Cooperstown, New York as a site of new-dialect formation
Aaron Dinkin, Swarthmore College

This paper examines the dialectological status of the village of Cooperstown, New York. Data from nine speakers in Cooperstown sharply differentiate it from other nearby communities in New York State, studied by Dinkin (2009): it shows evidence of drastic linguistic change in progress, which we interpret as the result of new-dialect formation (cf. Trudgill et al. 2000; Kerswill 2002). Cooperstown, like other communities in New York State where the Northern Cities Shift (NCS) is attested, was founded by migrants from southwestern New England in the late 18th century (Cooper 1838). But unlike other such communities, in which NCS participation appears in all age groups, in Cooperstown the NCS is rapidly vanishing in apparent time: although the single elderly speaker interviewed in Cooperstown (age 82) has advanced NCS, the four middle-aged speakers (45–58) show mostly low incidence of NCS features, and the four younger speakers (17–25) have virtually no NCS participation at all. These four younger speakers all exhibit partial or total caught-cot merger, which is unattested in any other community in the vicinity and among the old and middle-aged Cooperstown speakers. Thus apparent-time data indicates a rapid change from an NCS community with no caught-cot merger, typical of its region, to a merging community with no NCS.

New-dialect formation is expected in communities containing children of parents from diverse dialect backgrounds. The available data suggests that this is the case in Cooperstown: unlike other communities sampled by Dinkin (2009), the majority of the Cooperstown speakers interviewed have parents from outside the immediate vicinity. U.S. Census data indicates that Cooperstown has seen more in-migration than other communities in the region, and its hospital- and tourism-based economy distinguish it from their declining industrial economies. The sudden emergence of caught-cot merger and loss of NCS is consistent with the predicted convergence of new-dialect formation to simpler and less marked variants. Trudgill et al. also predict considerable linguistic heterogeneity in the intermediate generation. This is borne out in Cooperstown: the four middle-aged speakers include one with the diffused New York City short-a system (cf. Labov 2007) and one with the NCS, each reflecting the regional origins of her parents, but not together constituting any clear contemporary local community norm. Thus we find new-dialect formation in a small town following the same outline as in a spread-out and isolated colony such as early New Zealand.

An unexpected finding is that the younger Cooperstown speakers (and the oldest one) all have a nucleus of /ay/ fronter than /aw/, while the middle-aged speakers have /aw/ fronter than /ay/; the pattern exhibited by the younger speakers is the one typical of the North (Labov et al. 2006). In the low diphthongs, then, unlike the NCS and caught-cot merger, Cooperstown is converging to a configuration that resembles the surrounding Inland North region that it was originally part of. This suggests that new-dialect formation can end up converging on a feature that is characteristic of surrounding stable communities, even if it is not common in the intermediate generation.