A Century of Accent Change in Australian English

Abstract

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This paper reports on the first of a series of analyses from the Australian Ancestors Project (AA) which is a large scale endeavour designed to examine the origins and evolution of the Australian English (AusE) accent through an acoustic study of speech from twentieth century audio recordings of elderly Australians. The present paper provides an analysis of vowels sounds used by Australians born in the 1880s and gives some insight into pronunciation prior to the time of Federation. Our current body of empirical evidence for Australian accent evolution is restricted to the second half of the 20th century and this new resource provides valuable evidence for the dynamic processes involved in dialect change. This analysis is similar to the acoustic component of the ONZE project (Gordon, Campbell, Hay, Maclagan, Sudbury and Trudgill, 2004) which provides an invaluable model for the examination of historical speech data.

We believe that AusE began in the early colony as a koine, that is, a new dialect that developed as a result of contact between speakers of different but mutually intelligible forms of a language (Kerswill, 2002). Koineisation is often complete by the second generation in the form of a unique dialect specific to a settlement and we have evidence from primary written sources that AusE was indeed firmly established by the second native-born generation of white settlers (Dixon, 1822). Bernard (1969) refers to this dialect as proto-Broad which developed and diverged between the 1850s and 1880s into a continuum containing at least the Broad and General types (Mitchell and Delbridge, 1965). Mitchell suggests that the 1880s was an important time for linguistic change in Australia (Yallop, 2003) as a result of large scale immigration from Britain. Leitner (2004) views this period as the second formative phase in AusE accent development following the accent inception phase. The present paper focuses on the evolution of AusE by examining the speech of people born during this period of change. Although it is acknowledged that dialect shift may occur throughout a person's lifetime (Harrington, Palethorpe and Watson, 2000), once an individual reaches puberty such accent change usually proceeds more slowly than changes occurring in the dialect through evolution (Chambers, 2002). This provides justification for our assumption that the speech of elderly people in this study is likely to represent the accent types that were current in the community before Federation.

This research provides a comparison between the vowels of five male Australians speakers born in the 1880s with five born in the 1980s (Australian Voices Project, Cox and Palethorpe 2003). The elderly speakers were recorded between 1962 and 1964, when they were in their 80s, and the modern speakers were teenagers recorded in 1998. Two of the elderly speakers were from rural NSW and three were from rural

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Tasmania. The five teenage boys are all from rural NSW. For each speaker, stressed vowels were selected from at least 15 minutes of continuous speech and analysed acoustically to extract formant data using variety of standard signal processing techniques available in SHLRC (Harrington and Cassidy, 1999). Vowel quality is described with reference to the first two formant frequencies for the target(s) of monophthongs and diphthongs, and vowel spaces and diphthong trajectories are compared within and across groups of speakers.

Results reveal similarities between individuals born in the 1880s and interesting differences between the 1880s' and 1980s' data. Monophthong results show particular evolutionary changes for several vowels and some separation between pairs that currently display very similar target formant patterns (/a/ and /ʌ/, /ɪ/ and /i/, /ʊ/ and /ɔ/.) Diphthong results indicate systemic realignment or reassignment for /oʊ / and /eɪ/ and possible monophthong/diphthong interdependence shift for the first target of /aɪ/. Preliminary comparison with historical New Zealand data reveal striking similarities between the Australian and New Zealand speakers born before 1890.

These results may shed some light on the nature of vowel production in the late nineteenth century and allow us to make comment about characteristics of chain shifts in AusE We are able to compare our findings with evidence from the few written sources that are available about the nature of AusE in this period of development.

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