

Dialect influence on California Chicano English*

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Chicano English is a distinct U.S. English dialect common in California and the Southwestern United States. As Spanish immigrants from Mexico moved to the United States, especially throughout the 1990s, they learned English but carried some of the sounds and grammatical constructions from Spanish with them. Chicano English has become its own variety of English with organized linguistic patterns and must not be confused with English of second-language learners. This paper offers an accessible background piece to Chicano English in California and the ways that this dialect is changing due to contact with the surrounding dialects. The linguistic patterns of Chicano English can be traced to phonological influence from Spanish in its vowels, timing of syllables, intonation patterns, and some consonants and consonant clusters. Chicano English shows influence from well-known English dialects as well, including African-American English and California Anglo speakers who show /u/-fronting. The strength of these influences to Chicano English varies across the generation of speakers examined and where the speakers are from.

Keywords: Chicano English, California, /u/-fronting

1 Introduction

In recent years, Mexican American identity in the United States has become increasingly influential and widespread. Latinos are now the largest minority ethnic group in the U.S., representing more than 17% of the population (2013). With this growth, there has been a rise in the sociolinguistic study of the variation of language in the United States. More English speakers are of Mexican origin and are speaking a dialect known as Chicano English (Fought 2010: 44).

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Mendoza-Denton (1999: 377) mentions that most of the literature on this topic up to the 1980s has focused on Chicano *Spanish*. Previous research on Chicano English was often in the framework that Spanish was interfering with the acquisition of English. Many mistake Chicano English not as a dialect, but as the accented English of Spanish speakers who are learning English as a second language. The fact is, however, that predicting whether a Chicano speaker is bilingual or only an English-speaking monolingual is often impossible. Interference is useful to consider when dealing with second-language acquisition, however, it does not apply to native speakers of Chicano English (Mendoza-Denton 1999: 377, Santa Ana & Bayley 2008: 227).

Chicano English is most commonly spoken in California and the Southwest, although Puerto Rican English is another common variety similar to Chicano English (both having influence from Spanish) which is widely spoken in New York ("Talking with Mi Gente" 2005). Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006: 197) point out some popular misconceptions held about Chicano English, including that it is only spoken by speakers whose first language is Spanish. The reality is that although Chicano is influenced by Spanish, it exists independent of bilingualism. Along with Spanish, however, a notable amount of language contact occurrence is observed in Chicano English due to influence from other dialects of English. These occurrences become even more apparent in certain genders and social classes. Focusing on the California region, it is evident that Chicano English has been influenced in areas such as phonology, lexicon and syntax by California English, African-American English, and Spanish contact.

2 California English Influence

While it is true that Latino speakers in general have dialects that are very different from the Anglo speakers around them, it is important to remember that in California, both the dialects of Chicano English and California Anglo English emerged around the same historical time period. Eckert (2008: 29) discusses how today the California Anglo dialect has shown itself to be distinct based on stereotypes from gender, race and class through media associations with the male surfer and Valley Girl talk. As the Chicano ethnolect is not defined as the standard, any speaker who moves away from the ethnolect to take on these California English features is also often viewed as moving away from his or her ethnicity (Eckert 2008: 26-29).

Fought (1999: 5-6) looks at the phonological feature of /u/-fronting and compares California Anglo speakers' sound changes with the speech of Chicanos to observe the amount of linguistic transfer present between these two communities. She analyzes similarities and differences of language in relation to social structure between the majority and minority groups. Fought's focus is on a group of 15 to 32 year-olds of western Los Angeles to show linguistic influence across ethnic boundaries. Important social categories that she took into consideration for her study were social class and gang membership. As Fought explains, gang membership is significant to the study because both outside and inside group members usually affect linguistic behavior by striving to keep group boundaries (Fought 1999: 8-9).

Specifically, Fought (1999: 10-11) looks for the presence of /u/-fronting among the Latino young adults, as this sound change is increasingly common in the California Anglo dialect. The most frequent context for this sound change in both dialects is preceding alveolar stops and palatal fricatives. Looking at these environments taken from her interviews, Fought charts the

degree of /u/-fronting present among Chicano speakers. After coding speakers for both gang membership and social class, Fought finds that /u/-fronting is most common among middle class, non-gang members and the lowest degree of /u/-fronting was found among low-income gang members (Fought 1999: 13-14).

Fought (1999: 16) further divides the speakers by gender and finds that for the women, social class does not affect /u/-fronting for non-gang members. However, among gang-affiliated women, middle class women show more /u/-fronting than the lower social status. For the men, social class seems to be significant whether or not a man is gang-affiliated. Among only the gang-affiliated males, however, a low degree of /u/-fronting is observed. Gang affiliation is thus an important factor in the study for reflecting the social norms of this community. Fought (1999: 17-18) concludes that low socioeconomic groups will use /u/-fronting to distinguish themselves from non /u/-fronting gang affiliates.

/u/-fronting is not the only California Anglo English change that Chicano English speakers seem to borrow. Fought (2003: 92) gives another example of these minority speakers taking part in the sound changes found among the majority speakers - the phonetic vowel /æ/, which has shown a backing and rising tendency in the California Anglo and Chicano English community. Like /u/-fronting, Fought includes gang status as a social factor to see if this has any effect on the /æ/ variant. The individual speakers that Fought interviewed used this vowel in different contexts. Therefore, Fought chose to study the preceding and following consonant sounds of /æ/ and examined their effects on /æ/ being raised or backed. Her dependent variables were either /æ/-backing or /æ/-raising, and the independent variables were the preceding and following context as well as the speaker. The characteristics of the speaker were divided into sex, social class (middle class and working class), gang status, and language competence (Fought 2003: 127-128).

/u/-fronting was included as a third independent variable in the study as a check. Since /u/-fronting was already analyzed, Fought used this to verify the reliability of her method. After confirming its accuracy, Fought looked at /æ/-backing, a somewhat more recent change than /u/-fronting. Gang membership and sex were both significant variables. Non-gang speakers and women showed more backing over gang members and men, just as was true for /u/-fronting (Fought 2003: 128, 131).

The /æ/-raising showed a different pattern, however. For this variable, the exact opposite seemed to be true. With respect to sex, men raised /æ/ more frequently than women, and with regard to gang membership, gang members /æ/-raised more than non-gang members. Fought also found that /æ/ tended to be raised before nasals. Therefore, the people who tended to front /u/ the most also raised /æ/ the least. This pattern is not true for the Anglo community. It is also interesting to note that social class, independently, did not seem to have as large of an effect on linguistic variation as sex and gang status (Fought 2003: 128, 132-133, 137, 139).

Eckert (2008: 25) finds similar phonological differences in /æ/ among Chicano speakers in the Northern California region. While Anglo speech in this part of California raises /æ/ before nasals but backs /æ/ elsewhere, Chicano speakers are backing /æ/ in both cases. Eckert looks specifically at two elementary schools in Northern California to show how ethnically distinct manners of speaking can come from interaction and shared social practices. This feature is more commonly referred to as *nasal pattern*, in which /æ/ diphthongizes and the nucleus is raised before nasals (ex: [me□n] *man*). What makes this distinct to California is that /æ/ is raised only

before nasals whereas in other parts of the country, /æ/ is raised in other locations as well. However, Chicano speakers of Northern California generally do not show the nasal pattern, except when they are influenced by California Anglo speakers. After analyzing this pattern in the two elementary schools, Eckert found that the school with the higher population of Latino students showed the norm to be a no /æ/- raising pattern. The other school of primarily white students was the opposite, with /æ/-raising considered as the standard (Eckert 2008: 25-26, 34). Thus the /æ/ vowel height is significantly greater in the predominately Anglo school, and in both of the schools, vowel height is greater among girls than boys.

Eckert believes that this gender difference is due to girls' tendency to use language to signal social difference. Although the Anglo school shows more of the nasal pattern, both schools showed significant levels of this feature. However, those with the nasal pattern at the Latino school had a much weaker pattern than those at the Anglo school. Interestingly, at the predominately Latino school, nonraising appeared in the speech of all of the popular students, while all of the unpopular students showed some nasal pattern. Likewise, one Latina in the popular crowd at the Anglo school had very strong nasal patterns. Thus Eckert concludes that in-crowd participation and not ethnicity is the most important factor in determining the nasal pattern. This is significant in showing that dialect is influenced by what is considered as the standard by those in one's surroundings, not simply one's ethnicity (Eckert 2008: 36-38). Any use of white dialect features among the Latinos, including phonological and lexical features, are viewed as an attempt to assimilate to this ethnicity (Eckert 2008: 26-29). This helps explain one possible social reason for why Chicano English exhibits influence from contact with California Anglo English.

Mendoza-Denton (1999: 379) points out another phonological change in Los Angeles Chicano English. The variable /ɔ/ lowers to [æ] before /l/ such as in the word *elevator*. This feature could not have come from Spanish influence as Spanish does not have the /ɔ/ sound, meaning that it is likely to have come from influence from Anglo speakers of the area. Spanish influence would instead cause a tensing and raising of /ɔ/ to [e]. Therefore, the lowering of /ɔ/ either must have developed independently in Chicano English or must have been because of influence from the surrounding dialect (Mendoza-Denton 1999: 379).

A final important phonological feature characteristic of Chicano speakers that comes from contact with the local dialect is creaky voice. Creaky voice is a phenomenon that is more common among both Anglo and Latina women than men. Its rapid spread, although it is below the level of consciousness for most speakers, has been the recent study of Mendoza-Denton (2011). Creaky voice is the sound made when the subglottal pressure is lower than the pressure of modal voice, airflow is less, and the frequency is lower. It has been attributed to many different social characteristics such as social status. Mendoza-Denton demonstrates, however, that for Chicano girls with gang affiliation, creaky voice, especially as used in narratives, is attributable to the creation of a hardcore persona. It has been argued to be a marker of feminine toughness and masculine speech (Mendoza-Denton 2011: 264, 266).

Despite the evidence above for California Anglo English influence, some phonological features in Los Angeles are still only seen among Chicano speakers, like final -t/-d deletion in consonant clusters (ex. *last week* [læs wik]). These show that there are still many patterns from the surrounding dialect that have not yet influenced Chicano English (Santa Ana & Bayley 2008: 227). Eckert (2008: 29) explains one such pattern from California English that is not present in

Chicano English of this region. This is the vowel shift in the fronting of /uw/ and /ow/, which is a common occurrence distinctive for California dialect. Valley Girl speech and surfers use this fronting to pronounce [gɔwz] for *goes*. In addition to fronting back vowels, front, low vowels seem to be rotating counterclockwise. These California English features, however, are uncommon in Chicano English, especially among those affiliated with gangs. Some Chicanos show some fronting, but this is characterized as a way of being Chicano rather than assimilating to California dialect (Eckert 2008: 29, 34). Interestingly enough, in certain other features, however, such as the tensing and raising of /ɔ/ for example, Chicano speakers may actually be the ones influencing Californian speakers (Mendoza-Denton 1999: 383).

Besides phonological influence, lexical influences from California Anglo English can be seen in Chicano English. One feature in particular is discourse markers. Items such as *like*, *be like*, and *be all* (used to introduce quoted speech) which are now common discourse markers everywhere, began in California. *Like* especially has a very high frequency among Chicano speakers. These lexical features strengthen the claim that the Chicano spoken in this area is a Californian dialect of English (Fought 2003: 108-109).

3 African-American English Influence

Besides the impact that California Anglo English has on Chicano English, Fought (2003: 86) mentions how Chicano English is influencing or has been influenced by contact with other local dialects as well. Even though the Latino community Fought interviewed denied having much contact with African-Americans, the evidence seems to show otherwise. Fought looks at African-American English (AAE) and finds some grammatical similarities between the two dialects. Many phonological features, such as the use of stops in place of [θ] and [ð], are the same in both dialects. Reduction of consonant clusters and dropping final consonants not in a cluster are also common. Stress patterns in AAE have some differences for certain words (ex: *police*) with the stress falling on the first syllable instead of the second. Fought (2003: 87) thinks this may be similar to certain word stress in Chicano English.

Fought (2003: 87) explains that Spanish influence may be another reason for some AAE features in Chicano English. However, she claims that even if these phonological traits are not due to contact with AAE, the occurrence of them in AAE could reinforce their presence in Chicano English (Fought 2003: 87). The influence that Chicano English may have on AAE dialects in this area is not determined either. For example, Eckert (2008: 28) points out that a light /l/ is undoubtedly a feature that originated in Chicano English. However, light /l/ is a regular feature of AAE and has even been heard among some Anglos.

Impact with AAE may account for some syntactic features of Chicano English as well (Fought 2003: 95). Fought explains that there seems to be more syntactic overlap between these two dialects than phonological overlap. The use of habitual *be*, for example, is one very obvious characteristic of AAE that Chicano English uses. This trait has been shown to be more frequently used by males than females. The use of *it* as an empty subject pronoun is also evident for example, in “*It’s four of us, there’s two of them*” (p. 96). Lastly, Chicano and AAE speakers will sometimes use the perfective *had* in place of a simple past form used by most English speakers. This is especially common in a narrative such as “*The cops had went to my house*” (p.

96). Other features that may have originated from AAE contact are negative concord and subject-auxiliary inversion in questions. Although Spanish also has these traits, Fought offers some convincing evidence that these features are tied to AAE (Fought 2003: 97).

Negative concord in Chicano seems to follow the same patterns as in AAE, where more than two negations are acceptable in a sentence. Fought's (2003: 145) study on this topic finds what social factors, such as gang status, social class, bilingualism, and sex, effect negative concord use. Gang status seems to be the strongest social influence on the use of negative concord. Social class has a little less influence than gang status, with low income speakers using more negative concord than middle-class speakers. Bilingualism has the least effect on the use of negative concord, with bilinguals using negative concord slightly more. Lastly, sex was predicted to be very significant in the study, as it was with phonetic variables. Males were predicted to use more negative concord than females. However, gender had no significance and more negative concord was actually shown among women. Fought hypothesizes that there may be different sources of negative concord in Chicano English. Male speakers, for example, may use negative concord because of influence from AAE, whereas female speakers may use negative concord because of influences from Spanish. This could be one reason why sex does not play as high an effect as expected.

Overall, Fought gives some persuasive evidence that negative concord in Chicano English may be tied to AAE influence rather than Spanish influence. Spanish influence is very prominent in Chicano English, however, as will be shown next. Also, the fact that bilingualism tends to favor negative concord may be a tie to Spanish influence (Fought 2003: 148-149, 151).

4 Spanish Influence

Spanish influence, even for monolingual speakers, is an obvious feature of Chicano English in all areas. It is important to remember that Spanish in the California region has an older history than English. California was a part of Mexico until 1848 and Anglo American settlers did not arrive until midway through the 19th century (Eckert 2008: 28). Today, Spanish pronunciation has left its mark on Chicano English in its syllable timed quality and in articulation of alveolar stops. Most Chicanos use an apico-dental point of articulation for these stops as is used in Spanish (Santa Ana & Bayley 2008: 227).

The lexicon of Chicano speakers demonstrates extensive influence from Spanish as well. For example, Fought (2003: 105) shows how the term *Americanos* is usually not used to describe African-Americans or Latinos born in the U.S. among Mexican nationals. Therefore, the use of *American* to refer solely to a white Americans among Chicanos demonstrates Spanish influence. Other lexical examples include the use of *tell* for *ask* and *barely* to mean 'just recently.' The Spanish word *apenas* (barely) can mean either that something almost did not happen, but it did or that something happened recently. English does not use the word *barley* to signify that something happened recently. Thus this latter meaning is being carried over into English from Spanish. Fought also notes the use of the word *brothers* to refer to both brothers and sisters. This is translated from Spanish *hermanos*, which can mean either 'siblings' or only 'male siblings' (Fought 2003: 106). In *if*-clauses, Chicano English shows a pattern of using *would* in both clauses just as in Spanish where the pluperfect subjunctive can be used for both clauses.

The use of prepositions, however, seems to be the feature most obviously tied to Spanish. For example, some Latinos may say *on June* instead of *in June* as Spanish only has a single preposition, *en*, to express both *in* and *on* (Fought 2003: 99-101).

Overall, Fought (2003: 109) explains how older generations of Chicano speakers show more direct transfers from Spanish than the younger generations. Several of the Chicanos that Fought interviewed were monolingual English-speakers that no longer could speak Spanish due to generational language loss in their families. This may be because English is considered the language of higher prestige when it comes to attitudes about these two languages. Mendoza-Denton (1999: 382) notes that among Chicano English speakers there exists a continuum between bilinguals, monolingual Chicano English speakers, and Californian English speakers at least not on the segmental level, even if differences between all these groups are not noticeable on the phonological level. For those who do know Spanish (mainly the older generations), they showed a higher instance of codeswitching to Chicano English when speaking in Spanish (Fought 2003: 158). In many of the younger speakers, this may have been because they lacked fluency in Spanish rather than the intentional codeswitching that is done by fluent speakers. Similarly, older speakers show the opposite tendency in that they codeswitch from English into Spanish when they need greater fluency (Fought 2003: 155, 158-159).

5 Conclusion

Chicano English in California has shown an observable amount of influence from language contact in phonology, lexicon and syntax. Not only does Chicano English show influence from Spanish, it is also being influenced by the surrounding California and AAE dialect. As the study of Chicano English dialect is still fairly recent, an interesting future research question would be the study of the amount of influence going in the reverse direction. A few features ("Talking with Mi Gente" 2005) have already been noted where the Chicano dialect is having an impact on California and African-American English. Whether or not Chicano English is affecting dialects of Chicano Spanish would be another interesting study. For now, it is helpful for sociolinguists to recognize this contact-induced language change in California Chicano English to watch how it will progress in the future.

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