

Generational differences in Voice Onset Time and Final Obstruent Neutralization in Wisconsin German and English, 1863-2013

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In this paper I compare voice onset time (VOT) and final obstruent neutralization (FON) data from audio recordings made 1946-2013 for speakers of German and English in Wisconsin. I focus on how the contrasts are exhibited in written sources from German immigrant writers and their descendants from 1863-1940. In written sources, a loss of distinction in how an author perceives an initial consonant might be shown in their spelling by writing *put* when “but” is intended. By using written sources from German immigrants to the Upper Midwest in the 19th century, combined with audio recordings made from the 1940s to 2013, we can observe usage in individuals and at the community level over a long span of time to show the continual development of each feature.

Written sources were collected from five communities with a total of 98 authors. The documents, generally letters, were written by German immigrants and their descendants. Many of these writers were literate in German, but for those who have moved to the U.S. as adults, they were not subjected to the American education system and most had not received formal training in writing English. Recordings were made from both male and female speakers in German and English in the late 1940s and 2013.

I compare VOT and FON data by generation, first analyzing which authors exhibited vernacular data forms, then I focus on individual obstruent variation. Results show that while first and second generation German authors exhibit a variety of syllable initial vernacular forms, these level out by the third & fourth generation, where only /t^h/ vs. /t/ (transcription conventions show the distinction is maintained between [spread glottis] vs. unmarked [], where /t^h/ is the consonant in /t^hu:/ ‘two’ and /t/ is the consonant in /tu:/ ‘do’). I find a variety of vernacular forms in data collected from both German and English speakers for syllable final forms, although specific vernacular forms are distinct in each language. In the first and second generations, German syllable final vernacular forms vary, but by the third generation only /s^h/ vs. /s/ (as in /s^hu:/ ‘sue’ vs. /su:/ ‘zoo’) vernacular forms are written. English syllable initial vernacular forms show /t^h/ vs. /t/ forms recede in written data by the third generation and /k^h/ vs. /k/ (as in /k^hæp^h/ ‘cap’ and /kæp^h/ ‘gap’) vernacular forms are present in the written data of second-third generation, but remain in spoken data from second-fourth generation.

Written sources can be used with audio recordings, bringing historical sociolinguistics together with sociophonetics and the analysis of generation with the linguistic data gives a more nuanced description of the development and progression of these features in the Upper Midwest.