tough' gender norms, burnout girls are caught between 'tough' urban norms and conservative gender norms.

In the study of /u/-fronting in Los Angeles, use of the variable is associated more with middle class membership and non-gang speakers. Non-use is associated more with working class membership and gang-affiliated speakers. For women, the societal standards that pressure them to be “good” etc. dovetail well with non-gang status, and also with the conservative norms of middle class membership. This makes it easier for even those women who are from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds to use language
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norms associated with the middle class group, and also suggests
why female gang members might front if they were from the

However, society—and this is maximally true of Latino
society—pressures to be "tough," to defend themselves
physically, etc. Since gang membership emphasizes exactly these
sorts of qualities, it may be more difficult for Latino men to
express their disassociation from the gang linguistically than it is
for women, even among men who have made a clear choice
not to be gang members. When these men are also middle class,
the pressure to sound "tough" is even greater. Therefore, it is

Appendix A: Reina's narrative

"Me and my brother, we almost got shot.

"Because we went to drop off his girlfriend at work."

"The older one."

"We stopped at a red light."

"It was in Santa Monica, then some gangsters from Santa Monica stopped us."

"He had the gun."

"And he kept asking me if I was from Culver City, and I told him no."

"Then my brother goes, 'You know what? At least— if you don't respect me, at least
respect my sister.' He goes, 'You're the one I want to get.'"

"And they just stopped, and they were like, 'Naaa, nah, it's all right, it's cool, it's
cool.' And then they were like, 'We're gonna let you go, just don't tell anybody this
happened.'"

"And they were about to shoot, but like, my brother told them, you know,
don't disrespect my sister."

"And they left, but like, before I would, urn...."

"The time they used to tell me I used to look like a gangster...

"Before and keep asking me if I was from Culver City."

"And I said, 'I'm not gonna give you my number after you tried to shoot me.' And then

References

By some like gangs."

I used to look like a gangster." Before, and I used to get teased."

Before I would talk about it— I look like they used to tell me

he goes, 'Oh, I'm sorry.' I'm sorry, and then later. But like, to.

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