ABSTRACT

LACEY R ARNOLD. The Role of Production in Perception of Vowel Merger: A Study of pre-/l/ Mergers in Youngstown, Ohio. (Under the direction of Professor Erik R. Thomas)

While vowel merger has been a much-researched topic in sociolinguistics, it is still largely unclear precisely how production and perception intersect in communities undergoing vowel merger. This study examines three patterns of pre-/l/ mergers—among pool and pull, pole and pull, and triple mergers among all three vowel classes—in Youngstown, Ohio natives (n=41) born 1933-2005. In order to explore relationships between production and perception, I first give an overview of the linguistic situation of Youngstown, focusing on the status of pre-/l/ mergers. Next, I examine the extent to which measures of vowel merger in production align with merger and perception. Finally, I review the results of a perception task in which vowel-liquid duration was manipulated to determine whether duration is utilized as a cue in disambiguating potentially merged vowel classes.

Results suggest that there is tremendous variation in production of merger in Youngstown. Merger between pole and pull is progressing in apparent time, merger between pool and pull remains relatively steady, while triple mergers are so rare that no generalizations can be made. Production of pool and pull align with perception, while production of pole and pull do not, making generalizations regarding symmetry between production and perceptual accuracy difficult to make. However, speakers are uniformly informed by duration in distinguishing between vowel classes, regardless of the ambiguity of the stimuli or the perceptual accuracy of the participant, yielding interesting implications for language processing and cognitive theories of language.