The relevance of community language studies to HEL: The view from Roswell

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Turning and turning in a widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world . . . .

From “The Second Coming” by W. B. Yeats (1920)

The common practice of historians of the language creates broad generalizations about the English language. We make dictionaries of English, grammars of English, and phonologies of English. If we think about the past, we tend to look for broad generalizations there, too, such as the London Standard of the sixteenth century or seventeenth century. Nothing could be more obvious than to do so — how else should we treat the language that we speak, how else could we treat the historical processes that lead us to our language in the present day? As sensible as our common practices may seem to us, it is not just a rhetorical question to look for alternatives. James Milroy offers a fine example of such an alternative. Milroy has argued persuasively that our common practice as historians of the language funnels historically varied sources of English into the unified, monolithic language we so often describe today (Milroy 1992). In so doing, we get the historical process exactly backwards. We might rather consider that the natural tendency of a language, as of many another aspect of the natural world, is to become more diverse. Things fall apart. Milroy has suggested that we ought to be more interested in the maintenance of features in the language, since maintenance runs counter to such a tendency for diversification, and he has further suggested that we need to look at social factors as the mechanism that can encourage maintenance of features in the language.

Our paper addresses the social mechanism. We have been involved in a community language study of Roswell, Georgia, for the past year, as part of the sesquicentennial celebration for the city. Roswell began as a mill town on the Chattahoochee River north of Atlanta, and within the last
several decades has become a densely populated suburban community. During the same period, Southern American English has been undergoing linguistic change (e.g. the Southern Shift, as reported in Labov 1994 and elsewhere). We have been conducting interviews with both the older and younger generations, in both the black and white communities. Our preliminary results show that rampant cultural change has indeed been attended by linguistic change between the generations. Things linguistic are falling apart in Roswell, at the same time that the town is more prosperous than ever, and even strong community ties within local subcultures have failed to maintain very many aspects of traditional speech across the generations.

The site of Roswell was in Cherokee territory, but little remains there now of these Native Americans after the “Trail of Tears” in 1838. In 1839 the Roswell settlement was founded with a textile mill on the Chattahoochee River by Roswell King. As the capsule history on the Roswell Convention and Visitors’ Bureau (CVB) Web site tells,

The company was extremely successful and expanded. Even a “flouring” mill was constructed. Orders for cloth, tenting, rope, flannels, and yarn poured in. Mr. King offered homesites and investment opportunities to his friends and associates from coastal Georgia and a community was built. They constructed magnificent homes for themselves, cottages and apartments for mill workers, a general store near the mill, a church, and an academy to attend to the educational needs of the children. [The city of Roswell was officially incorporated in 1854.] There were several distinct styles of life in Roswell....the prominent families, the mill workers who often labored 11-hour days, and the slaves... Although the mills were destroyed [during the Civil War], the magnificent homes and church were not. After the War, families returned to Roswell and began to pick up the pieces of their lives. The mills were rebuilt and the textile industry once again became a strong part of Roswell’s economy, until 1975 (http://www.cvb.roswell.ga.us/about2.html).

So, from this description, it is clear that Roswell was founded and developed as a mill town with three distinct social groups: the prominent families who lived in nice houses, the mill workers who lived in cottages and apartments, and slaves. Of course there were also other settlers in the region independent of the mill, such as subsistence farmers; many of these families gradually migrated to the area from western North Carolina after the land became more open to settlement because of the “Trail of Tears”.
The mill hierarchy, however, wove the social fabric of the new community, and yeomen farmers had either to interact with it as outsiders, or to join it as mill workers.

The best description of the linguistics of such a situation is Shirley Brice Heath’s *Ways with Words* (1983). Heath carefully described three different cultures in a southern mill town, white mill workers, a marginal black community, and prosperous townsfolk of either race. Each had its own linguistic style and approach to literacy: the townsfolk fit the school setting best; the mill workers depended on rote learning; and the black community made great use of linguistic performance. Heath did not describe linguistic features (whether in lexicon, grammar, or pronunciation) of these communities, but the recent work of Walt Wolfram and his students discusses the linguistic features used in several small North Carolina localities, among them Hyde County, Texana, Princeville, and Roanoke Island (Wolfram and Thomas 2002, Childs and Mallinson 2004, Rowe and Kendall 2004, Hilliard and Carpenter 2004). Contrary to the earlier tradition of scholarship in the field that promoted the idea of a monolithic African American English variety, Wolfram and associates have found black speech and white speech in each place to be much more comparable than expected. Differences in speech among the black speakers, and between the black and white speakers, seemed to stem in large part from local social dynamics such as literacy and occupation, as described by Heath. These community studies also find themselves generally in line with earlier survey research in the Linguistic Atlas tradition, which documents differences between African American and white speakers but could not support the sharp divergence between black and white varieties proposed by other popular lines of research such as work on the supposed Creole origins of African American English (e.g. McDavid and McDavid [1951] 1979): “Although there is little evidence to distinguish the speech of Southern Negroes from that of Southern whites with comparable social advantages, there is one striking exception: the Gullah country of the South Carolina-Georgia coast” (McDavid [1970] 1979: 304); clearly this assertion separated what McDavid viewed as a genuine Creole, Gullah, from the speech of mainland African Americans). As McDavid wrote of his home town of Greenville, South Carolina, a historical center of the Southern textile industry, “Greenville was a community of three races – white, Negroes and cotton-mill workers” ([1966] 1979: 61). McDavid then argued that the educated white families in Greenville shared many features with the black community, as against the different habits of the mill workers. In some
ways the middle-class townsmen who were emerging (or escaping) from the mills and paid most attention to the “standard” language of the schools, which they saw as the basis for a new and desirable life mode, thus separated themselves from the folk grammar of both the black and white community: “An educated speaker who would not use ain’t in familiar conversation with his social equals was looked on with suspicion, as if attempting to cover up an unsavory past” (McDavid 1979b: 61).

To return to Roswell (http://www.roswellgov.com/), the demographics of the town during its mill period show only very gradual growth. The town achieved a population of 1000 only between 1870 and 1880, and did not get to 2000 until about 1950. However, at the end of the mill period in 1975, the population had climbed to 15,000. It was 23,000 in 1980, more than doubling to 48,000 in 1990, and nearly doubling again to an estimated 85,000 at the present time. The area of Roswell has grown from a village on the Chattahoochee to encompass a land area of about 39 square miles, with additional annexations possible. Thus it is clear that the nature of the town began to change sharply in the latter half of the last century, from the classic mill town to the new model of a suburban bedroom community for the Atlanta metropolis. As of the 2000 census, about half of Roswell residents had a household income over $100,000, and the median price for a house there was about $200,000. Roswell was over 80% white and only 8.5% black — with a growing Hispanic population that had already reached 10.5% by the year 2000. The median age of residents was only 35. Ninety-three percent of adult residents had at least a high-school diploma, 53% had a college degree, and fully 17% had a graduate degree of some kind. Roswell has just about become a place like Garrison Keilor’s Lake Wobegone, where all the people are above average.

This kind of development is not unusual for American cities, in the South and elsewhere. After World War II, the rapid growth of highway systems led to the expansion of single-family housing near cities: suburbs. As Raven McDavid wrote about the importance of cultural change for the study of language variation, this development began with industrialization, which created urbanization of the population as a work force (McDavid [1960] 1979). Industrialization changed the traditional demographic pattern. In Europe the basic pattern started with residential villages in rural areas, then market towns spaced about a day’s travel from the villages, and then larger cities scattered more sparsely to provide services and gateways to the wider world. In America, the basic pattern began with the rural residences of isolated farmers instead of farm villages (Zelinsky 1992: 47),
with a network of market towns and a sparser network of cities. Late twentieth-century suburbanization in America thus recapitulated the earlier American ideal of property ownership and independent single-family housing, in the new cultural setting which required workers to live within range of urban industries. While Roswell itself began with industry, the textile mill, the population of the town did not materially increase until the end of the mill period. The changing status of Roswell began with suburbanization that supported the industries of Atlanta.

The process of demographic change, however, has not stopped there. In many places suburbs have become more like cities in their own right, sometimes called "Edge Cities" (Zelinsky 1992: 166, who cites Garreau 1991). In such exurban places people no longer depend on the services of the central city, when restaurants, banks, legal and accounting firms, and independent city institutions become established there. Indeed, exurbs often come to host even the jobs responsible for the urbanization itself, often in light industry (in technology, say, or management, or distribution) as opposed to the heavy industry of central cities. Many people still commute from edge cities to work in the central city, so a key difference between a suburban bedroom community and an exurb is the establishment of an exurban identity separate from that of the central city. Suburban residents are more closely affiliated in their perceptions with the central city, while the self-sufficiency of their community may lead exurban residents to believe themselves to be independent of the central city — even if they commute to work there. Roswell is well on its way to exurban status. Its population is nearly as large as Athens, one of the six "metropolitan statistical areas" (or MSAs, a formal designation of an urban community) in the state of Georgia, even though Roswell remains a part of the Atlanta MSA. Roswell's largest employer is Kimberly-Clark, a paper goods company with annual revenue over $15 billion, and there are over 5000 businesses now registered in the city. The textile mill closed in 1975, ending one chapter in the history of the city, but Roswell has clearly begun to establish a new and different identity as an edge city in the Atlanta metroplex.

This recent rapid change is the prime reason why we were invited by the Roswell Folk and Heritage Bureau to undertake a community language study of the town for its sesquicentennial this year. We were invited to talk to senior citizens who were members of the central "Old Roswell" community, and the long-established Roswell black community, which used to number only in the hundreds but now supports two large church congregations including both members of the historic black community and black
newcomers to Roswell. So far, we have conducted one-hour conversational
interviews with eleven white speakers and nine black speakers from the
oldest generation. We talked to the middle-aged children of some of these
quite old residents, one white and two black speakers. We also chose to
interview some younger, college-age residents of Roswell, so far four
white speakers. This makes a total of twenty-seven speakers, and we are
now planning to continue our interviews after the sesquicentennial.

The interviews were based on a structured interview plan. We collected
extensive information about each speaker’s education, residential and fam-
ily history, and religion and other local social contacts. We asked about the
speaker’s experience with local schools, including integration. We then
attempted to direct conversation to some aspects of material culture in
daily life – foods, people’s houses, flora and fauna – so that we could com-
pare what people said in Roswell to existing Linguistic Atlas data from the
region. We asked about church and its activities in Roswell, including local
wedding customs. The interviews continued with conversation directed
towards elements of local history and culture, such as the mill, historic
sites (like Bulloch Hall), local festivals, and the general topic of integra-
tion. Finally, we asked about the relationship between Roswell and Atlanta
and about changes that the speaker had seen in Roswell over the years.
Each interview was conducted in as casual a style as possible and we al-
ways encouraged conversation rather than direct questioning; we got a
large number of good stories about different aspects of Roswell. We have
transcribed the interviews, and will eventually publish them in both text
and linked audio. In June 2004 we presented the community with a booklet
and CD for the sesquicentennial celebration that features samples from all
of the interviews (Childs, Anderson, Lanehart, and Kretzschmar 2004; the
community was so pleased with the study that we were given a civic
award). And of course we plan systematic linguistic analyses, but the ses-
quicentennial celebration put our public presentations first in line for atten-
tion.

We believe that we have indeed recorded representatives of two of the
three founding Roswell community cultures, members of prominent fami-
lies and townsmen, and members of the historical African American com-
munity. Our preliminary findings are that these groups do share many fea-
tures of what might be called a core set of Roswell speech habits. This
Roswell speech belongs to the Upland Southern pattern, which can be dis-
tinguished from the Plantation Southern speech type of Middle Georgia
(see, e.g., Kurath 1949, Kurath and McDavid 1961). We have noted an
exception that proves the rule. Within the old Roswell African American community, three of the people we interviewed came to Roswell from Newnan, in Coweta County in Middle Georgia, to work as household employees. They brought their Middle Georgia speech type with them, which some people might identify as more typical of African American English. Two of the middle-aged children of the Newnan group, however, appear to have accommodated their speech to the other pattern shared by Roswell African Americans and Old Roswell white speakers. Thus our findings from the older Roswell residents parallel Wolfram’s findings in North Carolina, in that the speech of Roswell African Americans varies, instead of all following a national monolithic pattern for the variety. Indeed, what we have found more striking than any general overall resemblance to Upland Southern speech is that the speech of the other older residents is not monolithic either, that it appears to be conditioned by the immediate social circumstances and aspirations of the speakers. This preliminary finding that there are different “ways with words” in Roswell also agrees in principle with Heath and Wolfram’s work in the Carolinas. We look forward to documenting the specifics of these social correlations in the acoustical, lexical, and grammatical analysis that we have planned.

To return to social dynamics, we have so far been unable to identify any surviving members from the mill workers. One of our townpeople reported having worked in the Roswell pants factory during the Second World War, the last of the local textile operations that closed finally in 1975, but she refused to talk much about the experience. A retired teacher, she did not have anything good to say about mill culture or mill workers and their children. Most of the people we talked to had little to say about the mill and its workers, even when we raised the issue in the interview. While the CVB and city Web sites promote the mill as part of the history of the town, and local preservationists are sponsoring archaeological investigations and reconstruction of the mill machine shop, the only remaining structure from the nineteenth-century complex, the people we interviewed were only too happy to put the mill and its culture behind them. Perhaps we will find some survivors from the mill workers, but it appears that this segment of the community was lost, quite suddenly, after it served as the mainstay of the town for a hundred years. In the hard times for the pants factory culminating in its 1975 closure, the jobs that bound the mill workers to Roswell became scarce and disappeared—and so did the mill workers. Roswell ceased to be just a mill town during the first waves of suburbanization, and now it has stopped being a mill town at all in favor of its
growing status as an edge city with a different social fabric of jobs, services, and institutions.

The situation among the youngest speakers we interviewed perhaps should not have come as a surprise, but it did anyway. One of them came from an Old Roswell family, of which we interviewed members of three generations. Two others were recommended to us by the Roswell CVB, and so had ties within the social network of Old Roswell. Our last young speaker was born in Rhode Island and moved to Roswell at a young age, to one of the new housing areas further out in the 39 square-mile area of the town. Despite the ties that three of them did have with the older community, none of our young speakers appeared to know much about Roswell, at least about the historic community. They did not know that there was an indigenous black community in Roswell, though they admitted to having black friends. They knew very little about the historic buildings in the town, like Bulloch Hall and the Smith Plantation, and some young speakers could not even name them. Only one of them knew much about local politics, which the Old Roswell group had dominated until the last election. They were, on the other hand, aware of the newer parts of Roswell in a way that the Old Roswell speakers were not. They knew (apparently unlike some of their elders) that there was a new Roswell out there, much larger than the old town square and historic district, and they took advantage of its theaters, restaurants, and shopping. They had either attended or had friends who attended the new schools. They were not particularly drawn towards Atlanta, except to attend a Braves game or other sporting event; one of them complained about getting lost and being nervous about driving to and in the Big City. One of the new Roswell cultural foci was the neighborhood Waffle House restaurant on Old Alabama Road (in a newer part of Roswell), a gathering place for some of our younger speakers and their parents. Our younger speakers considered themselves to be Roswell residents first and foremost, and to be included in local civic life. Only the third-generation Old Roswellian said that you had to have family roots in the community really to belong to it – and while he had the roots, he was really no more a part of Old Roswell than our other younger speakers. New local meeting places like the Waffle House, new schools, newly important local institutions like youth sports leagues, and new and growing business in Roswell all contribute to a new local identity.

The language of the younger speakers, in our preliminary findings, can no longer be considered to participate in the Upland Southern pattern, or to show much evidence of the core Roswell speech of their parents and
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grandparents. We cannot yet say in detail how their acoustical characteristics match Labov's Southern Shift, but our impression is that we could not classify them as full participants in the Southern Shift. Three of the four young speakers are college educated (as were several of the older speakers), though their college experience was their only significant time away from Roswell. Labov has recently begun to exclude metroplexes like Atlanta from his accounts of the main US chain shifts he proposes, feeling that these areas appear to be too complex to be captured by the Shift generalization, and the young Roswell speakers appear to us to show that kind of complexity. They appear to be even more highly affected by local social circumstances and aspirations than their elders (the model of Eckert 2000 comes to mind), but we must reserve too much comment about such correlations until we have completed our analyses.

As for our attempts to elicit the vocabulary of material culture from the younger generation, we largely failed to do so. The younger people did not eat at home much, even as children, and so they had trouble naming foods like "deep dish fruit desserts" that the Linguistic Atlas found to be lexically productive. Similarly, they had trouble talking about domestic and wild flora and fauna of their area, whether snap beans or snake doctors. They apparently did not live in their houses except to sleep there, because they had trouble describing rooms and furnishings except for their bedrooms. Perhaps this is because they have not yet had to spend time maintaining a household; part of the problem comes from change in residential housing practices, such as the absence or disuse of a fireplace (and its traditional lexicon of hearth, grate, kindling, and mantel). In the future, we will have to reconsider our interview plan for ways to derive data comparable to older studies (such as the "urban supplement" designed by Lee Pederson for the Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States project; see Pederson (1986–1992), especially vols. 1 and 3), and we will have to be more aware of "life stages" as a factor in linguistic performance, another of James Milroy's compelling arguments (in Milroy 1992).

So, to return to Milroy's argument about language maintenance through the mechanism of social factors and associations, it is clearly the case that the local dynamic of cultural change has specific effects on the language of Roswell, and that both the historical speech of the region and contemporary changes are represented in complex local patterns. We have observed two situations where maintenance obtains, among the older and middle generations of both the African American community and the white Old Roswell community. However, we also observed two cases where mainte-
nance has broken down, in the disappearance of the mill workers and, more significantly, among the younger speakers who represent the New Roswell. Right now, we are asking ourselves how much longer there might still be an Old Roswell speech type that residents used to share, and whether the new social dynamic of an edge city can support the maintenance of a New Roswell speech type.

We believe that these same questions should be asked more often by historians of the language. The view from Roswell is that social connections do provide for maintenance of a speech type, and also that cultural change can make speech fall apart very quickly. "The center cannot hold" – if in language we can ever identify some usage that is fair to call the center. Social change in Roswell is typical of that in America of the last half-century, surely, but it is also typical of many another period in the English language. Early Modern London is perhaps the biggest comparable historical example because of the mass movement of people to the city from the countryside, attended by massive social change. And Early Modern London, of course, was in turn the greatest source of emigrants to North America (sometimes just as a stop in transit, see Bailyn 1986), and somewhat later the chief source of emigrants to Australia and other colonies in the Empire. Thus the social condition of disruption in Early Modern London might well be taken, if we follow Milroy, as the most salient circumstance for the history of the language at that time, both in Britain and overseas. This condition suggests a break from the past, not continuity with and development from any settled, coherent community that satisfied the conditions for language maintenance. Moreover, the kind of cultural change that is happening now in Roswell and happened earlier in Early Modern London has in fact happened continuously in England ever since Hengest and Horsa, through various political, technical, and demographic changes from invasions, from crop rotation and industrial development, and from realignment of population densities and patterns. It looks like the conditions are right so that, once more as Yeats put it, things fall apart.

To pursue this line of argument a bit further, we do know that regional speech differences in Britain have been maintained over the centuries, and comparable regional differences in America also continue to persist, which appears to present a paradox in light of our evidence concerning the serious and rapid effects on language of cultural change. As commonly occurs, the paradox is only apparent. While the regions persist, the speech within them
does not. Some features do hang on over great periods of time, but others come and go; indeed, some features that we consider most salient for a region today may be of recent development, as Guy Bailey and Jan Tillery have shown for Southern American regional speech (Bailey and Tillery 1996). Any single locality, like Roswell, contributes to the maintenance or change of the array of features in use in a region in the relationship of a part to the whole. That is, among all the many local places within a region, localities that are not at the moment in the grip of social change can contribute to the appearance of maintenance of the traditional speech type of the region, while localities like Roswell can contribute to more active percolation of features within the speech of the region. Any good generalization that we wish to make about any variety of regional speech must necessarily be colored by the ongoing ferment of social and linguistic change there; and so, too, must any good generalization about a national speech type, or at the broadest level, about English.

We believe that looking closely at Roswell can show the benefits to be had from a closer examination of local effects in the history of the language. While we still have a legitimate interest in broad generalizations, study of localities like Roswell can help us to break away from the funnel effect that James Milroy noted, and to appreciate English today for what it really is, the result of a great many local effects of maintenance and change. Funnel-vision can amount to tunnel-vision, and the avoidance of thinking of English in monolithic terms can help us to create a more accurate description of our linguistic past.

Notes

1. These local events might be considered as a continuous series of catastrophes, some minor and major for the disruption they cause the social mechanism and thence language patterns; such a view replaces the threat of Yeats' “mere anarchy” with a new take on the traditional catastrophism approach to linguistic change as represented in Martinet 1955 (described by Labov 1994: 21–24).
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