Social factors at the inception of dialect, contact: The Reversal of the Southern Vowel Shift in Raleigh, N.C.

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Labov (2010) argues that the social uniformity observed for the spread of linguistic changes at the city or regional level constitutes evidence that face-to-face contact is not the primary mechanism of linguistic change. In large-scale dialect contact settings, initial extreme variability often gives way to a stable, relatively uniform dialect within just two or three generations. These settings therefore offer a good testing-ground for social and linguistic factors that shape language variation and change at the community level. Raleigh, North Carolina has housed intense dialect contact during the past 50 years as local technology industries have attracted white collar populations from outside the South. An ongoing study of conversational speech in Raleigh (Dodsworth & Kohn 2012) investigates the social factors conditioning the contact-induced reversal of the Southern Vowel Shift. Acoustic analysis of the front vowel spaces of 100 White Raleigh natives – a subset of a 250-speaker conversational corpus collected since 2008 – reveals rapid change over time for all five front vowels. Among the first generation of speakers to grow up amid intense dialect contact, significant social factors are surprisingly rare; for example, occupation shows a few unstable main effects, but sex does not. Similarly, a variable encoding one aspect of community-level network structure is not significant in any model. Even internal effects, such as the place, manner and voicing of following consonants, show remarkable uniformity across social groups. In general, the results support Labov's claim that factors other than face-to-face contact are responsible for the spread of linguistic changes. The continued analysis of speakers in the corpus will allow the further investigation of class, network, and their interaction with other social factors.