MEGHAN DEANNA COOPER. The Linguistic Transformation of a Tobacco Town: Southern Features in Winston-Salem and Forsyth County, NC. (Under the direction of Professor Robin Dodsworth.)

Winston-Salem, North Carolina is a medium-sized Southern city which has experienced growth in white collar job sectors and decline in manufacturing jobs, once the driving force of the local economy in the last several decades. The change in the socio-economic climate has led to an influx of non-Southerners into the area as well as a rapid and expansive replacement of rural areas of Forsyth County with suburban neighborhoods rezoned into the city.

Dialect contact and leveling and prestige-based linguistic norms and identity are expected to have contributed to a loss of Southern features in Winston-Salem and Forsyth County. This study examines the status of three linguistic phenomena that are considered to be Southern features: 1) the second and third stages of the Southern Vowel Shift (SVS) (the reversals of the tense-lax pairs of high and mid front vowels), 2) the mergers of the high and mid front pre-lateral vowels (HILL-HEEL and BELL-BALE mergers), and 3) the merger of pre-nasal /u/ and /e/ (PIN-PEN merger). Data from fifty-three speakers raised in Forsyth County is taken from a series of semi-structured sociolinguistic interviews. Graphical comparisons and statistical analysis demonstrate that older speakers exhibit more Southern features, exemplified by the pre-lateral mergers and the reversal of the tense-lax distinction in the mid front vowels, with a notable pattern of change beginning in the late 1970s. However, the pre-nasal merger appears to be relatively robust among speakers of all ages.