Transnationalist vowel patterns in Filipino Winnipeggers

Dr Nicole Rosen | University of Manitoba

Immigrant settlement is a transnational process: where people come from and their ongoing ties to that place and how they feel about that place matter (Kelly 2011). This paper ties aspects of integration and belonging to the formation of new transnational communicative practice, using Filipinos in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada as a case study.

The first wave of Filipino immigration into Winnipeg began in the late 1950s when primarily medical professionals arrived in Manitoba from the Philippines. A second large wave consisted primarily of garment industry workers in the 1960s and 70s, and there has been a steady flow since. Filipino-Canadians today make up 9% of the overall Winnipeg population (Statistics Canada 2013), and are the most important visible minority in Winnipeg, with Tagalog the most-spoken non-official language in the province. Winnipeg’s Filipino community lives in enclave neighbourhoods in the North-West of the city, and Filipinos are well-integrated into the local politics and identity of the city, with multiple role models and local pride. They are also the only Filipino youth in Canada to surpass their parents in terms of degree holdership (Kelly 2007).

Using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, we show that the English spoken by the children of Filipino immigrants in Winnipeg offers evidence for an Emergent Linguistic Market as described in Hall-Lew (2009) for Chinese Americans in San Francisco. In this case, language transfer features are embedded into innovative speech patterns normally associated with the young and upwardly mobile (Canadian Shift) and become the source of some features in the system of the Emergent Market in the linguistic marketplace.

The data come from a corpus of Winnipeg speech collected in 2014-2015. The corpus is controlled for age and location (all speakers born between 1975-1995 in Winnipeg), and stratified by gender and ethnicity, with 14 Filipino and 14 non-Filipino speakers, all speaking English as a first language. The vowel formants were extracted using a combination of hand-alignment and FAVE (Rosenfelder et al. 2011). A total of 3248 vowels were analyzed using mixed effects modeling in R (R Core Team 2015). Fixed effects tested include ethnicity, gender, age, following segment, preceding segment and stress, while random effects include lexical item and speaker.

Statistical models reveal that ethnicity is a strongly significant factor across a number of dimensions within the dataset. Most interestingly, Filipino production of innovative Canadian Shift vowels /\(\text{i}/\) and /\(\text{e}/\) is significantly lower and more retracted, i.e. further along in the Canadian Shift, than other Winnipeg speakers. What is more, the long vowels /\(\text{iy}/\) and /\(\text{ey}/\) (which do not normally take part in the Canadian Shift) are also significantly retracted and lowered among Filipino Winnipeggers only, which we argue reflects a mixture of language transfer effects from Tagalog and English analogic innovation. We argue that the transnationalist immigration process discussed above is reflected in what could be called transnationalist vowel patterns: innovative Canadian patterns combine with language transfer effects from the parental Filipino language Tagalog to index a new local identity: Filipino Winnipegger. Transnationalism has been argued to require a careful consideration of the multiple spaces and scales in which class identities are constituted (Kelly 2007, Bonifacio 2013), and we argue that language should also be considered one of those spaces.