Arab Americans and sound change in southeastern Michigan

SAI SAMANT

Arab American Students express intra-ethnic distinctions through English vowels

Introduction

Arab Americans comprise one of the fastest growing immigrant groups in the United States. Like many of the other groups discussed in the articles in this issue, we know almost nothing about the linguistic practices of Arab Americans. This paper discusses one aspect of language use among U.S.-born and immigrant Arab American youth living in Dearborn, Michigan. I show how the participants in this study use a vowel that is part of the Northern Cities Shift (NCS), a widespread regional sound change in the United States. This study and others like it have repeatedly shown that fine-grained differences in the pronunciation of vowels are a rich resource for the expression of social identities and distinctions (Eckert, 2000; Hay and Drager, 2007; Dodsworth, 2008). Until recently, most studies investigating regional sound changes had not considered the social patterning of these variables among minority speakers. This lack of attention may stem from longstanding views that use of these variables is limited to white speakers (Labov, 2001). This study shows that Arab Americans in Dearborn are making use of NCS variables to express social differences that are not related to mainstream white majority speakers but based on local social information and categories. In the remainder of this paper I describe the community and research site, then present and discuss the results of my statistical analysis.

Arab Americans in Southeastern Michigan

Roughly 200,000 people of Arab descent live throughout the Southeastern Michigan suburbs surrounding Detroit. Arab Americans have been migrating to and settling in Southeastern Michigan for the past 200 years. Though the automobile industry, which served as a primary employment source for many Arab (and other) immigrants in the early to mid-twentieth century, has seen a recent drastic decline that has contributed to ongoing economic depression throughout Michigan, Arabs have continued to come



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to the greater Detroit region to join family members and participate in the well-established Arab American communities.

Arab Americans in Southeastern Michigan vary widely in their religious, cultural, national, and linguistic (including several Arabic varieties and other languages) backgrounds. According to a report on the Detroit Arab American Study (DAAS), a 2004 large-scale survey of the Arab population in metropolitan Detroit, many Arabs in Southeastern Michigan are from Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, and Yemen. Slightly over half identify as Christian (58%) and just under half are Muslim (42%). The Arab population is also quite varied in terms of socioeconomic status, settlement, migration, and 'integration' or 'assimilation' into the mainstream white communities.[1] The DAAS and other research (e.g. Abraham & Shryock, 2000; Suleiman, 1999) suggest that patterns of residence and interaction through Arab American communities in the Detroit suburbs serve to create and maintain boundaries among Arab Americans along lines of kinship, nationality, and religion. Key to my study, this suggests that the differences among Arab Americans at an intra-ethnic level can be just as salient as differences at an inter-ethnic or inter-racial level.

Dearborn, Michigan, where I gathered my data, is a suburb of about 90,000 people directly adjacent to the western edge of Detroit. It has the most highly concentrated percentage of Arab Americans (30%) of any town in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau Report, 2003). Dearborn has been recognized at a national level as a sociopolitical and cultural center for the Arab American community. Many students I spoke to during my time at Mercer High School, my research site, told me that their parents chose to come to Dearborn because they had family or friends there, or because they knew that it was a place where Arab families lived. Dearborn's unofficial status as a point of entry into the Arab American community in the U.S. has resulted in continued Arab immigration to the area. Thus, the makeup of the Arab American community in Dearborn is somewhat dynamic: the national, religious, and linguistic backgrounds are in flux within the community as immigrants arrive there, while some established residents move to other suburbs as they gain socioeconomic footholds.

Arab Americans in Dearborn are generally – though not exclusively – concentrated on the eastern side of the town, where Mercer High School is located (see below for further discussion).[2] Lebanese Shi'a families, about two-thirds of Arab Americans in the city, have settled in Dearborn and have a considerable economic and social presence.[3] Yemen, Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine are the other main nationalities of Arab Americans in Dearborn; many of these families arrived in the U.S. over the past ten to fifteen years and have considerably fewer economic and social resources than the Lebanese families. These differences in power and status have led to tension between Lebanese and non-Lebanese families, and this tension exists at some level at the high school as well. Non-Lebanese students often feel discriminated against by the mostly Lebanese school administration, and Lebanese students often hold prejudices against non-Lebanese students.

Though Dearborn is a hub of the Middle Eastern population in the U.S., the Arab Americans who live there do not encompass the diversity of the Arab American community in Southeastern Michigan or at the national level. Rather, Dearborn represents a unique slice of Arab American demographics in the U.S., and its demographics highlight the importance of national, religious, and family ties that influence patterns of residence and interaction for Arabs in Southeastern Michigan. In my discussion of the results below, I show that the specific details of Dearborn are relevant to my analysis of vowel pronunciations.

The study

I gathered my data at Mercer High School in Dearborn during the 2006–2007 school year. Mercer High has about 2400 students and about 80–90% of those are Arab.[4] There are many indications at and around Mercer of a strong Arab community. The shops on the streets near Mercer are a mix of standard American fast food joints and mini marts, along with food, clothing and other shops catering specifically to an Arab American community, with goods and services such as Middle Eastern groceries and restaurants, Arabic language movie rentals, mosques, and women's Middle Eastern clothing.

At Mercer itself there are also several indicators of an Arab American presence. Visitor signs are bilingual – in both English and Arabic.

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Though English is the official language of the school district and the district promotes an English-only policy, the school runs an intensive bilingual education program.[5] About half of the teachers and two-thirds of the administrators and staff at Mercer are Arab American and speak Arabic regularly. Though many teachers make a point to avoid it in the classroom to stay in line with the district policy, I encountered Arabic regularly being spoken between students, between teachers, and between students and teachers and administrators. Students' use of Arabic was highly varied. Many students regularly used a few Arabic words that seemed like they were part of the regular parlance of the high school (e.g., *yallah* 'come on' and *wallah* 'I swear' were both very common), but one-word Arabic insertions into English like these were often the extent of most students' Arabic use. Among students who had come to the U.S. recently, many of them preferred to use Arabic with each other and were much less comfortable speaking English.

The linguistic phenomenon of interest in this paper is the American English vowel /æ/ (as in *cat*). This vowel is undergoing change as part of a set of regional sound changes affecting six vowels, known as the Northern Cities Shift and shown in Figure 1. The NCS is found in the northern urban and suburban centers from Chicago and Detroit to Buffalo. Sociophonetic studies – which focus on the relationship between subtle, fine-grained phonetic variation and social factors – have repeatedly found that even small differences in the production of vowels are a rich source for the expression of social distinctions.

Much of the research on the NCS has focused on white speakers and our understanding of what the vowels of the NCS look like are based mostly on these studies (Labov, Yaeger, & Steiner, 1972; Gordon, 2001; Eckert, 2000; Hillenbrand, Getty, Clark, & Wheeler, 1995; Anderson, 2003; Evans, 2001). More recent work has examined the NCS in the speech of ethnic minority speakers (e.g. Gordon, 2000), expanding the sociolinguistic picture of how regional sound changes spread to different groups of speakers. This more recent research suggests that predictions or assumptions about who does or does not use (or 'participate in') the NCS cannot be made solely along racial and ethnic lines; it is not the case that white speakers use variables associated with regional sound changes and minority speakers do not. Recent work provides examples of minority speakers, some of whom use the NCS and some of whom do not (Roeder, 2006; Gordon, 2000; Ito, 2001; Jones and Preston, forthcoming). And, importantly, for minority speakers who do use regional sound changes like the NCS, it is not necessarily because they are trying to 'sound white,' an easy claim to make if we start with the premise that a mainstream regional sound change is the exclusive purview of white speakers only (Fought, 1999, 2002). My goal in examining the patterns of an NCS variable among Arab Americans is to contribute to our knowledge of who uses the NCS variables and to expand our understanding of the kinds of social differentiation that the NCS can express. As I discuss below, the sociolinguistic patterns of /æ/-shifting in the NCS among these Arab American youth illustrate how intra-ethnic social distinctions are expressed through variation in the NCS vowels.

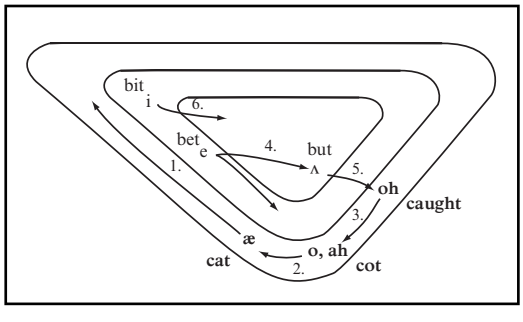


Figure 1: Illustration of the Northern Cities Shift (Labov, Ash & Boberg, 2006: 190)

The results of my study are based on data gathered during sociolinguistic interviews with seventeen students at Mercer. All of the participants in my study identify as Arab, Arab American, or Arabic (some, but not all, students use these terms interchangeably) and as Muslim. The participants come from a variety of national backgrounds, with about half from Lebanese families, and consist of nine male and seven female participants. Interviews lasted 45 to 90 minutes and consisted of open-ended questions about, for example, students' social life, friends, plans for the future, and thoughts on Dearborn. The findings presented in this paper on /ae/-shifting are part of larger project investigating several vowels of the NCS (Samant, 2010, to appear).

To get a sense of how the /æ/ vowel appears in the English of Arab Americans in my study, I performed an acoustic analysis of speech sound

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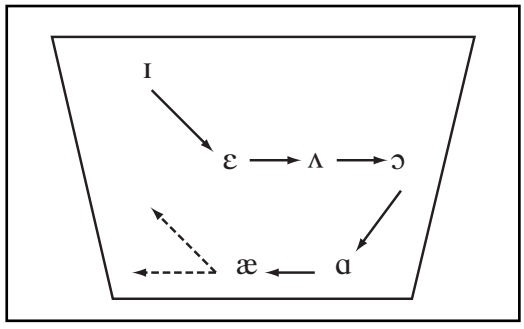


Figure 2: Raising and fronting of /æ/

production.[6] The participants in this study demonstrate social patterning in both raising and fronting of /æ/, which is illustrated in Figure 2 (with dashed arrows). This is different from the dimension of interest in past studies, which has generally focused on raising alone (Labov, Yaeger & Steiner, 1972; Callary, 1975; Herndobler, 1993; Eckert, 2000; Gordon, 2001; Roeder, 2006). The social variables of interest in this paper are given in Table 1.

The variable of speaker sex along with the interaction of ethnicity and religious practice are the significant social predictors of /æ/ raising and fronting. The social variables in my study emerged from the recurring themes in the interview and my observations and interactions with the students during my time at Mercer. For instance, the distinction between non-Lebanese and Lebanese students came up regularly. Alex, a male student whose parents were from Syria, said:[8,9]

> It's like, you know, most of the school their nationality is Lebanese and so, you know, they place theirself as higher class than like Iraqis and Yemenis. They think they're, like, the cool ones. Cause it's like the most populated here…The Iraqis and the Yemenis they're always looked down on. Who are you? You're garbage.

Alex's views are representative of many non-Lebanese (and some Lebanese) students' opinions on the place of non-Lebanese students (particularly Yemeni and Iraqi students) in the social order of Mercer. Dee, a female Iraqi student, felt heightened divisions among Arabs when she moved to Dearborn when she was young:

> We're stupid like that. It doesn't make sense that we're so divided. We should stick together since the rest of the world is hating on us so much. But I think it's gotten a lot less. When I first came to Dearborn, I never knew there were different type of Arabs, I thought we just Arabs. Then I came here and was like daaamn you guys hate on each other a lot. Especially when we first came.

Table 1: Summary of statistically significant social variables[7]

Variable	Levels within the variable
Gender	Male
	Female
Ethnicity	Lebanese
	Non-Lebanese
Religious Practice	Regular (characterized by weekly mosque attendance, daily prayer)
	Sporadic (mosque attendance at major holidays or weddings, no daily prayer)

My results show that speaker sex is a significant predictor of /æ/-fronting, which is somewhat surprising, given that raising is the more commonly observed dimension of /æ/-variation in the NCS and is associated with and documented in the speech of young women (Callary, 1975; Labov, Yaeger & Steiner, 1972; Herndobler, 1993; Eckert, 2000). However, the men in my study tended to have a more fronted /æ/ than the women. The male lead in fronting could be related to an earlier stage of the shift (before raising occurs). But, it could also be fronting that is unrelated to the shift itself, or rather, a distancing from the NCS-like variants.

Ethnicity and religious practice are the other two variables that are shown to condition /æ/ raising and fronting, though only in interaction and not individually. Among students with a sporadic religious practice, the patterning of /æ/ differs between the two ethnic categories (Lebanese and non-Lebanese), while students with a regular religious practice show no such ethnic distinction in /æ/-variation. Lebanese students with sporadic religious practice have the most raised and most fronted /æ/ (i.e., they are the most NCS-like), while non-Lebanese students with sporadic religious practice are the least raised and least fronted (i.e., the least NCS-like). Students with regular religious practice across both ethnic categories generally fall in between the two sporadic groups.

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Among Arab students at Mercer, religious identity as a Muslim is generally taken for granted, but the degree to which it is a part of students' daily lives varies somewhat. Students who pray daily, attend mosque weekly, and are involved in being Muslim in other ways are identified as having a regular religious practice, while students who do not pray regularly or who participate only in major religious holidays (e.g. Ramadan) are identified as having sporadic religious practice. Though this break is somewhat arbitrary, there is a degree to which it fell naturally out of the data: students either were connected to religion in a very regular, daily way or they were not.

Religious practice appears to have almost diverging effects on Lebanese and non-Lebanese students and it is this pattern I explore here. One possible explanation that has emerged from my fieldwork is that for Lebanese and non-Lebanese students, the level of religious practice carries different meanings. Several Lebanese students talked about their families being 'Americanized' in many different ways and religious identity was a part of that process. In her interview with me, Zeinab, a Lebanese female student, identified strongly with being Arabic and Muslim, but did not see herself as very religious:

> When I was younger I used to go to Arabic school and they used to teach us and stuff. But like I stopped doing that. My mother teaches me here and there but it's not like I'm totally full-on religious or anything. [*SS: Do you pray regularly*?] No, I do not pray. [*SS: Oh you don't pray at all?*] At all [*SS: Do you ever go to the mosque?*] Only if a family member has died or during Ramadan or during the holidays and stuff.

For Lebanese students, who are generally unproblematically part of the mainstream socioeconomically powerful group in Mercer, less and less religious practice may be part of a process of assimilation occurring at a familial or cultural level, but does not diminish or erode their strong, though perhaps symbolic, affiliation with being Arab and being Muslim. Zeinab went on to describe her own religious practice as what she saw as normal:

> Cause there are a lot of kids that don't follow everything. [*SS: What do you mean, everything?*] Like the religion, you have the girls that walk around with the scarves and everything. Total package. Then you have the regular ones like me that are just — not that you don't care but you're not ready to take that step.

In contrast, for non-Lebanese participants, sporadic religious practice was not part of a process of assimilation (some non-Lebanese students described their parents' resistance to assimilation). Sporadic religious practice was about the participant's personal relationship with Islam or with their families. Aisha, a Jordanian female student participant, told me that she was not praying daily or attending mosque regularly because she was in the process of figuring out what Islam meant to her, even though she noted that this process was upsetting her family. It may be that Lebanese students with sporadic practice do not see their religious practice as a source of contention or conflict for them, while non-Lebanese students who have sporadic practice find it problematic because it is in conflict with their beliefs or with family pressures to participate in religious practices. These differences in the identification of sporadic religious practice may help to account for why it is linked to differences in pronunciation of /æ/ in different ethnic categories.

Discussion

In this paper I have discussed the sociolinguistic patterning of the vowel /æ/ among seventeen Arab American high school students in Southeastern Michigan. The results of my analysis demonstrate that Arab Americans use a feature of the Northern Cities Shift in a socially patterned way, expressing macrosocial (i.e., gender) and local, community-specific distinctions. The ethnic categorization I make – between Lebanese and non-Lebanese students – relies on specific social, economic, and cultural divisions at Mercer that are tied to similar patterns in Dearborn.

Consideration of the distinctions between Arab Americans is possible because I do not start with the premise that I am measuring Arab Americans' 'accommodation to' or 'participation in' the NCS, which is how studies of minority speakers and regional sound change are often framed (e.g. Roeder, 2006; Evans, 2001; Gordon, 2000). The traditional view fails to acknowledge that the variables of the NCS are more or less 'out there' and available to white and non-white speakers alike for their sociolinguistic use. The fallout of presuming that use of

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a regional sound change is limited to white speakers is that there is a very limited understanding of minority speakers' use of regional sound changes, both at a descriptive level (i.e., do minority speakers use the NCS?) and at a more analytical level (i.e., what is the sociolinguistic patterning?). While several studies show that white speakers use the NCS to express subtle, local social distinctions and meaning, there are very few examples of the same kind of research among minority speakers (cf. Fought, 1999, Wong, this issue for exceptions). The sociolinguistic patterning of /æ/ that I find among the Arab American participants in my study is not based on a view of the NCS in which use of NCS variables expresses an accommodation to the mainstream (i.e., white speakers). As sociolinguists continue to explore regional sound change in ethnic minority speakers and enrich understanding of shifts like the NCS, theories of sound change will continue to develop in light of these new findings. It has become apparent that use of these variables does not in fact 'stop short at the racial line' (Labov, 2001:506) and that the social and linguistic boundaries between and within ethnic groups are in fact quite diffuse, and offer a new lens through which to examine the spread of regional sound change. ■

Notes

1 *White* here refers to European American or Caucasian populations, but this obscures some of the complicated racial identities at work among Arab Americans. The DAAS suggests that Arab American self-identification as white is varied, and may be linked to individual religious, ethnic, and political beliefs and identities. Though Arab Americans are identified as racially 'white' by the 2000 U.S. Census, none of the participants in my study (or more, generally, Arab students at the school who I spoke with) identified as white. I treat Arab/Arabic as an ethnic identity distinct from a white racial identity.
2 Mercer High School is a pseudonym.
3 Shi'a is a denomination of Islam.
4 At the time I was visiting Mercer, the district did not keep official records on Arab student enrollment but instead classified them as 'white'. My estimate is based on my own observations and conversations with several administrators.
5 It is my understanding that the bilingual education program lost nearly all of its funding in 2008, but during my time at the school, the program served at least 200 students.
6 I measured approximately 30 occurrences of the vowel in each interview, for a total of 612 measures for F1 and F2 of /æ/. Prior to performing any statistical analysis of the data, I normalized the formant measures to minimize variation due to physiological differences and clarify social patterns in the data (Clopper, Pisoni, & de Jong, 2004; Johnson, 2008). I use the software Praat package <http://www.fon.hum.uva.nl/praat/> for acoustic analysis and formant measurement.
7 Several other social and linguistic variables are included in the analysis, but they are beyond the scope of this discussion.
8 Participant names are pseudonyms.
9 Quotes are taken from interviews with participants.

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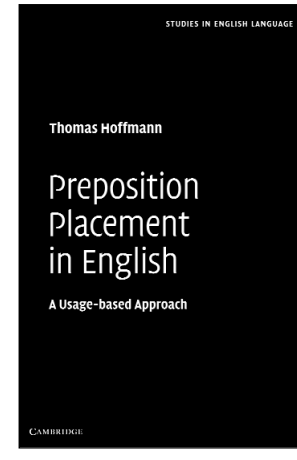
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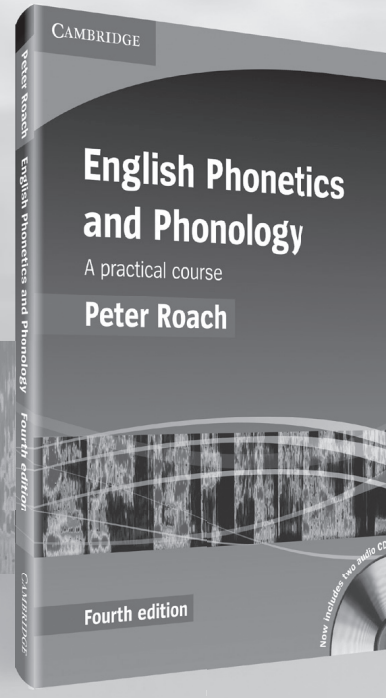
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