

Faculty Development Grant Final Report 2009-2010
“The Fredericksburg Regional English Dialect Survey Pilot Study”
Due May 15, 2010

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1. Project Description.

This project, for the 2009-2010 academic year, was entitled “The Fredericksburg Regional English Dialect Survey Pilot Study.” Its aim was to collect information on the accent (the set of phonological features) of the speech of natives of the Fredericksburg region. My specific aims were to investigate the occurrence of southern versus northern/midland features in the local accent, primarily by analyzing the occurrence of traditionally southern phonological features such as the monophthongization of the sound sequence /ay/, as in *tide* pronounced like *tahd*, a lack of rhoticity (r-sounds), or a merger of the vowels in *pin* and *pen*. I also examined the possible merger of the vowels in *caught* and *cot*, a primarily non-Southern feature, and investigated the extent to which Fredericksburg residents participated in the phenomenon known as the Southern Vowel Shift. The final phenomenon I investigated was the ingliding variants of the diphthong /au/ as in *south*. I tracked change over apparent time (across age groups), since there appears to be rapid linguistic change in the younger generation.

2. Non-stipend Expenditures

This project was funded to include money to pay interviewees. However, a health crisis in the family prevented me from encumbering and using the funding during the time period of the grant. Therefore, no expenses were actually incurred. As a result, the focus of the project shifted from the collection of 20 new interviews to the more detailed analysis of the existing 16 interviews that had already been collected.

2. Goals and Specific Objectives.

The original study had four main objectives:

- (1) conduct 20 new interviews to provide a more carefully balanced sample across gender and age cohorts.
- (2) analyze the existing data
- (3) present the findings at a national conference
- (4) write up the findings and submit to a journal for publication

3. Results

Without funding and sufficient time, I was unable to complete the first objective of collecting 20 interviews. Instead, I was able to concentrate in detail on Objective 2, the analysis of existing data, which consisted of 16 interviews collected during a seminar on accents of American English (LING 470J taught in Spring 2008). Sixteen different recordings of a reading passage were transcribed phonetically and categorized by linguistic variables such as the phonetic environment (voiced vs. voiceless sounds, open vs. closed syllable, following obstruent vs. sonorant). They were also classified by non-linguistic factors such as the speaker's sex and age. The transcription, which was rechecked for accuracy, was especially intense.

In addition to the reading passage, eight of the interviews were transcribed orthographically. On average, each hour-long interview takes about eight hours to transcribe.

Early results of the pilot study were presented at the New Ways of Analyzing Variation Conference (NWAV) in Houston in November 2008, and feedback from the audience was used to guide this analysis. However, before Objective 3 can be presented in full, and then published as per Objective 4, a more balanced sample must be obtained. The convenience sample from the existing data, while useful, must be supplemented with additional data, for which additional funding will be sought. Nevertheless, the intense labor of coding the reading passage, and transcribing half of the interviews, has laid the foundation for the overall study. The initial results suggest that in most cases, local residents are losing the traditional features of their southern accent, and are not fully participating in the Southern Vowel Shift. However, before this can be broadly proven, existing data must be balanced against a more carefully constructed sample in the future.