

The loss of a phonological contrast in a moribund heritage language: The merger of /a/-/ɔ/ in Moundridge Schweitzer German

Early theories of bilingual phonology argued that convergence with the dominant language was more likely to occur at the phonetic level, whereas maintenance of phonological contrasts was expected even in cases of language attrition (Weinreich 1963, Andersen 1982). In a study of Pennsylvania French (PF), Bullock and Gerfen (2004) have shown that the French mid front rounded vowels /ø/ and /œ/ have merged with American English rhotacized schwa. It therefore appears that phonological convergence with English has led to the loss of a phonological contrast in Pennsylvania French. In another study on Frenchville French, however, Bullock, Dalola and Gerfen (2006) showed that the speakers of this moribund heritage dialect preserved the distinction between /a/ and /ɑ/ in the speech of a fluent PF speaker, a contrast that they had considered to be vulnerable to merger due to convergence with American English. These studies show that phonetic environments susceptible to influence from the dominant language do not necessarily undergo change.

There is also evidence that languages in situations of intense language contact can undergo sound changes that are independent of the phonology of the majority language. For example, the monophthongization of /ai/ > /a/ in Midwestern Pennsylvania German (PG) is not due to contact with English even though monophthongization is attested in the variety of English found where some of the speakers live because (1) the conditioning of the change is different in Midwestern PG and (2) the PG speakers do not monophthongize /ai/ when speaking English (Keiser 2001). Unlike Pennsylvania French, Midwestern Pennsylvania German is robustly maintained, and its speakers may be described as balanced bilinguals (Keiser 2001).

In this paper we explore an apparent sound change in Moundridge Schweitzer German (MSG), a moribund heritage dialect of German spoken in Moundridge, Kansas. Data from interviews with fluent speakers of this dialect indicate that there is a merger in MSG of /a/ and /ɔ/. The distribution of realizations of /a/ and /ɔ/ are shown in the scatter plot in Figure 1. We interpret this change to be a merger by expansion.

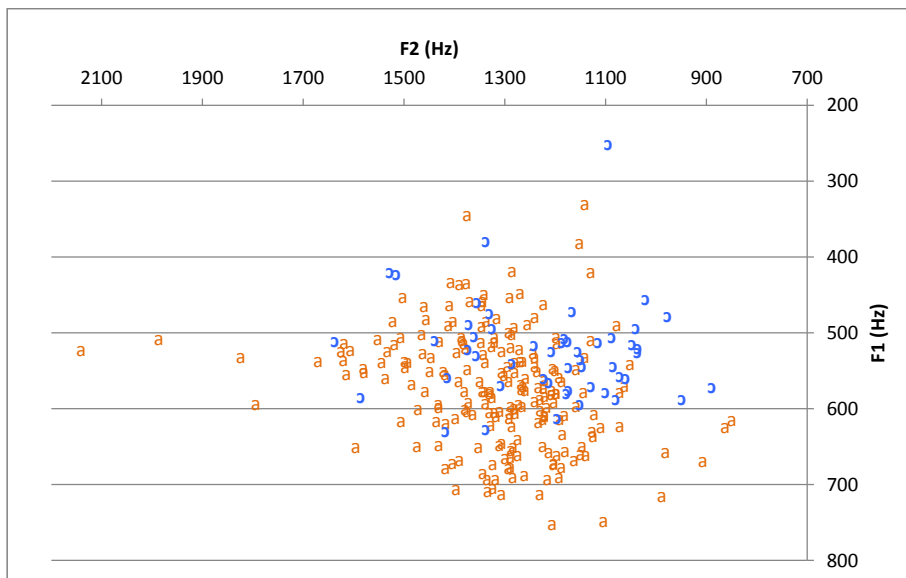


Figure 1: Merger of /a/ and /ɔ/ in MSG through expansion

This merger is analogous to the *cot* ~ *caught* merger that is found in many varieties of American English and has been documented near Moundridge (Labov et al. 2005). Evidence of a merger in MSG therefore suggests the possibility of phonological convergence with American English. However, at least some phonetic features of the dialect remain resistant to convergence. For instance, speakers of MSG have an apical, trilled /r/ when speaking German.

The study investigates whether or not the loss of phonological contrast between /a/ and /ɔ/ in MSG is due to convergence with American English. In order to investigate whether this merger is due to contact with American English or had developed independently within MSG, ten speakers of Moundridge Schweitzer German were recorded. The participants in our study were between 70 and 96 years old, and the majority of the speakers drastically reduced production of the dialect after starting school at age six. Since starting school, American English has been their dominant language. The participants were engaged in free conversation in English and asked to read a list of twelve English words, which was designed to elicit the critical vowels.

The preliminary results do not confirm the hypothesis that the merger of /a/ and /ɔ/ observed in MSG is due to convergence with American English, as the speakers do not display the *cot* ~ *caught* merger when speaking American English. Thus, the merger of /a/ and /ɔ/ in MSG appears to be an independent sound change in a moribund heritage language. These findings indicate that heritage languages spoken in communities undergoing language shift are subject to phonological variation and change that is independent of language contact and not attributable to convergence.

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