Language Change in Hawai‘i: KIT, DRESS & TRAP in Motion
James Grama, M. Joelle Kirtley, Katie Drager, Sean Simpson and Rebecca Clifford
University of Hawaii, Ma-noa

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Large scale phonetic and phonological descriptions of language varieties (e.g., Labov, Ash & Boberg 2006) have been a cornerstone of variationist work through describing the linguistic features that constitute a dialect, identifying changes in progress, and investigating variation that arises as a function of speakers’ genders, ethnicities, and socioeconomic classes. Such research is vital to understanding and characterizing “the sound” of a given region, and work of this nature is key in understanding how phonological change occurs. However, the variety of English spoken in Hawai‘i has received little attention along these lines. This study examines phonetic variation in Hawai‘i English, and identifies a change in progress involving the short front vowels KIT, DRESS and TRAP (using the nomenclature of Wells, 1982).

Interviews were conducted with 17 speakers from two neighborhoods on O‘ahu, and participants varied in age and gender. Acoustic phonetic analysis was conducted on vowels from spontaneous speech produced during the interviews, and formant measurements were extracted at seven points throughout the duration of the vowel. For older speakers, KIT is realized as high and front, overlapping with the space occupied by FLEECE for some speakers. Likewise, DRESS and TRAP show consistently overlapped distributions, where DRESS is realized as slightly higher in pre-nasal tokens, and TRAP is largely diphthongal, especially in pre-nasal and pre-coronal contexts. Younger speakers deviate from the distributions found in older speakers and realize KIT, DRESS and TRAP in relatively lowered and retracted positions, a change that is particularly advanced for young females. Mixed effects models fit to normalized formant values measured at the vowel midpoints reveal significant differences in realizations between the older and younger speakers for TRAP (F1, p<0.05; F2, p<0.0001). These distributions are reminiscent of patterns found in Canada (Clarke, Elms & Youssef, 1995) and California (Eckert, 2004); however, while speakers in California reflect a split TRAP system where the vowel is realized as a diphthong with a high nucleus in pre-nasal positions, such raising is uncharacteristic of younger speakers in Hawai‘i. Taken together, these data suggest that the lower, more retracted positions of KIT, DRESS and TRAP reflect a sound change in progress. These results provide an important first step toward a socially-informed acoustic phonetic description of Hawai‘i English.