MEXICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH IN CONTEXT: ACCOMMODATION TO OTHER AVAILABLE NORMS IN LOWER MICHIGAN

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Recent studies have examined the effects of regional varieties on the English of Mexican Americans outside the Southwest (Hartford 1978; Frazer 1996; Gordon 2000; Wolfram, Carter, and Moriello 2004; Roeder 2006). The present study[1] is an examination of the vowel systems of Mexican Americans in two communities in Lower Michigan — the Lansing area, where the Northern Cities Shift (NCS) is a feature of the predominant local dialect, and Berrien County in southwest Michigan, which has not shown extensive NCS influence. The findings reveal a kite-shaped pattern in the lower vowels of the Lansing speakers, which is attributable to a new variety of Mexican American English influenced strongly by the NCS. The degree of accommodation to this pattern by Mexican Americans in Berrien County — where the Mexican American community is less well established — correlates with their length of residence in the area.

We compiled over 2000 tokens from a 75-word wordlist for both groups, and used the speech analysis software Akustyk, developed by Bartolomiej Plichta for Praat, taking measurements during the steady state of the vowel. Each community was normalized (separately) in Plotnik using the Nearey formula.

We are particularly interested in how these Spanish-influenced dialects have been affected by the NCS, a phenomenon first identified by Fasold (1969). The first step of the NCS is usually taken to be the tensing and then raising of /æ/, as in *bat*, to a point that is sometimes in the region of the high front vowels. Later steps include fronting of /ɑ/ and lowering and/or backing of /ɛ/.

The demographics of the two communities are quite different. Respondents for the Berrien County study live in Benton Harbor, a city whose population is over 90 percent African American. While an economic revival appears to be getting a fledging start in the city, Benton Harbor still shows a 35 percent reported unemployment rate and a 65 percent high school dropout rate. The majority of Mexican Americans in this area came as migrant farm workers and are first and second generation residents. Thus we would predict that these speakers would be insulated from exposure to the NCS by racial, educational and geographic segregation.

[1] Please note that authorship is alphabetical.

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Lansing's settled Mexican American population is older and more well established. Mexican Americans migrated to Lansing in large numbers during World War II to fill factory and farm jobs, and the population has grown steadily since then. Some families have now lived in Michigan for three generations. In addition, Lansing has a majority white population, into which Mexican Americans have been successfully integrated. Therefore, these speakers have had extensive exposure to the NCS, and it is not surprising that their accommodation is more progressed.

The history of Mexican Americans in southwestern and south central Michigan is reflected in the vowel configurations we see among respondents for this study. Thomas (2001) found that Mexican American speakers of English in Texas, the source of the majority of respondents in both studies, tend to have a well separated /æ/ and /ɛ/ and merger of the low back vowels /ɑ/ and /ɔ/. Berrien County speakers show a pattern that includes both of these characteristics in speakers who are new to Michigan. Neither of these features appears in any of the Lansing data, however, reflecting the fact that the dialect in Lansing is older and more well established.

The Berrien County sample includes eight speakers who range in age from 26 to 36 and, more importantly, show a dramatic range in their length of residence in southwestern Michigan. Two speakers have been in the area for less than seven years, while several others have been in the area for over twenty years, and the youngest was born in southwest Michigan.

Figure 1 presents the system of Monica, a 30-year-old woman whose family moved to Benton Harbor in 2000. Her system shows a distinct height difference between /æ/ and /ɛ/. Her front vowels show no evidence of NCS influence, since /æ/ is neither fronted nor raised relative to /ɛ/. She also shows the low back merger that is typical of many of the Texas Mexican Americans studied in Thomas (2001). Her system is representative of most recent arrivals from Texas during the last 20 or 30 years.

Figure 2 presents the system of Sancho, a second generation Michigan resident who was born in Decatur — about 30 miles east of Benton Harbor — and has lived in Benton Harbor with his wife, a European American NCS speaker, for eight years. Unlike Monica, Sancho's /æ/ is both fronted and raised, such that it overlaps with /ɛ/ in the F1/F2 vowel space. In addition, /ɑ/ or /ɔ/ show a distinct separation that is not present in speakers who arrived from Texas more recently. Although the configuration of his five lowest vowels does not completely conform to the kite-shaped pattern found in the Lansing speakers, it shows some NCS influence and is similar to the NCS effects found by Ito (1999) among rural whites in Lower Michigan.

The Lansing sample includes thirty-two speakers who range in age from 14 to 71. All respondents have lived in Lansing for at least half of their lives, and some are from families that have lived in Lansing for as many as three generations. Figure 3 shows the chart of Estela, a third generation resident of Lansing who exhibits the distinctive kite-shaped pattern found among Mexican Americans in the area. The relative heights of /æ/ and /ɛ/ in Estela's speech are similar to Sancho. Her /æ/ is much farther front relative to /ɛ/ than in Berrien County speakers, how-

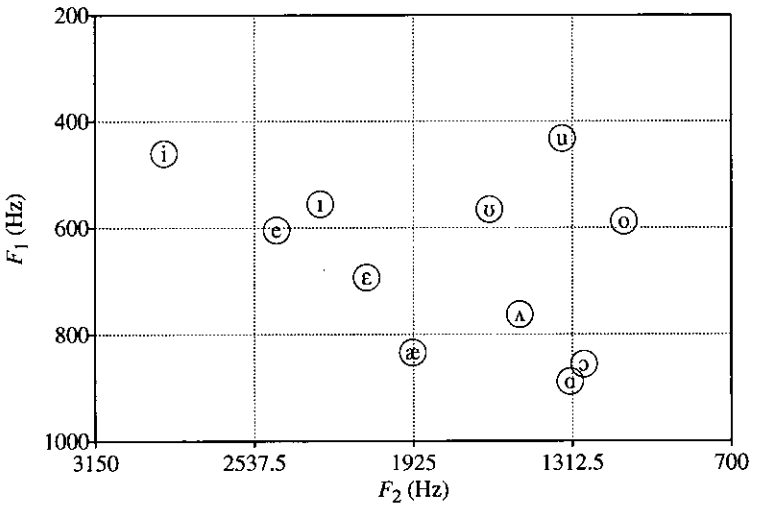

FIGURE 1

Vowel system of "Monica"

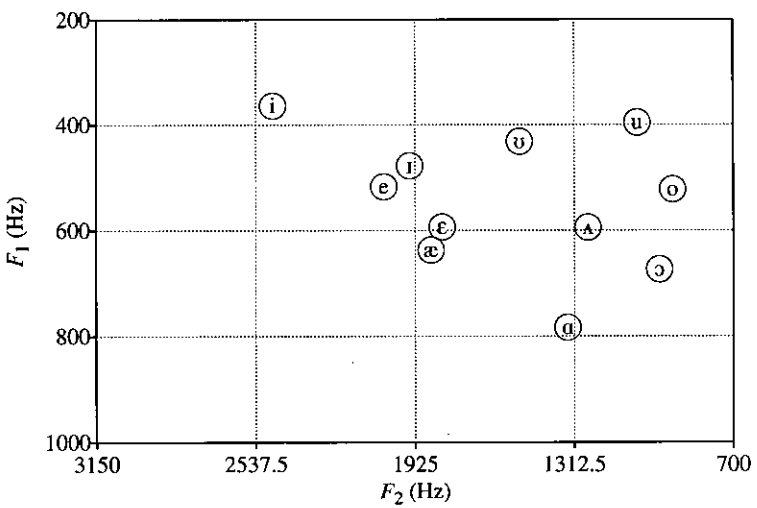

FIGURE 2

Vowel system of "Sancho"

ever, reflecting more extensive NCS influence. The fronting of /æ/ completes the kite-shaped pattern and is representative of the vowel pattern found in the speech of young female respondents in Lansing. It is notable, however, that none of these

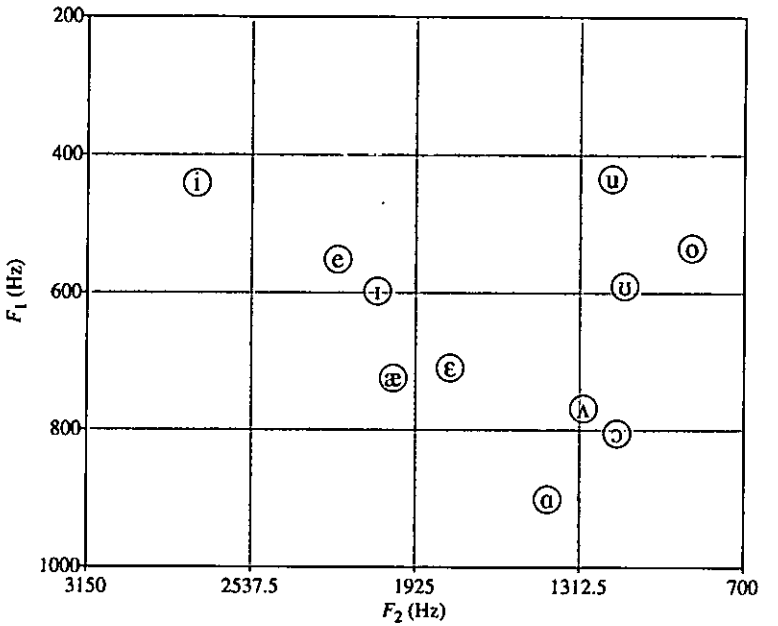

FIGURE 3

Vowel system of "Estela"

informants have positions for /ɑ/ or /ɔ/ that are advanced to the degree found in local NCS speakers. This indicates that, although the NCS has a strong impact on the speech of local Mexican Americans, their dialect still maintains a distinct ethnic quality that echoes the cultural and linguistic history of these individuals, distinguishing it from the more recent arrivals in the southwest of the state. It will be interesting to see if those more recent arrivals follow this same pattern, or if the difference in ethnic composition and intensity of the NCS in this less urban area will lead to another outcome.

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