Interpreting *flip-flop* patterns in vowel mergers-in-progress

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**flip-flop**

- **flip-flop:**
  - “a process in which two segments exchange position in the phonological pattern.”  
  (Chomsky & Halle 1968:355)
  - “when a rule inverts distinctive-feature values in such a way as to change Segment A into Segment B, and vice-versa.”  
  (Moreton 1999)

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**flip-flop**

- Non-merger example: SVS  
  (Wroblewski et al. 2010; Labov et al. 2006)
  - The front vowels involved in the Southern Vowel Shift might be analyzed as undergoing *flip-flop* with respect to peripherality.

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**Question**

- Is the occurrence of *flip-flop* evidence of hypercorrection?  
- (If so, does that suggest that mergers actually can carry social meaning?)
‘Hypercorrection’

• “Two different types of prestige which may trigger a style shift that overshoots the norm...
  • First, *hypercorrection* or orientation to *overt prestige* refer to a situation in which speakers’ style shift is triggered by their *orientation to the standard dialect.*
  • Second, *hyperaccommodation* or orientation to *covert prestige* is a type of style shift due to speakers’ *accommodation to a local variety.*”
  (Di Paolo 1990:267)

‘Hypercorrection’ of LOT & THOUGHT

• Bill Peters, 80yrs, Pennsylvania
  (Labov, Yaeger & Steiner 1972:235-236; see also Labov 1994)
  — “His vowels are distinct in connected speech, but in minimal pairs he seems to be orienting to the younger norm.
  — The short-o and long open-o classes are still distinct, even though they are very close and sound ‘the same’ to him.
  — Mysteriously enough, Peters can make these two phonemes ‘the same’ and yet keep them apart.”

‘Hypercorrection’ of LOT & THOUGHT

• “a speaker may vary in pronunciation from a complete merger to a strong contrast depending on how the speaker assesses the situational context ... Currently, *speakers hypercorrect in some situations by merging the vowels.*”
  (Di Paolo 1990:289)

• “Utah speakers can be said to be hypercorrecting toward a ‘false’ standard.”
  (Di Paolo 1990:268)

flip-flop of LOT & THOUGHT

• “One of the ... responses to *Don/dawn* can be discounted because the speaker pronounced *Don* as *[dɔn]* and *dawn* as *[dan]*.”
  (Labov 1994:355, reporting on Herold 1990)

flip-flop of LOT & THOUGHT

• Speaker 251: Middle class White Female, 16yrs
  (Di Paolo 1990:281)
  — “The means for the onset of F1 indicate that 251 reverses the traditional height distinction between *(ɔ)* and *(ø)*. That is, *(ɔ)* is a lower vowel than *(ø)* at the onset. ...
  — Similarly, the 2.01 dB difference in the VQI between the onset of *(ɔ)* and *(ø)* is the reverse of what is expected. ...
  — Thus, two of the three acoustic parameters indicate a flip-flop of *(ɔ)* and *(ø)*, and the third, F2, does not distinguish the two vowels.”

Phonetic/Phonological Description

• “The coalescence of /a/ and /ɔ/ in all contexts among young speakers points toward the *loss of the /ɔ/ phoneme* in the northern Rockies, as far west as Idaho.” (Pederson 2001:285)
  — centralizing, lowering, unrounding, & monophthongization of /ɔ/ (THOUGHT)
  — little backing or raising of /ɔ/ (LOT), (cf. Baranowski, this session)
Methodology (Hall-Lew 2009)

- acoustic analysis of sociolinguistic interviews with a sample of 30 San Franciscans native to one neighborhood, the Sunset District.
- sample stratified according to age, gender, and ethnicity: European (mostly Irish) American & Asian (mostly Chinese) American.
- all either English monolingual or English-dominant since at least age 5.

Multiple Regression Models

- dependent linguistic factor:
  - single numerical representation of the distance between LOT & THOUGHT midpoints, per speaker (both Pillai-Bartlett statistic & average Euclidean distances) (no off-glide data included in statistical tests)
- independent social factors:
  - speaker age (16-76)
  - speaker ethnicity (AsianAm / EuroAm)
  - speaker gender (F / M)

Results (Hall-Lew 2009)

- San Francisco is a community of near merger
  - LOT-THOUGHT is a merger by approximation or drift, not expansion (cf. Herold 1990)
  - Many San Franciscans who do have the LOT-THOUGHT distinction still show much phonetic overlap between vowel distributions.
  - Many San Franciscans who cannot perceive the distinction nonetheless produce a subtle phonetic difference between vowel classes.
Results (Hall-Lew 2009)
• Significant apparent time correlation
  — older speakers had greater distances between vowel classes than younger speakers

Results (Hall-Lew 2009)
• No significant main effects between merger & ethnicity or merger & gender.
  — However, apparent time correlations found for Asian Americans, but not European Americans.
  — And, apparent time correlations found for Females, but not for Males.
  — Near-significant apparent time correlation among Asian American Females; none among any other social sub-group.

Analysis (Hall-Lew 2009)
• Why Asian Americans?
• Why Women?

Analysis (Hall-Lew 2009)
• The neighborhood’s Asian American identity has emerged as the same time that this sound change has.
  — Asian Americans are more likely to construct their local identity in line with newer social & linguistic resources.
• European Americans have older linguistic resources for marking their local identity.
  — The older persona/figure of local authenticity was both 
  European American and Upper Working class male:
    • a physically tough, upwardly-mobile civil servant; also typically Irish Catholic (e.g., policemen, firemen, construction workers)

Analysis (Hall-Lew 2009)
• Asian Americans are perhaps more likely to construct local identity with newer changes:
  — merger?
• European Americans have older linguistic resources for marking their local identity:
  — distinction?

Analysis (Hall-Lew 2009)
• But what about the awareness of the merger?
  — “As a rule, mergers and splits have no social affect associated with them.” (Labov 1994: 343)
• We don’t really have to worry about this here, because the change seems to be, phonetically:
  — not the merger of LOT and THOUGHT, but
  — the centralization of THOUGHT, which then, secondarily, results in a merger with LOT
Analysis (Hall-Lew 2009)

- Asian Americans are perhaps more likely to construct local identity with newer changes:
  - the centralization of THOUGHT
- European Americans have older linguistic resources for marking their local identity:
  - the raised, backed, in-gliding THOUGHT

**flip-flop & the LOT/THOUGHT merger**

- flip-flop appears to be a consequence of the over-centralizing of THOUGHT.
- The result is the production of THOUGHT is lower and/or further front than LOT.

Analysis (Hall-Lew 2009)

- The vowel quality of THOUGHT carries social meaning in San Francisco’s Sunset District community:
  - higher and backer productions index an older local authenticity
  - lower and centralized productions index a newer local authenticity
  - (future research: perception studies)

**Mary vs. other San Franciscan women**

- Individual vowel plots from interview data:
  - Enid (Chinese American F 76yrs)
  - Cindy (Chinese American F 42yrs)
  - Cheri (Irish American F 65yrs)
  - Amy (Euro American F 39yrs)
  - Abby (Irish American F 30yrs)
  - Mary (Irish American F 29yrs)

**Enid (Chinese Am, F, 76yrs)**

![Normalized Bark Values: Individual Tokens](image1)

**Cindy (Chinese Am, F, 42yrs)**

![Normalized Bark Values: Individual Tokens](image2)
Cheri, Irish American, 65yrs

Uh yes, yes. Uh native San Franciscans have—either a Bostonian or:: a combination Bostonian/New York uh accent and you d— you will tell a real native—My son doesn’t, so to speak? But yes, they’ve commented, they go “Where are you from.”

(L: Who’s ‘they’?)

*Just people! Just people that I, that I talk to.*
Mary: interview (flip-flop)

- **NB:**
  This is not exactly flip-flop; the LOT vowel isn’t moving. Rather, the THOUGHT vowel has ‘flipped’ over it.

- Di Paolo’s “speaker 251” flip-flopped with respect to F1 and not F2; Mary is showing the opposite.

Mary: reading passage (flip-flop)

Minimal Pair Word List Productions

- **Mary**
  - Dawn Don
    - “…that’s one that I always get caught(?) on the East Coast, Erin and Aaron are the same name and Dawn and Don are the same name”
  - cot caught
    - followed by laughter
  - stalk stock
  - dot daughter

Mary: minimal pairs (merged)

Minimal Pair Word List Productions

- **Mary**
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The Complication

- “in spite of the fact that most of them might consciously say that (ɔ) and (ə) are one word class …
- they must be able to recognize that there were two word classes, (ɔ) and (ə), present.”

(Di Paolo 1990:289, reporting on language attitudes results that showed that listeners rated the merged speaker more favorably than the non-merged speaker)

There’s something about Mary

- Born & raised in the Sunset District
  - Her only time away was college at Cornell
- Her father is 3rd-generation San Francisco Irish
  - NB: San Francisco incorporated in 1850
- She attended both public and private school
  - Giannini, a multiethnic public middle school
  - St. Ignatius (‘S.I.’), a private Irish Catholic high school
comments from Mary’s mother

“[My children] had a pretty multiethnic friendships. [Mary] particularly had, um, friends that were not Caucasian.
When she was at that school her group of choice was Black girls, but that didn’t last very long. They wouldn’t, um, take her in, if that makes any sense.”

comments from Mary’s mother

“Her Black friends got in trouble because they were hanging out with her.
And the same thing happened; Asian...
[Mary] would be disturbed to loose certain friends because, because it became too painful for them to cross that line.”

comments from Mary’s mother

“What is it, Fresh Off the Boat? That’s what [Mary] would say. Some of her friends changed their clothing habits to look like they were Fresh Off the Boats ... they’re Asian American, but they changed their language and their clothing in order to associate with the new Asian community.”

Mary

“You know and there’s um there, there’s a lot more like Fresh Off the Boat, kind of, you know there’s like the Russian posse and there’s the [hhh] everything, you know there’s all kinds of things, and there was a, the FOBs when I was there, um, which was the reappropriation of Fresh Off the Boat and was Fresh Oriental Boys [hhh] and then we had like housers which were mostly Filipino like breakdancers.”

Mary

“you get to pull like, anything you want out of the different influence[s] you had growing up, and it comes off natural. I, you know, I went to Cornell, um, after having gone to S.I., you know I was about as cartoonishly, you know, upwardly-mobile White girl as you get, but I slip into how I talked when I was in middle school and people were like ‘Whoa, how do you know how to talk like that?’ you know and I was like ‘Oh [hhh] all I wanted to be when I was 13 was a 5-foot-tall Asian girl who could breakdance!’”

Analysis

• Mary is particularly tuned into the symbolic capital of both levels of her community. She constantly negotiates between:
  – her immediate heritage community, where everyone has a backed, raised THOUGHT vowel.
  – her wider community, where everyone is moving towards a centralized THOUGHT vowel.
Analysis

• Mary’s flip-flopped production of THOUGHT may reflect her social position as:
  ✓ a 4th generation Irish American,
  ✓ in a neighborhood that used to be proudly Irish,
  ✓ but which rapidly shifted to being proudly Asian,
  ✓ at exactly the time when Mary was growing up,
  ✓ creating a social situation in which she struggled to find a balance between these two rapidly changing sources of local authenticity & prestige.

Question

• Is the occurrence of flip-flop evidence of hypercorrection?

Analysis

• In this community, social norms have changed very rapidly & dramatically.
• There appears to be more than one source of overt prestige, depending, among other things, on an speaker’s age, ethnicity, gender, & network.
• Both ‘hypercorrection’ & ‘hyperaccommodation’ are concepts that are difficult to apply here.
• But perhaps we can think of ‘hypercorrection’ more broadly...

Proposal

• Speakers can orient to newer San Franciscan identities by employing the newer linguistic sound changes that index those identities.
• A lowered, centralized production of the THOUGHT vowel is one such resource.
• LOT-THOUGHT flip-flop may be one extreme consequence of this self-styling.

Implications

• flip-flop may be a particularly revealing phenomenon of merger-in-progress:
  ✓ linguistically, it may indicate a precise turning point in the trajectory of a change, marking the time period during which prestige shifted.
  ✓ socially, it may help to unpack the identity-based motivations that are coinciding with, or perhaps driving, that change.

References