Towards a regional and social dialectology of South African Englishes: a study of the BATH vowel
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Session 27 – Phonology-Vowels

The study draws on nearly-completed work on variation in South African Englishes based in five cities (Cape Town, Durban, Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth and Kimberly). The project aims to characterise regional and social differentiation (amidst considerable overlaps) in South Africa and to ascertain directions of influence and change. Traditional Labovian methods and more modern acoustic sociophonetics via PRAAT are used in pursuing these matters of social history and cultural geography via language in South Africa. Criss-crossing regional influences and social class nuances are detailed in the context of a once-divided, but now desegregating society.

This paper will present the full results of the study of one variable, BATH or (a:), based on 200 speakers belonging to one of four ethnicities (Black, White, Coloured & Indian) in the five cities. The sample is equally distributed over city, ethnicity and gender (but not age or social class). The BATH vowel is an interesting one insofar as it varies socially and regionally according to degree of backing and raising. Weak rounding may be a side effect for some speakers, though this was not studied quantitatively. The prestige variant historically in South Africa is a low central variant similar to that of RP. The raw data set comprises 18 000 tokens of BATH. For acoustic analysis this was reduced to 5 500 tokens to avoid: (a) unclear, over-fast or overlapping speech, (b) environments not conducive to reliable formant readings (/l,m,n,r/), and (c) environments that have a strong phonological effect (preceding /j/). Normalisation was undertaken via two systems: the vowel intrinsic BARK and vowel-extrinsic Watt-Fabricius methods. From the first graphs generated in EXCEL, it appears that at this stage of the analysis BARK provides a clearer picture of variation.

Interim results via STATISTICA indicate (a) that no city is linguistically uniform in terms of ethnicity, and (b) no ethnicity is linguistically uniform across all cities. However, Whites show the greatest similarity in terms of having the same profile of variation per city: several have a mean closer to the “standard” RP-like realisation but the mean for most speakers is that of a backed, raised vowel. Black speakers at this point in time show a low to mid-central variant characteristic of the traditional L2 variety (without vowel length), though some younger speakers show clear accommodation to the norms of other groups in their city, depending on patterns of the new non-racial schooling. The most robust regional variation occurs among Coloureds and Indians along the following lines: (a) for Coloured speakers backing and raising occurs in all cities, except Johannesburg where a low- to mid-central realisation is common, and (b) for Indian speakers, backing and raising occurs in three of the cities (in accommodation to Coloured norms) but not in Durban or Johannesburg. This effect is explainable by the relative size of the two groups per city.

The research reinforces the LVC position that linguistic variables and dialect studies afford us sensitive insights into local communities, their sense of “place” and ways of relating to each other.