

“That Spanish Twang”: Speaker Rhythm and Accommodation in a Great Plains High School

Contact studies between ethnolects and Predominant Regional Varieties (PRVs) identify the sociohistorical circumstances that promote regional developments, as well as general social and linguistic constraints that lead to supra-regional ethnolectal patterns. Changes over the last 20 years to the meatpacking industry in the Great Plains have dramatically altered the demographics of the region so that formerly Anglo-majority schools now have large Latinx¹ English speaking populations (Kandel & Parrado, 2005). Analysis of these populations illuminates how differences in settlement patterns impact the establishment of an ethnolect, the ways in which recruitment and migration sparked by a single industry create new sites for contact among adolescents, and the linguistic outcomes of such contact in so-called new “majority-minority” rural schools. We find that Spanish substrate features associated with speech rhythm link Latinx English in Liberal to other regional Latinx Englishes around the country, while influencing the local linguistic ecology in perhaps unexpected ways.

This study examines Liberal, Kansas, a town where the Latinx community has grown from 19.5% to 59.1% of the population over the past twenty-four years (US Census). Sociolinguistic interviews for 18 Latinx and 8 Anglo adolescents from Liberal, and 10 Anglo adolescents from surrounding communities that are over 95% Anglo have been analyzed for vowel and morphosyntactic variation. This analysis indicates few differences between the speech of adolescent Latinxs in Liberal and Anglos from the same region. However, these similarities fail to capture differences that receive commentary from community members, described by one participant as “that Spanish twang,” which may be related to rhythm. To explore rhythm, we use the Pairwise Variability Index (PVI) (Low & Grabe, 1995; Thomas & Carter, 2006), a measure that captures rhythm through comparison of adjacent vowels:

$$PVI = \frac{|\text{Duration1} - \text{Duration2}|}{(\text{Duration1} + \text{Duration2})/2}$$

Syllable-timed languages tend to have more equal vowel durations, resulting in lower PVI values, while stress-timed languages tend to have larger PVI values (Low & Grabe, 1995). Using PVI, previous studies of Latino English indicate a tendency for the variety to be more syllable-timed than Anglo varieties of English, but less syllable-timed than Spanish (Fought & Fought, 2002; Thomas & Carter, 2006). Linear mixed effects models were constructed in R with field site, sex, and (for Latinx speakers) reported language preference as the independent variables, and the PVI quotient as the dependent variable. Despite remarkable accommodation to regional vocalic and morphosyntactic patterns, Latinx adolescents in Liberal are more syllable-timed than their peers in surrounding Anglo-dominant communities, linking this variety to other varieties of Latino English found throughout the country (Carter 2005; Fought & Fought 2002; Shousterman 2014). Latinas produced the lowest PVI quotients, a finding confounded by a female preference for speaking Spanish at home, which also correlated with lower PVI quotients in separate statistical runs. This finding aligns with Shousterman's (2014) observation that language affiliation predicted syllable timing. Although our sample size is limited, several Anglo participants from Liberal pattern with their Latinx peers, indicating that the demographic shift in Liberal, Kansas, has the potential to impact speech norms across ethnicities.

References

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¹ We use “Latinx” as a gender-inclusive form of Latino/a

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