

Stop. Hey, what's that sound? Initial VOT in Wisconsin German and English

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Voice onset time (VOT) is an underdocumented part of American regional speech, but it clearly varies by region, see Jacewicz et al. (2009). The linguistic situation in Wisconsin is especially interesting due to its strong German heritage, where part of the state still has thousands of 2nd-5th generation native-German speakers. As part of an ongoing project, this paper explores regional variation in the production of initial stops in three southern Wisconsin counties.

Previous fieldwork conducted in the area (also Geiger & Salmons 2006) give acoustic evidence that some speakers of Wisconsin English in these regions have less aspiration than is reported for general American English by Lisker & Abramson (1964) and others.

Because speech patterns differ by register and task, I compare free speech examples and word-list reading tasks from each speaker. Braun (1996) shows how VOT varies regionally in Germany and from this it can be inferred that the same is true for speech in Wisconsin.

Consultants include both monolingual English speakers and bilingual English and German speakers, 17 male and 20 female, ranging in age from 42-101 years at the time of interview. Tokens come from both the German and English of Wisconsin Heritage German (WiHG) speakers from Dodge County as well as the English of monolinguals from Richland and Sauk Counties. Production samples were gathered in fieldwork conducted from January through April of 2013. A pilot analysis with over 400 tokens shows clear regional differences and suggests generational differences. All speakers show the expected distribution pattern of VOT ($p < t < k$). Sauk Co. consultants have more aspiration on /t/ and /k/ tokens than all the other groups. Dodge Co. monolingual English speakers have the highest VOT for /p/ tokens, but it is virtually the same as the Sauk Co. VOT for the same token. Richland Co. consultants have the least aspiration of all the groups. Results for age and gender also suggest varying trends across counties.

Most striking are the differences across the three counties, even though they are geographically separated by less than 100 miles. This paper examines whether this plays out with an expanded set of more than 1300 tokens in an attempt to understand whether there is a difference in how people produce initial stops, and whether the German bilinguals in areas with heavy German settlement have impacted regional speech and perceptions.

References

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