

A community within a community: Talk and identity in the North Korean refugee diaspora

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It is well known that different linguistic variables can do different social work and that the same variable can index different social meanings depending on the variables with which it co-occurs. Indeed, third-wave approaches to the study of variation and change have argued that the social meaning of linguistic variables is not precise or fixed, but that instead, individuals use the resources available to them to construct social meaning (Eckert, 2008). We examine this process of negotiation of social meaning among North Korean refugees living in the New Malden Korean community in London, UK, in 2 variables that are well-known to vary between North and South Korean; /ʌ/ and the /e/-/ɛ/ contrast.

Speakers who move to a new dialect area often acquire features of the variety spoken in that community, and may use features of their second dialect (D2) alongside features from their first dialect (D1) to signal belonging to both their D1 & D2 communities (e.g., Evans & Iverson, 2007). In contrast to these so-called mobile talkers who typically move out of choice for work or education, North Koreans in New Malden are refugees who initially defected to South Korea, but then sought asylum in the UK. In South Korea, North Koreans are typically stigmatized as a result of their socio-political background. To hide their identity and pass as non-North Korean, they often report trying to lose their distinctive North Korean (NK) accent and adopt Standard South Korean (SK), the prestige accent spoken in Seoul (Park, 2021). The sociolinguistic situation in New Malden is different: although the community is dominated by South Koreans, North Koreans have become increasingly visible and active within the community (Shin, 2018).

Our previous work has shown that when interacting with a male SK speaker, female NK speakers diverge from rather than converge to their interlocutor in production of /ʌ/ (Evans et al., 2023). Interview responses showed a clear sense of solidarity within the New Malden North Korean community and so we interpreted this as showing that these speakers used this variable to reclaim and index their North Korean identity. Here, we add to our existing dataset to investigate: (1) whether use of /ʌ/ covaries with the /e/-/ɛ/ contrast, which is present in NK but has merged to /ɐ/ in SK (Eychenne & Jang, 2015) and is not as perceptually salient as /ʌ/; and (2) if any changes in production in spontaneous speech are dependent on whether or not they are interacting with a NK or SK speaker.

Ten female participants, aged 27-47yrs, living in New Malden and originally from Hamgyong province, completed 3 tasks: a wordlist, a read passage (*The North Wind and the Sun*) and paired conversation in Diapix, a collaborative spot-the difference task (Baker & Hazan, 2011). Five were returning speakers (out of 10) from our earlier study, giving a total of 15 participants across both studies. Recordings are complete and analysis is ongoing. Automated transcriptions were generated for Diapix before data from all tasks were forced aligned. F1 and F2 values were extracted at the midpoint for target variables. Data were normalized using Nearey2 (Nearey, 1989), using log-means calculated from the wordlist. Our discussion will focus on usage of different variables in different contexts and with different interlocutors to shed light on how speakers use phonetic variation to negotiate and communicate identity in this complex social setting.

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