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Phonological change in a small language community

JOSÉ IGNACIO HUALDE
Department of Spanish, Italian and Portuguese & Department of Linguistics, 4080 FLB, University of Illinois, Urbana, IL 61801, USA
E-mail: jihualde@uiuc.edu

Bullock and Gerfen show that two of the last speakers of French in Frenchville, Pennsylvania, systematically replace the French front mid round vowel (in words like *deux*, *neuf*) with the rhoticized schwa of American English, their dominant language. As the authors argue, it is unlikely that this sound change would have arisen in the speech of French speakers who were not bilingual in English.

Some aspects of this substitution are puzzling. As the authors assert, front rounded vowels are crosslinguistically marked, for which reason their loss from the phonological inventory in a situation of language contact is not unexpected. But in the French of their Frenchville speakers, the high front round vowel /y/ does not seem to be affected in a systematic manner. Only the mid front round vowel has altered its pronunciation in a radical way. No clear reason is given for this lack of parallelism in the treatment of high and mid front rounded vowels.

Secondly, and more importantly, the particular sound substitution described in this paper is hardly one that we would expect a priori. As the authors show, spectrographically the rhoticized vowels produced by their speakers are quite different from the non-rhoticized mid front rounded vowels of other French varieties (including the French variety of earlier generations of speakers from Frenchville), as reflected in very different F3 trajectories. No doubt, auditorily these two types of vowels are rather different as well, as the authors had no trouble spotting them in the speech of their Frenchville informants.

As the authors also point out, in French-based Creoles the usual evolution is the unrounding of front rounded vowels (e.g. /y/ > /i/, /ø/ > /e/). In other situations of language contact, second language acquisition, etc., it is not uncommon for the co-occurrence of rounding and fronting to be avoided by backing, instead of unrounding (e.g. /y/ > /u/, /ø/ > /o/). The substitution reported in this paper is thus particular to the American English-French context. But, even in this context, it appears to be somewhat unusual. In the incomplete, developing, French variety that we may dub American High School French (AHSF), what we typically find at earlier stages is that the mid front rounded vowel of French is replaced by /u/; that is, *deux* is pronounced as /du/. (Since both rounded high vowels are also interpreted as /u/, *deux*, *doux* and *du* are at least potential homonyms in some versions of AHSF.) This is in fact what we find in the typical American pronunciation of French names such as *Richelieu*, *Depardieu* and in recent French borrowings like *pas de deux*, *masseuse*, etc. (also in older borrowings). The question then is why the English-dominant bilingual speakers in this study identify the vowel of Fr. *deux* with that of Eng. *sir* instead of with that of Eng. *do*.

I would suggest the following possible scenario. The cross-linguistic identification was made in the phonetic environment before /r/, where rhoticization in the vowel would be induced by the following consonant and, arguably, there is a special resemblance between the two vowels that are involved in the substitution. To illustrate with an example, the vowel of Fr. *soeur* was identified as being more-or-less identical to and replaceable by that of Eng. *sir*. This is also an option in AHSE, I believe. Now, this happens to be a case where segmentation is particularly ambiguous in English: Do we have a sequence of schwa followed by a rhotic consonant or simply a rhoticized schwa? Both analyses have been proposed by English phonologists. Evidently, the bilingual speakers in Bullock and Gerfen's study adopted the latter analysis and used this as the basis for establishing a more general correspondence, allowing for the optional replacement of the mid front rounded vowel by rhoticized schwa also in contexts where an /r/ does not immediately follow, as in *deux*, *neuf*, etc. That is, the correspondence or identification between the two vowel phones was established in a context where it was motivated by acoustic similarity but was later analogically extended to other contexts where it would not be phonetically justified.

To what extent is the fact that French is a dying language in Frenchville relevant for this sound change? In my opinion this fact is not very important in order to explain the inception of the change, but it is crucial to explain its spread. Radical sound transfers like the one reported by Bullock and Gerfen may also take place in situations of stable bilingualism in communities with large numbers of bilingual speakers, but it is likely that they will meet with resistance to their spread on the part of more conservative speakers. In the case at hand, it appears that we have a community of two speakers: two brothers who use French only in interactions with each other. Other former members of the community, already deceased, apparently did not use this pronunciation. The Bullock and Gerfen paper shows that we have much to

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learn from the study of such small language communities. Such situations are more common than one might perhaps suspect when we consider immigrant families. We may have, for instance, a Hungarian-speaking family in some town in the American Midwest where use of Hungarian is limited to communication within the family and the language may develop in peculiar ways. Studies like the one we are reviewing should serve to call attention to the study of language change in such small language communities.

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