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Sunday, March 8th: 12:00-12:30

An In-Depth Analysis of the Miami Dialect

According to Labov, Ash, and Boberg's (2006) Atlas of North American English (ANAE), Miami is part of the Southeast Super Region (SESR) { a region characterized as (i) having either no low back merger (a merger of the vowels /ɑ/ and /ɔ/ in which words like 'cot' and 'caught' are pronounced the same) or a merger in transition, and (ii) /o/-fronting (fronting of the vowel /o/ in words like [bəʊt] 'boat'). Recent research (Cerny and Doernberger 2008), however, has found that there is in fact a low-back merger in Miami, and thus calls into question such a classification. This study examined the status of the low-back merger and /o/-fronting, in an effort to determine whether Miami still belonged in the SESR or whether it was its own separate dialect.

Eleven speakers (6 male, 5 female) from Miami participated in a short interview and then read aloud a word list containing all English vowels. All original speakers then participated in a second round of data collection that consisted of a word list with a focus on the vowels /ɑ/, /ɔ/, and /o/.

Data from the first word list was analyzed using Praat (Boersma and Weenick 1992/2008), and then normalized, using Nearey's (1977) log-mean normalization, to create a vowel plot representative of a general Miami speaker. The plot showed standard vowel positioning and a close proximity of the low-back vowels, but did not give any indication of the presence of /o/-fronting.

Data from the second word list was used to analyze the dialect features of the SESR. The low-back vowels /ɑ/ and /ɔ/ were tested to determine the status of the low-back merger. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) statistical test was used to show that Miami does in fact have a merger in production, based on a resulting p-value greater than 0.05. All eleven speakers were also shown to have a merger in perception via an administered oral perception test.

The vowel /o/ was tested to determine the status of /o/-fronting using the ANAE criterion: if the normalized mean F2 value is greater than 1200 the /o/ is said to be fronted. The results from the collected data indicate that eight of the eleven speakers, as well as the normalized data set, had normalized mean F2 values less than 1200 Hz, and thus had no /o/-fronting. It should also be noted that two of the three speakers who had /o/-fronting, had F2 values of 1206 and 1210, which are very close to the 1200 Hz threshold.

Based on the results, the Miami dialect has a complete low-back merger and does not have /o/-fronting. This indicates that Miami no longer meets the criteria indicative of placement in the SESR. Future study of the recorded data, as well as future data collection, will explore the classification of Miami as its own dialect region and specifically which dialect features define it.