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Paul M. De Decker

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Hangin' and Retracting': Adolescent Social Practice and Phonetic Variation in an Ontario Small Town*

Paul M. De Decker

1 Identity and Language Variation

One of the aims of sociolinguistics is to explain variation within the community. Although explanations are commonly predicated on differences in social factors such as age, sex, social class, and ethnicity, recent work has argued for a reformulation of these traditional social categories. For example, Preston and Ito's (1999; Ito 2000) work on the Northern Cities vowel shift in rural Michigan has shown that a speaker's loyalty to their local community or town is a significant social determinant in accommodating to urban sound change. Similarly, Hazen's (2001: 127) work on vernacular features in Warren County, North Carolina, suggests that cultural identity (i.e. self-conception in relation to local and regional communities) should be included as part of the "regular litany of nonlinguistic factors assessed in the study of language variation."

Incorporating speaker attitudes and identity into variationist studies is not new. Labov's (1963) pioneering work on the centralization of /ay/ and /aw/ in Martha's Vineyard correlates attitudes towards the local island community with islanders' speech. Eckert (2000b) argues that researchers should return to examining the social factors relevant to the community under study. Using Wenger's (1998) concept of the community of practice, Eckert shows that variable patterns of involvement in the Northern Cities Shift can be explained as a form of social practice within the peer social order. For her community of suburban teenagers, cruising around the city, making trips to Detroit and involvement in their school's extra-curricular activities are all forms of social practice that together with variable patterns of language use construct identity within the high school.

Following these suggestions to re-examine non-linguistic factors involving practice within and attitudes towards the local and regional communities, this paper reports my examination of a relatively understudied phenomenon occurring in Canadian English. Clarke et al. (1995) show that

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speakers within urban centers of South-Western Ontario exhibit patterns of front lax-vowel lowering and retraction of /æ/.

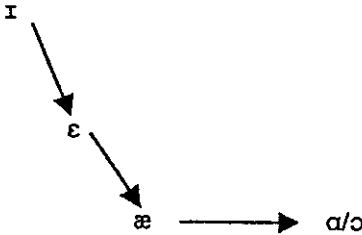


Figure 1. CdnE Chain Shift (from Clarke et al: 1995)

They propose that the retraction of /æ/ to a low central position prompted subsequent lowering of /ɛ/ and /ɪ/, as shown in Figure 1. Although this pattern conforms to Labov's (1994) principles of vowel shifting (specifically, that lax vowels fall along non-peripheral tracks), their study indicates that the so-called third dialect of North American English (cf. Labov 1991) is not as homogeneous as was first believed.

The present paper reports on a study of this shift in a non-urban center of southwestern Ontario. Using data from participant observation and sociolinguistic interviews, I examine several social factors that appear to be significant in the formation of peer-based social networks and that may ultimately explain the observed patterns of variation:

2 The Research Site: a Non-Urban Community

The research site is a small town I refer to, in this paper, by the pseudonym Parktown. Located approximately one hour from the urban center of London, Ontario (see Figure 2), Parktown has a population of approximately 14,000 people. Traditionally renowned for its farming, Parktown supports a number of small businesses, including a shopping mall in the town center, and several restaurants. The main industry is the manufacturing and distribution of automobile parts.

There are several churches, a hospital and public and private schools. Most relevant to this study, there is one public high school that serves students from Parktown and its surrounding, more rural villages. The town is relatively homogeneous ethnically, most residents being of Western European descent. All the speakers in this study were born and raised in Parktown or nearby in a rural community.

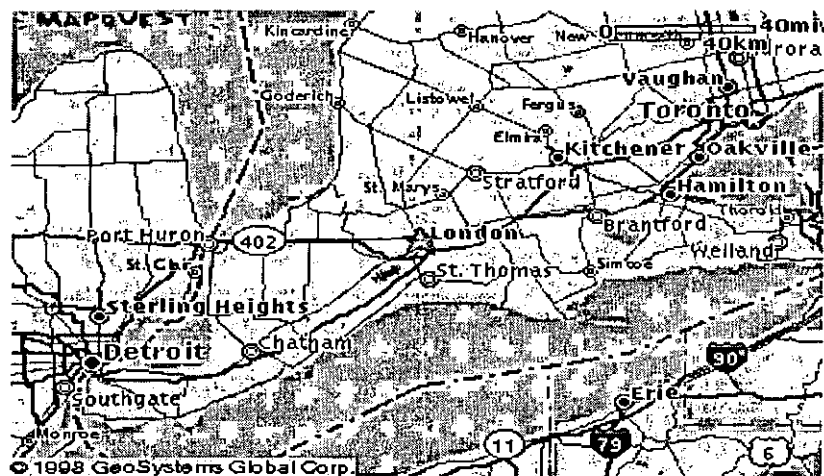


Figure 2. London and surrounding areas of South-Western Ontario

3 Methodology

Although the abovementioned Canadian vowel shift involves three variables ((ɪ)-lowering, (ɛ)-lowering and (æ)-retraction), a preliminary analysis shows that (ɪ)-lowering occurs very rarely among these speakers and (ɛ)-lowering has only been observed at low rates. Therefore, this paper focuses only on (æ)-retraction.

The data were taken from sociolinguistic interviews with 10 speakers, consisting of 9 females and one male. This disparity according to sex was motivated by the finding that females tend to lead in ongoing sound changes (Labov 1990) and so this analysis focuses solely on those speakers who might be most advanced in this sound change. The male speaker was included because of his integration in a social network consisting mostly of females. Though the effect of sex/gender on the social distribution of (æ)-retraction is not part of this analysis, the results show that his linguistic patterns are consistent with those of innovative females.

Rather than selecting a stratified random sample of teenagers, I chose these groups on the basis of my interest in examining linguistic variation according to engagement in different forms of social practice. This interest in examining communities according to their practices is motivated by Eckert's abovementioned work on teenagers in Detroit. Since the concept of a com-

munity of practice is relatively new to the study of the quantitative analysis of language variation, it has not been used as extensively as Labov's standard construction of the speech community. However, the work that has incorporated the community of practice has brought compelling results to sociolinguistic theory (e.g. Bucholtz 1999, Eckert 1997, 2000 etc.).

Following Wenger (1998), Eckert (2000:35) defines a community of practice as "an aggregate of people who come together around some enterprise." Throughout the course of mutual engagement in some jointly negotiated enterprise, people develop a set of shared repertoire or social practices that reinforce and reconstruct their community identity (*ibid.*). This paper focuses on the shared resource of variable language patterns that may serve to construct these teenager's identities within the larger community of Parktown.

Below are the four communities of practice examined in this study, along with a brief description of each group's negotiated enterprises:

THE 'CIA' (aka Christians In Action)	a group of peer-youth workers who run a drop in center for 'street kids'; they perform in a Christian rock band called "the LIMB" playing shows around the area and sometimes in the United States
'CLOWN POSSE'	a network of students who are members of a local arts program; they offer their services to the community by dressing up as clowns for fairs and other town functions
'SMART KIDS'	the top of their classes at school, this ensemble of students are highly integrated into the school system both during class hours and through extra-curricular activities such as the student government, senior band, and the key-club (a community service club)
'DOWNTOWN KIDS'	a collective of friends who hang out at the drop-in center on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights because they "have nothing else to do"

Table 1. Four Communities of Practice in Parktown

The range of engagement in forms of mutually-negotiated enterprise is not that diverse (i.e. most of the groups are involved in the wider community), but there are a few notable distinctions. The Smart Kids (cf. Eckert's Jocks), while not involved with school sports, are highly involved with school events and are popular and well-liked by the student body. On the other hand, the Downtown Kids normally hang out with friends, spending much of their time at other friends' houses or, as their name implies, downtown and

at the drop-in center. Although they do attend classes and recognize the importance of going to school, their forms of practice mirror some of those typical of "burnout" (Eckert 1989) behavior, such as drinking and doing drugs. The other two groups, the CIA and the Clown Posse, are quite similar, in that both are integrated into the community through their involvement in social programs designed to be of service to the community. It is important to note that although all speakers in this study live in Parktown or just outside the town, and all but one attend the local high school, none of the groups interacts with the others.

In addition to these adolescents, three older women were randomly selected to facilitate comparison between the speech of the high school students and those of older town residents who have lived in the area for most, if not all, of their lives. While three is admittedly a relatively small number for these purposes, I intend to increase the number of older speakers in future work, to examine changes in apparent time. For this paper, the older women serve to represent the more traditional speech features of the town.

Sociolinguistic interviews were conducted with at least three or four members of each community of practice. My ethnographic analysis is based both on discussion which took place during the interviews and on participant observation during other contact sessions with each group.

Each informant read from a list of 240 words containing the relevant vowel phonemes. Among these were 30 tokens of /æ/ in a variety of surrounding segmental environments. All tokens were digitized and instrumentally measured using Praat 4.0 (Boersma and Weenik 2001) to measure first and second-formant frequency values. Using Plotnik 5.0 (Labov 2001), the position of each variant was plotted in a two-dimensional space (i.e. F1 x F2). In addition to the acoustic analysis, the same tokens were impressionistically coded as either retracted or non-retracted. That is, if the variant sounded like [æ̠], it was coded as non-retracted; otherwise, it was coded as retracted. These impressionistic codings were entered into a token file for multivariate analysis with GoldVarb 2.1 (Rand and Sankoff 1990) to determine the overall probability and percentages of (æ)-retraction. Furthermore, all tokens were coded for not only extralinguistic factors (discussed below) but also a variety of linguistic factors. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the social conditioning of (æ)-retraction.

4 Results

The results for each speaker, found in Table 2, are derived from a one-level step-up analysis using GoldVarb. As shown, there is quite a range in the degree of retraction among these speakers. Connie, a Smart Kid, exhibits the

highest amount of (æ)-retraction in this sample, while Maria, the oldest of the three older women (age 73), shows the least amount. The other two older speakers, Annie (age 57) and Jaime (age 45) disfavor retraction or have intermediate effects.

Speaker Pseudonym	% of æ-retraction	Factor Weight	% excluding /N/ and /g/	2 nd formant freq. mean*	Community of Practice
Connie	73%	0.77	100%	1638Hz	Smart Kids
Karen	72%	0.77	100%	1606Hz	Smart Kids
Julie	72%	0.77	87%	1618Hz	Downtown Kids
Shelly	69%	0.73	96%	1668Hz	Downtown Kids
Chris	63%	0.67	91%	1497Hz	Clown Posse
Anita	60%	0.65	75%	1441Hz	Clown Posse
Jaime	45%	0.50	50%	--	45 year old woman
Betty	40%	0.45	54%	1822Hz	Clown Posse
Annie	32%	0.36	40%	--	57 year old woman
Ali	30%	0.35	39%	1883Hz	CIA
Aimee	19%	0.22	27%	1730Hz	CIA
Michelle	14%	0.17	19%	2031Hz	CIA
Maria	11%	0.14	14%	--	73 year old woman

Table 2. Results from GoldVarb for each speaker. (* = unnormalized mean)

Labov (2001) reports on the effect of following nasals and voiced velar stops on the quality of the (æ) variable. In pre-nasal and pre-/g/ environments, (æ) is tensed and raised but before /g/, /æ/ is "often close to /ëy/, and sometimes merges with it" (ibid). Acoustic analyses of these Parktown speakers show a striking distinction between variants in these inhibiting environments and variants followed by other segments. Labov's claim is further supported by these data. Figure 3 illustrates this distinction between tensing and non-tensing environments for one 18-year-old female from Parktown.

Toronto. This finding suggests that there are variably qualitative degrees of retraction and that these speakers, while more advanced than their older counterparts, show low degrees of retraction. Again, further acoustic tests involving normalized data from both urban and non-urban speakers are required to confirm this interpretation.

The factors weights in the third column of Table 2 demonstrate the range of variability of (æ)-retraction among these speakers. If we re-examine the results within each of the four communities of practice, we find apparent relative homogeneity. This pattern is not surprising, since, as Guy (to appear) has most recently observed, one tends to talk like the people one talks to. It is also not entirely surprising that those who live in the same community, even though they do not talk to each other, have similar patterns of variability. That is, community members share similar patterns for the internal factors affecting (æ)-retraction but differ in their overall rate of use (*ibid*). However, in the absence of hierarchies of internal constraints, we must rely on the overall rates of retraction or input probabilities. The input probabilities for these speakers confirm that for the most part, three of the four groups (i.e. Clown Posse, Smart Kids, Downtown Kids) exhibit relative homogeneity (i.e. the speakers in each community of practice generally show consistent favoring patterns of retraction). However, the three members of the CIA show input probabilities that are not only lower than that of the other groups, but also disfavor (æ)-retraction. They lag behind other community members and do not appear to be participating in this ongoing sound change. In the next section, I consider why this might be.

5 Cultural Identity and Social Practice

Turning now to the question of which social factors might contribute to these patterns of language use, I report on some ethnographic data gathered during the sociolinguistic interviews with the groups. Over and over again during the interviews, these teenagers talked about the relative restrictions and limitations of Parktown, particularly the lack of things for teenagers to do and that this issue was more problematic for some teenagers than for others. While some decried the absence of places available where kids could go to "hang out", others took their social lives elsewhere. In this case, "elsewhere" is the "big city" of London (population 336,000), a fifty-minute drive from Parktown. Those who were unwilling to travel to the city accepted the constraints of Parktown. It quickly became obvious that all the teenagers demonstrated some orientation towards their town—they either showed a strong dislike for it because of its inability to cater to their needs or they showed a genuine affinity for it, often focusing on the cohesion with and friendliness

of other Parktonians. In some form, they identified with their town and positioned themselves in relation to the larger regional area, which includes other larger urban centers. Since these issues constituted a recurring topic in the interviews, I was drawn to further examine them as features of adolescent identity and whether or not they could influence the observed patterns of variation.

In many ways, this social division between the teenagers resembles Hazen's (2000) idea of cultural identity, which he defines (Hazen 2000: 127) as "a sociolinguistic factor which involves how speakers conceive of themselves in relation to their local and larger, regional communities." In his work in Warren County, cultural identity was measured by the "degree of attachment to life outside the county" as well as career and educational goals (Hazen 2001: 128). According to Hazen, a speaker may develop either a local identity (i.e. identify with the local community) or an expanded identity (i.e. identify with the area outside the community). In this study, I operationalized cultural identity in a similar manner on the basis of Parktown's teens' prevailing opinions concerning desire to remain in the town or move beyond their community, both now and after high school. In order to examine the effect of cultural identity on the observed patterns of linguistic variation I became concerned with two questions:

- (1) Are local and expanded identities relevant identities among Parktown teenagers?
- (2) If so, then how can one empirically measure cultural identity?

Given the high degree of homogeneity among members of a given community of practice, which seemed to run along the lines of opinions about and orientations towards Parktown, I hypothesized that the community's forms of social engagement or social practice would reflect such orientations and provide a means of assessing one's cultural identity. In light of community-based practice, the second question may then be reformulated as:

- (3) What social practices are associated with local and expanded identities?

Taking data from ethnographic notes on the forms of social engagement in which these Parktown females engage, I formulated the following questions that relate to issue of expanded and local identity for this group of teenagers. These questions (see (4) below) address attitudes, orientations and social practice that teenagers regularly think about, relate to and engage in (or not).

- (4) (i) Where would you prefer to live to after high school?
 (ii) Are you going to college or university?
 (iii) Do you have a part time job?
 (iv) Do you hang out in the city?

Asking these questions allowed me to gain an understanding of how these teenagers related to and felt about their town and life outside the town. In terms of identifying as either local or expanded, the assumption was that those who decided to stay in Parktown after high school are integrated into the community via part-time employment at local businesses and do not hang out in the city were positively identify as locally oriented. Those who have strong desires to move away from Parktown, do not work or consider themselves integrated into the community and hang out in London frequently were assumed to identify with having expanded identity. The question concerning the choice of college or university was added to ascertain the degree to which one was determined to moving away from Parktown; since it is my impression that those who attend university seldom move back to the area, while those who are college-bound quite often settle back in Parktown or in a neighboring town.

However, none of these questions were selected as significant to the probability of (æ)-retraction in an initial variable-rule analysis. Mismatches between the hierarchies of factor weights and percentages in some of the factor groups suggested interaction or overlap among the questions. Cross-tabulation showed an overlap between questions 4.(iii)(Do you have a part time job?) and 4.(iv)(Do you hang out in London?), such that speakers who have jobs hang out in London rather than Parktown. To obviate this overlap, the two groups were collapsed into one.

The results of the subsequent multivariate analysis, shown in Table 3, reveal a clear correlation of employment and (æ)-retraction. Female Parktownian teens who are unemployed but hang out in London favor (æ)-retraction. Those who do not hang out in London show a lower propensity to retract (æ). However, those who both work in the community through part time employment and hang out in the city disfavor (æ)-retraction.

These results suggest that it is involvement in the community through part-time employment, rather than simply the degree of contact with urban speakers, which influences linguistic behavior. It appears that, at least for this small sample, engagement in forms of social practice commonly perceived as expanded identity practices (i.e. hanging out in the city) do not affect accommodation to (æ)-retraction, which has been characterized as an urban change.

Question	%	Factor Weight	N
Where would you prefer to live?			
city	—	—	0
town	43%	[0.43]	115
no preference	56%	[0.55]	183
Are you going to college or university?			
college	51%	.60	175
university	50%	.36	123
Do you have a part time job and do you hang out in the city?			
[-job],[+hang out in London]	73%	.83	59
[-job],[-hang out in London]	60%	.57	148
[+job],[+hang out in London]	21%	.19	91

Table 3. Cultural Identity factors contributing to (æ)-retraction.

Additionally, working at a weekend or after-school job appears to factor quite significantly in accommodating to the variable process of (æ)-retraction.

6 Interpretation: Social Network Analysis of a Community of Practice

How can these results, which run contrary to our expectations, be explained? Table 2 shows that the peer-group with the lowest rate of retraction is the group of teenagers that run the youth drop-in center and also play in a Christian rock band (i.e. the CIA). Considering their considerable contact with urban speakers via trips to London, we would expect them to accommodate to urban speech patterns. Since they show the opposite (i.e. they are actually the most conservative of the four communities of practice), we should reconsider how cultural identity affects their rate of retraction. Cultural identity (here defined as local vs. expanded identities) may be more complex than was initially assumed. Forms of practice associated with expanded identities may work together with local-identity practices to produce patterns of linguistic variation that in turn are typical of the local community. In other words, expanded-identity practices do not necessarily yield expanded-identity linguistic behavior. For members of the CIA, working at a part-time job appears to outweigh their social activities in the city. However, it is possible that part-time employment as a form of local-identity social practice is

not solely responsible for their observed patterns. Apparently, a more detailed measure of both local and expanded identities is required to exploit the concept of cultural identity to its maximum potential.

In the absence of such a measurement, we could speculate that the CIA's patterns of variation result from other forms of social practice they are involved in that the other groups are not. For example, the CIA is the only group in the sample with strong ties to people outside of their immediate community of practice. Evidence for this assertion is supported by their communication with those who hang out at the drop-in center, as well as their friends from school and the variety of other members associated with the Christian youth groups within the region. In reference to social network theory, the CIA have relatively *loose* network ties, whereas the other groups (i.e. Smart Kids, Clown Posse, Downtown Kids) for the most part have *dense* ties (cf: Milroy 1985). Apart from being around non-members in school, these other groups do not have the same connection to non-network members that the CIA have. The Smart Kids and the Clown Posse see other teens at school but do not hang out with them on a regular basis. If they have any contact at all, it is normally through the school, where the strength of contact is relatively weak. This interpretation might explain the high rates of retraction among those groups with weak external ties (i.e. Smart Kids, Downtown Kids and Clown Posse). Milroy and Milroy (1992) found that weak ties in Belfast often facilitated the spread of linguistic change. Conversely, the CIA has stronger ties with a variety of other Parktown citizens. It is quite possible that they lag behind in retraction because they have stronger local ties (despite their frequent trips to the city) and therefore resist innovative speech patterns. This interpretation makes sense, given the enterprisal component of their daily existence: they work as an outreach team and have the greatest degree of interaction with various communities of practice in the town. As a result, they are exposed to a variety of linguistic phenomena that they may choose to include in their own linguistic repertoire (cf: Eckert 1996). For instance, they have access to a wide range of community features, like patterns of retraction illustrated by the older speakers of this sample (i.e. a more fronted /æ/). Additionally, they have access to the innovative pattern of urban speakers as illustrated by the Smart Kids, the Clown Posse and the Downtown Kids. Thus, it may be possible that, if (æ)-retraction is indeed perceived as an urban phenomenon, the low rates of retraction by these non-urban-community-involved teens might be the result of wanting to *avoid* sounding like those teenagers from the city, thus pointing up their local, non-urban identity. If this is the case, then (æ)-retraction for these teenagers may in fact have negative associations.

Further support for this hypothesis may also lie in stylistic factors. One might consider that CIA patterns are the result of hypercorrection. Since the data come from a word list, it is possible that these pronunciations are the result of style-shifting where, at least for this group, the informants presented themselves as linguistically conservative, in order to assert their local identity. If this is the case, then further research on the perception of (æ)-retraction in Parktown is needed as well as on why some teenagers would want to sound more conservative.

7 Conclusion

In summary, this paper has presented a preliminary analysis involving the study of social practice as a way to assess language variation. In addition to the standard social factors of geographic location, age and social network membership, I have also attempted to operationalize an approach that focuses on the activities, orientations and practices that take place related to the broader social categories.

This study also found an unexpected complexity in identity features of small town teenagers. According to the criteria used to measure expanded identity, the members of the CIA peer-group should rank rather high. Their academic trajectories are set for university and they spend their social time in the near-by city. Thus, they would be seen as having expanded identities. However, other forms of social practice and network structure suggest the work of antinomious pressures. While participating in expanded identity practices, the CIA also engage in forms of practice that are associated with local identities. They have loose network ties that connect them with a variety of local and non-local community members. Their patterns of (æ)-retraction are likely the result of such competing factors (i.e. choosing to be local) but given their access to a variety of different people and styles, it is also likely that they have a command of several linguistic styles that they may use for a variety of different purposes, which is dependent upon whom they interact with. This study illustrates the complex nature of measuring identity and suggests that an analysis of social practice and identity must consider the competition between forms of social engagement that might appear contradictory under of a view of identity as a binary phenomenon (i.e. local vs. expanded).

Nonetheless, the general trend for this small sample of non-urban female teenagers is that those who accommodate the least to the urban sound change in progress are also those who also make regular trips to the nearby urban center as part of their regular social forays. Conversely, those adolescents who do not use the urban terrain for social purposes and who spend the ma-

majority of their social time at friends' houses, either watching movies or just hanging out, show patterns of linguistic variation that suggest a greater accommodation to what has been previously reported as and perceived as an urban speech pattern.

These findings also suggest that the retraction of (æ) may not be perceived as an urban phenomenon. While it may be more advanced in the city, this study demonstrates that it is present in non-urban speech. Furthermore, two of the three older speakers show relatively lower rates of retraction than those found among the younger speakers. While the retracted variants are not as salient as they are in the speech of the big city, they are more robust than was originally expected. If we adopt Clarke et al's (1995) assumption that (æ)-retraction signals the beginning of the chain shift, the evidence in this paper suggests that at least an initial stage of the shift is incipient in non-urban Canadian English.

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Department of Languages, Literatures and Linguistics
York University
S 561 Ross Building
4700 Keele Street
Toronto, Ontario
M3J 1P3
Canada
dedecker@yorku.ca