

Hyoun-A Joo, The Pennsylvania State University
Lara Schwarz, The Pennsylvania State University
B. Richard Page, The Pennsylvania State University
Michael T. Putnam, The Pennsylvania State University

Mapping the maintenance versus the merger of /a/-/ɔ/ in Moundridge Schweitzer German: The role of word class

Early theories of bilingual phonology argued that convergence with the dominant language was more likely to occur at the phonetic level whereas maintenance of phonological contrasts was expected even in cases of language attrition (Weinreich 1963, Andersen 1982). Work on Frenchville French, a moribund heritage variety of French spoken in Frenchville, Pennsylvania, shows that the phonetic properties of the speech sounds involved must be considered as well as their phonological distribution when describing patterns of maintenance versus convergence in the sound system of a heritage language (Bullock, Dalola & Gerfen, 2006). This study investigates the pattern of maintenance versus merger of /a/ and /ɔ/ in Moundridge Schweitzer German (MSG), a heritage dialect of German spoken in and around Moundridge, Kansas. Based on recordings of free-speech conversations with dialect speakers in 2011 and 2013, we measured the vowel formants of realizations of /a/ and /ɔ/ in MSG to determine their distribution in the vowel space. Upon charting the formants for a 93-year old female speaker, we observed a fronting of /ɔ/ in function words, which results in an overlap, i.e. a merger, of the formants for these two phonemes. This may be indicative of change through language contact with the variety of American English spoken in this region of Kansas, where the *cot* ~ *caught* merger has been documented (Labov et. al., 2006). Evidence of a merger would therefore suggest convergence with the dominant language. However, this evidence should not be interpreted as merely the assimilation of the German dialect to the phonetic properties of American English, as other phonetic features of the dialect remain resistant to change. For instance, speakers of MSG have a clear trilled /r/ when speaking German.

Scatter plots of the formants of realizations of /a/ and /ɔ/ show considerable overlap in function words. In contrast, we see no overlap for lexical words. These preliminary findings suggest a merger of the vowels in the function words, but a maintenance of the contrast in lexical words. In order to confirm this trend, more additional data is required for analysis.