Not their first time to the RODEO: How Oklahomans adjust their local dialect for context, and how they imitate themselves

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This paper presents acoustic analyses and comparison of conversational and wordlist data from Oklahoma. Lifelong residents were interviewed as part of the RODEO project (Research On the Dialects of English in Oklahoma), and this work will focus on subjects’ situational adjustment of how they speak. Although work such as Labov (1994) has demonstrated that Northern Cities Shift (NCS) (Labov et al 2006) speakers do not commonly adjust their dialect features in more formal settings (both due to linguistic security and lack of awareness of their own accent), our work suggests that Oklahomans behave differently.

We will present evidence that Oklahomans employ features of the Southern Shift such as monophthongization of /ai/, but that discourse context affects the intensity of these dialect markers. One subject, Hank (M, 53, Yale, OK) displays monophthongal /ai/ in his conversational data, but uses only diphthongal /ai/ when reading a wordlist. Other subjects display hypercorrection while reading the wordlist that does not appear in the rest of the interview. Oklahomans, unlike most NCS speakers, appear to be aware that they speak with an accent. Their own accounts describe such speech as ‘hickish,’ and so they work to level their accent during more formal reading tasks.

This awareness of dialect is punctuated by another subject, Beth (F, 46, Watts, OK), who spontaneously volunteered to read the reading passage both in her usual accent and also in a pretend, “real down-home southern” accent (i.e., conscious hypocorrection). Using PRAAT, stressed vowel spectra from both passages were analyzed to determine formant, pitch, and intensity values. In general, the vowel space differences between the two accents were found to be largely insignificant. This suggests that unlike for Hank, the vowels themselves may not be such salient features of local dialect for her. However, more significant differences included a greater tendency toward diphthong lengthening which is indicative of perceived monophthongization within the larger universe of southern speech behaviors, and an overall decrease in f0 frequencies. These findings are particularly revealing insofar as they demonstrate stronger perceptual associations with some core southern speech behaviors (and with such features as alveolarization of –ing) than with general vowel positions.

This paper will thus provide a continuum of Oklahomans’ dialect production – examples of hypercorrection away from local norms for formal wordlist tasks, evidence of Southern Shift features within more casual conversational speech, and the results of a subject who knowingly tries to exaggerate what she perceives as local norms.