Ethnolects and the Mystery of Substrate Transfer

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As a result of worldwide migration, urban centres in North America, Europe and Australia that were formerly more linguistically homogeneous have become increasingly multilingual. This situation entails consequences not only for heritage language (HL) maintenance or attrition, but also for the development of ‘ethnolects’ in the majority language (ML). Ethnolects are usually assumed to reflect substrate transfer from the HL of each ethnic group (Carlock & Wölck 1981). However, as Labov (2008) has pointed out, the ‘mystery of the substrate’ is that HL features do not have a one-to-one correspondence with ethnolinguistic features. Alternatively, ethnolects may be interpreted as ways of conveying ethnic-group membership via features that may or may not derive from substrate transfer (Clyne, Eisikovits & Tollfree 2001).

Using data from a research project on ethnic variation in the English of Toronto, Canada (Hoffman & Walker 2010), I present an analysis of several phonetic variables, some claimed as ethnolectal and some that occur across all ethnic groups. Ethnicity is operationalized using two slightly different measures: ethnic orientation status and social network score. I make use of several statistical methods (significance, correlation, factor analysis, multiple regression) to examine between-group differences, grouping of speakers and features, and conditioning effects of ethnicity and linguistic factors.

Social network score is highly implicated in conditioning the variation, reflecting degree of participation in mainstream norms. Some clustering of features may be interpreted as constituting an ‘ethnolect’, though these variables neither form a cohesive group nor straightforwardly reflect considerations of substrate transfer. Whatever differences we see across speakers and groups, the language-internal conditioning of the variation is generally parallel, reflecting a shared underlying system. These findings suggest that ethnolects are best viewed as different uses of community linguistic resources to construct a communicative repertoire.

References