ABSTRACT

ERIC WILBANKS. Social and Structural Constraints on a Phonetically-Motivated Change in Progress: (str) Retraction in Raleigh, NC. (Under the direction of Professor Jeff Mielke.)

The current project examines the status of (str) retraction, an ongoing, phonetically-motivated sound change, in the Raleigh, NC corpus of sociolinguistic interviews (Dodsworth & Kohn, 2012). Investigating the status of this sound change in apparent time, acoustic analyses of 140 Raleigh-natives was carried out. All tokens of /s/ and /ʃ/ were automatically extracted and the spectral characteristics of the resulting 99,150 tokens were analyzed. Results demonstrate the retracted variant in the speech of the youngest Raleigh women and support the role of women as linguistic innovators. Additionally, data is presented demonstrating that the emergence of (str) retraction in the community in the 1960s corresponds with massive demographic shifts caused by urbanization and immigration from the North. While the specific causes of (str) retraction, whether it reflects a diffusion of an externally developed change or the community-internal innovation based on clear phonetic motivation, is unclear, the variant is clearly an emergent phenomenon of Raleigh speech.

Additionally, I demonstrate that medial word position was the locus for actuation of the sound change and remains the environment which most strongly favors the retracted variants. This structural constraint has been observed in other communities but its role as the position in which change began has previously only been hypothesized. At the level of the community, (str) retraction is still heavily restricted and its spread to other linguistic environments and into the systems of other speakers is currently unfolding. These data, in addition to improving our knowledge of the sociolinguistic characteristics of Raleigh's speech, inform our understanding of the overarching principles governing the progression of sound change.