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Beckie Moriello

Walt Wolfram

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New dialect formation in the rural South: Emerging Hispanic English varieties in the mid-Atlantic

New Dialect Formation in the Rural South: Emerging Hispanic English Varieties in the Mid-Atlantic¹

Beckie Moriello and Walt Wolfram

1 Introduction

Although stable Hispanic populations have existed in some regions of the United States for centuries now (Peñalosa 1980, Fought 2003), rural regions in the Mid-Atlantic South are just beginning to witness the emergence of core Hispanic communities. For example, between 1990 and 2000, North Carolina experienced a higher percentage of growth in its Latin American population than any other state. This status is partly due to the fact that North Carolina, like much of the Southeast and some states in the Midwest, started out the decade with relatively few Hispanics compared to the rest of the country. During the last decade, more than 100,000 new Hispanic residents have moved to North Carolina from Mexico, El Salvador, and other countries in Central and South America. Many of the new residents who come directly from their country of origin have acquired English exclusively in the context of their new surroundings. Though some of the children in these communities now have been born and reared in the United States, Spanish is still their native language and the dominant language for communication in the community.

The development of new Hispanic communities in the Southeast United States raises a number of important questions about the development of varieties of English. Who are the immigrants learning their primary English from and how does this affect the emerging English language variety? Is a new, regionally defined ethnic variety of Hispanic English developing in these settings? Do new Latino/a residents accommodate the local dialect traits of their cohort English-speaking communities, and if so, which community? What aspects of the local dialect are most prominent in their speech and how are they combined with other constellations of English language structures? Does the variety of English show a persistent substrate from

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Spanish transfer and fossilized interlanguage features? These kinds of new contact situations offer a unique opportunity to examine the process of ethnic dialect formation and dialect accommodation in its incipient stages in a localized, regional dialect setting.

2 The Case of Siler City

We examine some of the issues associated with the emergence of new Hispanic communities in the Mid-Atlantic South by focusing on Siler City, North Carolina, a relatively small, rural community located in the Piedmont. Siler City is situated between larger urban areas such as Raleigh and Durham and Charlotte, as indicated on the map in Figure 1. It is about 50 miles west of Raleigh, 40 miles southwest of Durham, and 80 miles northeast of Charlotte. The map given in Figure 1 also indicates sites of some of the regional dialects recently studied by the staff of the North Carolina Language and Life Project (e.g. Hazen 2000; Mallinson and Wolfram 2002; Wolfram, Hazen, and Schilling-Estes 1999; Wolfram and Thomas 2002; Wolfram, Dannenberg, Knick, and Oxendine 2002) that provide a broader basis for dialect comparison.

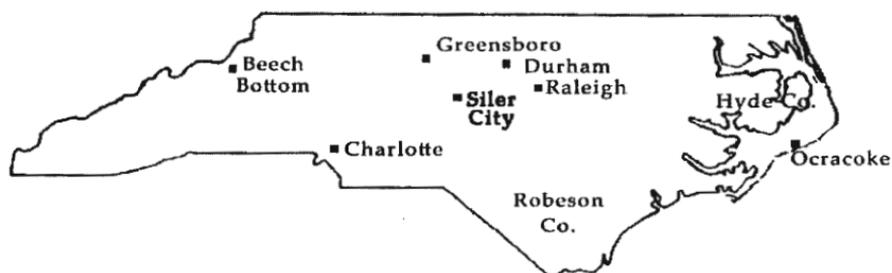


Figure 1. Location of Siler City

In 1990, Siler City was a small rural area of approximately 5,000 residents, 70 percent white, 27 percent African American, and 3 percent Hispanic. Within a ten-year period, the population has rapidly grown to approximately 7,000 residents, with almost 40 percent of the population now Hispanic. Most of the recent immigrants came to work at occupations that range from the poultry industry and farming to the manufacturing and service industry—and to join relatives who had recently moved there themselves. Though Siler City has a small-town, rural ambience in which “everybody knows everybody”, this does not necessarily extend to the Hispanic community, which has been relatively segregated from the long-standing residents of the community. Furthermore, the relatively dense, multiplex

social networks of the Hispanic community tend to set it apart from the dominant European American population as well as the long-term African American communities of the region, in effect, creating a new type of ethnic enclave within the traditional context of the rural Mid-Atlantic South. Although there are some indications of increasing interaction between the long-term residents of Siler City and the newer residents of the growing Hispanic community, the core communities remain relatively segregated (Moriello forthcoming).

Over the past year, we have interviewed over 40 of the Hispanic residents of Siler City, including speakers representing different age groups and lengths of residency (LOR). At this point, the sample focuses on several different age groups, elementary-school children between the ages of 8 and 10, middle-school children between 12 and 14, high school teenagers between 16 and 18, and adults in their twenties. Some of the younger children now have lived their entire lives in Siler City while others have come within the last couple of years. Most speakers have had some ESL training, including those who were born and lived their whole lives in the Siler City Latino community. A few interviews with European American and African American cohorts of these speakers have also been conducted in order to get an idea of what kinds of benchmark English-dialect models might be available for Hispanic residents of Siler City. The Southern European American dialect found in the region falls well within the parameters of rural Southern Piedmont speech. This includes a vowel system indicating Southern breaking, fronted back vowels, ungliding of the /ai/ diphthong, and back-upgliding of the vowel of *bought* and *caught* (Labov 1994, Thomas 2001). African American Vernacular English in the region is quite like that described for nearby areas of the North Carolina Piedmont, such as Robeson County to the south (Dannenberg and Wolfram 1998) and Warren County to the north (Hazen 2000, 2002).

3 The Configuration of Hispanicized English

The Hispanic community in Siler City is obviously still in the formative stages of development and negotiating its dialect accommodation with respect to the local variety of English. Speakers represent a full range of proficiency in English, from recently arrived speakers who know minimal English to those who are highly proficient in both English and Spanish. Given the continuing flow of in-migrants and the stage of community development, Spanish remains the primary language for communication within most families and within the Latino community. In fact, it is not uncommon for children from the community who were born in the United States to be placed in

ESL programs along with those who have recently arrived. The social setting sets the stage for widespread language transfer from Spanish and interlanguage in the English of residents throughout the Hispanic community. Consider, for example, the incidence of unmarked past tense, a prominent interlanguage phenomenon for second language learners, in brief speech samples of two speakers: (1) a 9-year old Hispanic girl who was born and raised in North Carolina and (2) a 9-year old girl who came from Mexico a couple of years ago. All cases of unmarked past tense are italicized and in bold, while marked cases of past tense are simply in bold. Instances of pleonastic tense marking, a by-product of interlanguage, are marked with an asterisk *.

(1) Nine-year-old girl, born and raised in Siler City

The little mermaid when, um, she *rescue* a boy. And then they, they-she, um, *help* im, then she *start* singing to him. Then um, cause the boat they **were** on, they-it **started** on fire and it *go* underwater and he **couldn't** breathe underwater so she **took** him over there, and her daddy **said** to them, "Rescue humans or nothing." And she don—and then a bird **came** and he **said**, "He's dead." Then, um, his grandpa **came** and he *wake* up the boy and he **was**, uh, he **said** a girl **was** singing. Then she *turn* into a human.

(2) Nine-year-old girl, two-year LOR in Siler City

Like the other day I **went** to WaltMar and she **was** there, and we *say* hey to each other, and we **wanted** to spend the night one time at my house but she **couldn't** cause she ***haded** to go with her family. They **were** gonna go somewhere. But I *don't* when *she's* gonna spend the night with me. One time I *spend* the night at her house.

Oh, it **was**, um, a sleepover. We **had** all kinds of friends we *invite* all of her friends, I *invite* mines so she *invite* hers and we **had** a sleepover. Whoever—whoever, um, *sleeps*, whoever *wake up* late, they **were** the ones who *gotta*, who gotta, um cook for them and clean up the room, and paint their face. So, I know I *wake up* early. I always wake up at five o'clock. So I ***didn't had** to clean the room. I ***didn't** even **had** to go in back.

Despite the difference in their country of birth and their LOR in Siler City, both speakers show the type of variable tense unmarking found in the interlanguage of second language learners (Wolfram 1985, Wolfram and Hatfield 1986), though there are, of course, some differences in the relative frequency of unmarked (6 out of 16 cases for (1) and 11 out of 23 for (2) in the sample passages). We also find cases of pleonastic tense marking as in *I didn't had* or *haded*, a fairly common trait in interlanguage. Other studies

indicate that pleonastic tense marking is one of the traits of interlanguage that may fossilize as a kind of persistent substrate influence (Wolfram 1974:158). While speakers who have just been in the United States a couple of years have more obvious transfer from Spanish, both speakers show a significant overlay of Spanish influence. This is probably a by-product of the relative insularity of the Spanish community in Siler City, where children raised by Spanish-speaking parents use Spanish almost exclusively in the home. Many children are not exposed to extended verbal interaction in English until they go to school, so that LOR may not be a factor as significant as it is in less densely populated ethnic communities.

The question of accommodation to the regional rural dialect (or dialects) of English turns out to be fairly complex and fluid. We have been impressed with the overall resistance to extensive accommodation, especially for some speakers who have lived the majority of their lives in Siler City. Nonetheless, there are signs of accommodation, particularly with respect to frequent Southern lexical items. For example, there is evidence for the early adoption of *y'all*, as indicated in (3).

- (3) a. I say, Hey *y'all* two, leave me alone. (9 year old boy, born in US)
 b. Did *y'all* drive here? (9 year old girl, 2-3 LOR)
 c. Why don't *y'all* tell us about your stuff. (10 year-old boy, 2-3 LOR)

The adoption of token lexical items can, of course, take place fairly readily and be incorporated into heavily accented English. For example, one may hear the Southern auxiliary *fixin'to* produced with an overlay of Spanish transfer that includes a high front vowel in the first syllable of *fixin'* and non-reduced vowels in unstressed syllables, as in [fiksintu] vs. [fiksəndə].

Some lexical items may also be learned from the onset in their Southern dialect production, so that the [I]/[ɛ] merger in items such as *pin* and *pen* may both be rendered as *pin* [pɪn]. Furthermore, if there is Spanish transfer imposed on the [I]/[ɛ] merger, as is the case of some speakers who have shorter LORs, an item like *pen* would be produced as [pin] or *ten* may be produced as [tin]. There is also evidence that other rural Southern-based vowels may be adopted only for particular lexical items. Thus, one young speaker we interviewed produced the back low vowel of *bought* as [baot], a back, upgliding diphthong still prominent in some parts of the rural South. At the same time, the speaker produced the vowel of *caught* without the Southern backgliding, as in [kat]. We thus see two quite distinct phonetic productions for different lexical items within the American English long *o* word set, one that accommodates the local dialect norm and one that does not. The lexicalization of local dialect productions is, of course, not uncom-

mon in the acquisition of another dialect for native speakers of English (Chambers 1992), thus lending some support to the contention that lexical diffusion is an active process in the acquisition of local dialects of English for speakers acquiring English as a second language in a way comparable to second dialect acquisition.

4 The Development of /ai/

To examine the potential influence of particular regional dialect variables, we have undertaken a detailed analysis of the use of the /ai/ diphthong, perhaps the most salient feature associated with Southern American English. Within the regional South, there are two patterns of /ai/ weakening, one in which it is weakened regardless of the following phonetic environment and one in which weakening occurs only in prevoiced (e.g. *tide* and *time*) and in syllable-coda position (e.g. *bye*, *tie*) (Bernstein 1993, Thomas 2001, Anderson 2002)². Phonetically, the vowel may range from a monophthongal [a:] to a reduced glide variant, as in [aæ] or [aɛ] (Thomas 2001:37). The Piedmont region of North Carolina and the Siler City area, in particular, are characterized by the weakening of the glide only in prevoiced phonetic contexts such as *time* and *tide* (Thomas 2001:194). The weakening of /ai/ is a pervasive dialect trait that seems to cut across social class and ethnic boundaries in Siler City. Accordingly, /ai/ may serve as a kind of icon of dialect accommodation for Hispanic residents who learn English in this Southern context. Spanish phonology includes the diphthong /ai/, but it is produced somewhat differently from the /ai/ of American English phonetically. In particular, the glide tends to have stronger syllabic prominence than the American English counterpart, and its trajectory tends to be longer, with its endpoint closer to the high front vowel [i] than its Standard American English correspondent.

In our analysis, we examined several different dimensions of /ai/ production. First, we did an impressionistically based analysis in which we simply rated each vowel in terms of a binary distinction between glided and unglided variants. This was juxtaposed with the extraction of a feature often associated with interlanguage in second language acquisition—the absence of third person singular *-s*. Inflectional suffix absence is not a feature of Southern rural European American varieties in the rural Piedmont, although it is, of course, a characteristic of African American Vernacular English. In Table 1, we give the raw figures and percentages for /ai/ ungliding and third person *-s* absence for six different 8-10 year old Hispanic speakers. Two of

² Technically, this phonetic context is non-prevoiced, but for convenience here we simply designate it as prevoiced.

the speakers were born in the US but the other four speakers have been residents of Siler City for only a couple of years. We also include the correlation coefficient (Pearson r) for the /ai/ ungliding and the third singular $-s$ absence variables to determine if there might be a relationship between interlanguage and host English-dialect accommodation. Naturally, any generalizations on the basis of a sub-sample of six speakers must be extremely limited, but the results of this pilot may suggest possible kinds of relationships between interlanguage and dialect accommodation.

Speaker	/ai/ ungliding		3rd sg $-s$ abs	
	No ungl./Tot	% ungl.	No abs./Tot	% abs
K: 8-yr. boy born in US	15/35	42.9	3/41	7.3
D: 9-yr. girl born in US	6/19	31.6	5/17	29.4
A: 9-yr. boy 2-3 yr. LOR	2/30	6.7	12/40	30.0
M: 10-yr. girl 2-3 yr. LOR	0/12	0.0	7/21	33.3
R: 9-yr. girl 2-3 yr. LOR	1/23	4.3	11/18	61.1
L: 9-yr. boy 2-3 yr. LOR	1/14	7.1	10/19	52.6
Pearson $r = -.733$				

Table 1. /ai/ ungliding and verbal $-s$ absence for a subsample of children

Table 1 indicates that only the Hispanic speakers who were born in the US really exhibit /ai/ weakening to any extent. Speakers who have lived in the US a couple of years have limited tokens of ungliding, and some of these unglided productions are lexically restricted to items like *Carolina*. By the same token, all of the speakers, regardless of LOR, participate to some extent in inflectional $-s$ absence, though those who were born in the US have much lower levels of usage. The incidence of $-s$ absence for all of the speakers, including those born in the US, is noteworthy, as is the inverse correlation between /ai/ ungliding and inflectional $-s$ absence. That is, speakers who are more likely to have /ai/ ungliding are less likely to have inflectional $-s$ absence.

We then conducted an acoustic analysis of the production of /ai/ for over 30 different speakers in our corpus. In this analysis, 6-10 tokens of /ai/ in prevoiced and prevoiceless positions (limited to pre-obstruents) were measured in terms of the position of the nucleus and the length and direction of

the vowel. We also measured the length of the vowel and the duration of the glide in relation to the overall vowel. The location of the nucleus and trajectory of the glide are given for a subsample of 12 representative speakers in figure 2. These include some "heavily" accented speakers and some speakers highly proficient in English. For comparison, we include measurements of a white adult speaker (indicated by the empty square) from the region and a young African American child cohort (indicated by the empty circle).

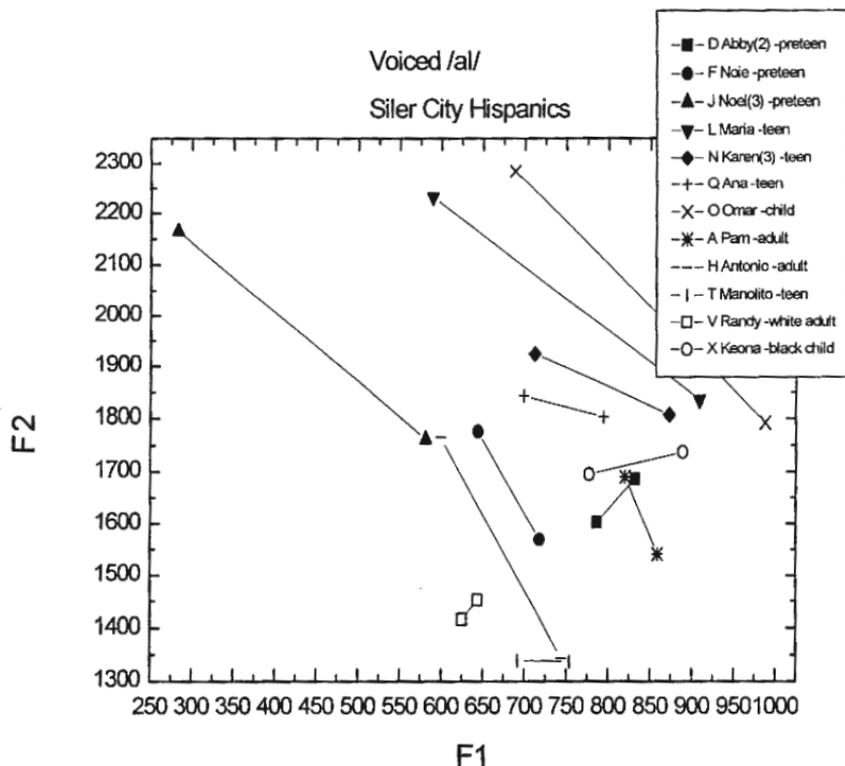


Figure 2. Acoustic samples of prevoiced /ai/ glide

Both the white and the African American speakers show the kind of ungliding we would expect in the rural Piedmont region of North Carolina. The Hispanic speakers, however, show a much wider range of variation, including speakers who have a more backed nucleus and relatively long glide trajectory. More heavily accented speakers, such as Antonio (horizontal line)

and Noel (filled triangle) show a longer and higher glide trajectory, whereas speakers such as Manolito (vertical line) and Abby (the filled square), who show better overall proficiency in English, indicate a much shorter glide. It is noteworthy, however, that we do not find the wholesale accommodation of the type of glide weakening typical of the regional variety represented by the non-Hispanic residents of Siler City. In fact, ungliding is not pervasive among Latino residents, even among those who have been born and raised in rural North Carolina. In part, this may be due to the insularity of the Hispanic community, where social interaction, apart from school or work situations, is often limited to other members of the community.

The overall duration of the vowel segment and the duration of the glide in relation to the vocalic segment are displayed graphically in figure 3, where the measurements are given in milliseconds. In figure 4, the measurements are converted into percentages, so that each bar represents the percentage of the vowel segment occupied by the glide.

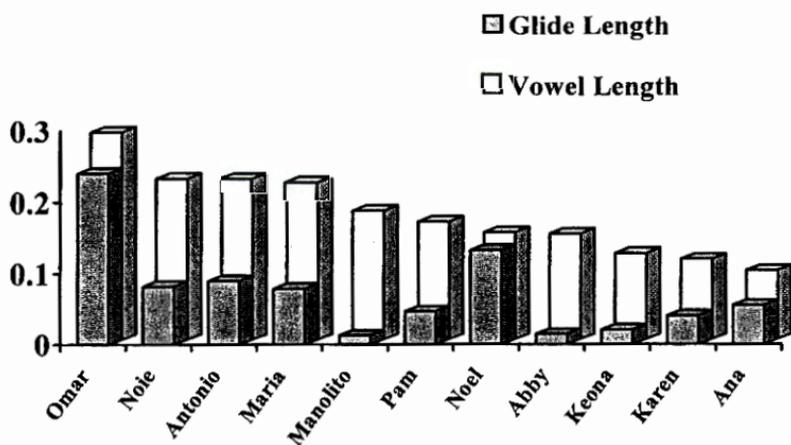


Figure 3. Relationship of the glide to the overall vowel production

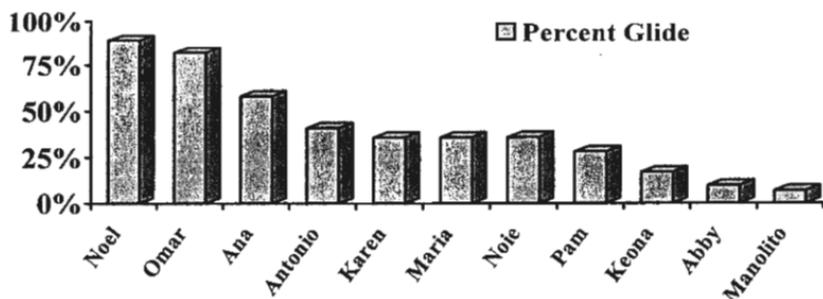


Figure 4. Percentage of the vowel occupied by the glide

Figures 3 and 4 indicate that the more Hispanicized production of /ai/ is likely to involve a longer, more prominent glide segment, whereas the American English production, including but not limited to the Southern, glide-weakened version, shows a less prominent, shorter glide. The figures thus suggest a phonetic transfer effect in terms of the proportion of the vowel occupied by the glide. However, this correlation is not as neat as we might predict based on our understanding of the differing productions of /ai/. The speaker who has the highest percentage of vowel occupied by a glide (Noel) is not very proficient in English but the speaker with the next highest percentage for the glide (Omar) is quite proficient in English. Notwithstanding such exceptions, speakers with lower glide-vowel ratios tend to be more proficient in English and seem to be more assimilated to the local culture, based on our informal assessment of their relation to the local non-Hispanic community.

The production of /ai/ may indicate how the speech community in general is accommodating to local dialect norms as well as how individual speakers symbolically align with local and mainstream American culture. The individual basis of alignment was manifested dramatically in the case of one interview conducted with two siblings, an 11-year old girl and her 13-year old brother. Their parents came from Mexico, but the children have lived all of their lives in the North Carolina Piedmont. In the sociolinguistic interview the girl had only one case of prevoiced /ai/ unglided out of 17 potential cases (5.9%), while her brother had well over half (62.8%) of his /ai/ productions unglided. There is a transparent and dramatic difference in the choice of production by the sister and brother. The adolescent boy identifies strongly with the local non-Hispanic "jock" culture of adolescent boys, and

projects a type of macho-masculine image, quite unlike his sister. Symbolically, this choice is manifested in the accommodation to the local /ai/ ungliding norm. Such cases demonstrate the individual choices that speakers may make, even within the same family, as speakers mold their identities in relation to those around them and for themselves.

5 Conclusion

Although our investigation of the sociolinguistic situation in Siler City is still incipient and many of the details of the emerging language variety are yet to be described, several points seem clear. To begin with, this situation provides an ideal opportunity to examine principles of new dialect learning—such as those set forth by Chambers (1992)—with a second language acquisition twist. For example, we see the prominent role of dialect lexicon in the early stages, and the potential role of lexical diffusion as particular lexical items may be acquired in a localized dialect production before the systemic adoption of a phonological rule. Thus, some speakers may acquire a glide-weakened production of the /ai/ vowel in the lexical item *Carolina* well before they acquire a generalized version of prevoiced glide weakening, or produce a distinctly Southern variant of /ɔ/ in particular lexical items at the same time that they produce a non-Southern variant for other lexical items. In terms of the overall community in Siler City, we have been impressed with the general reluctance to accommodate to the general Southern-based vowel system. There are certainly exceptions based on individual choice and cultural alignment; however, at this point in its development, the Hispanic community does not indicate pervasive accommodation to the local rural Southern variety. There are a couple of possible reasons for this lack of accommodation. One may be the relative insularity of the community, where social networks are still fairly dense and multidimensional, and the dominant pattern of social interaction remains ethnically segregated. The vast majority of residents have limited interaction with the members of the resident European American and African American communities, often limited to employment, school, and other institutionally mandated social occasions. The continuing language divide may also augment this ethnic segregation. The steady stream of in-migrants proficient only in Spanish fosters the need to maintain Spanish as the dominant means of communication within the community and within the home, even among children who were born in the United States.

It may also be that the model of English in the situationally restricted use of English contributes to the relative lack of local dialect accommodation. In this regard, the ESL programs may even play a role. We have ob-

served, for example, that ESL programs in Siler City often employ instructors who are from outside the community, and in some cases, not Southerners themselves. Thus, the models of English that students are exposed to in these ESL settings would not be the Southern dialect norm. This pattern of dialect use is contrary to that observed for many regular teachers, administrators, and political leaders of the Siler City community, who reflect strong local Southern norms. And, of course, it may simply be a stage in the life cycle of the incipient community, which has just emerged during the past decade and is still in the process of establishing its sociolinguistic identity.

With or without local dialect accommodation, aspects of language transfer and interlanguage may serve as a formative substrate base for the perpetuation of an ethnic variety of Hispanic English. At this stage, it is still too early to predict where the mix of local speech accommodation and substrate will end up. As the Hispanic population of Siler City becomes a more established speech community within the overall dialect landscape of the rural Piedmont, it will establish a more stable sociolinguistic relationship to the longstanding European American and African American speech communities. Our observation of this process in its early stages should provide insight into the linguistic and social mechanisms at work as the Hispanic speech community becomes an increasingly significant type of speech community in the Mid-Atlantic South.

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