

Enclave, endangered, or simply stable? Explaining the Western Pennsylvania vowel system

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One generalization that can be made about North American dialects of English is that they are changing, in some cases rapidly (Labov, Ash, and Boberg 2006:304). Also according to the *Atlas of North American English* (ANAE), however, the Western Pennsylvania (WPA) variety is an exception, relatively stable against a backdrop of dramatic change occurring nearby. Sociolinguists are primarily interested in change, so we have tended to pay relatively little attention to its counterpart. But even if stability appears to be the exception rather than the rule in the history of spoken language, a full account of language variation and change requires exploring the factors that favor stability as well as those that drive change.

This study first tests ANAE's claim about the stability of the WPA variety, using a much larger dataset. Analysis of vowel formant measures from sociolinguistic interviews with 52 Anglo-American speakers from the Pittsburgh area generally confirms ANAE's findings both about the quality of WPA vowels and about their stability across apparent time, which is causing this variety to become increasingly different from those of neighboring dialect areas. To account for this, we propose demographic reasons including population loss and the lack of large-scale in-migration, as well as ideological reasons including geographic exceptionalism that leads WPA speakers not to expect their accent to be like others'. Stability is often discussed in the context of enclave and/or endangered dialects, where competition from other varieties and the lack of a critical mass of speakers means that variation may arise or acquire social meaning (eg. Dorian 1989). Since WPA is neither an enclave nor endangered, at least in the short term, our study suggests more generally that we need to think about other contexts for stability.

References

- Labov, William, Sharon Ash and Charles Boberg. 2006. *Atlas of North American English: Phonetics, Phonology and Sound Change*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Dorian, Nancy. 1989. *Investigating Obsolescence: Studies in Language Contraction and Death*. New York: Cambridge University Press.