

Articulating country identity through gender and race by Dr. Rob Podesva (Stanford University)

Abstract:

Prior to the last decade, linguistic descriptions of the California dialect have centered on its coastal metropolises, Los Angeles and San Francisco (Hinton et al. 1987, Hagiwara 1997, Fought 1999, Eckert 2008, Mendoza-Denton 2008, Hall-Lew 2009). Features of the dialect, whether distinctively Californian or not, have been ideologically associated with urban coastal personae that typify the state, such as valley girls and surfers (Podesva 2011, Pratt and D’Onofrio 2017). But as recent work has turned its attention to inland, more rural parts of the state (Geenberg 2014, Holland 2014, Podesva et al. 2015), a different picture emerges, one in which speakers balance the tension between adopting innovative dialect features and retaining other features that convey country identity.

I begin this talk with a survey of several studies that illustrate how orientations to the country influence speakers’ pronunciation of vowels, consonants, and voice quality. Collectively, these studies underscore the centrality of country identity across much of the state and suggest that accent features offer a means of constructing such an identity. In the rest of the talk, I complicate this view by showing that two accent features that have the potential to index country identity are implicated in the construction of other identity formations. The data under consideration consist of word lists read by approximately 750 speakers across 7 field sites.

The first accent feature is the PIN-PEN merger, whereby the words “pin” and “pen” are pronounced the same. While country-oriented speakers are less likely to pronounce these words differently in Humboldt County, the PIN-PEN merger is more prevalent in the speech of African Americans in more racially diverse communities like Bakersfield and Sacramento, as the PIN-PEN merger is also a characteristic feature of African American English (Thomas 2007). These findings underscore the point that accent features are ambiguous in meaning, and that ultimately what a feature can mean (“country” vs. “African American”) varies from community to community, even in the same state, depending on relevant axes of social differentiation.

The second feature is the retraction of /s/, whereby the sound /s/ in “so” is pronounced with a tongue position nearly as far back as “show.” Across all communities, men produce a more retracted /s/ than women, consistent with the findings of previous studies in other communities (Stuart-Smith 2007). In Humboldt County, the gender difference is greater among country-oriented speakers, which replicates a pattern reported in the nearby community of Redding (Podesva and Van Hofwegen 2016). Country identity can be linguistically constructed with the pronunciation of /s/, but crucially through the process of gender differentiation. While men can construct country identity by retracting /s/, women can do so by fronting it.

To conclude, I advocate an intersectional approach to the linguistic construction of country identity. Linguistic features are not straightforward markers of country identity, but are instead tied up in the simultaneous construction of other dimensions of identity, such as gender and race.