Age-graded vowel raising and the linguistic marketplace in Korea

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In colloquial speech of Seoul Korean, /o/ is raised and realized as [u] in constituent-final –ko and –to (Yeon, 2012; Chae, 1995), and this phenomenon is called vowel raising. For example, it is common to say ka-kwu ‘go and’ instead of the standard form ka-ko. Chae (1995) looked into social variables as important factors in the vowel raising, and found that the vowel raising of /o/ in Seoul Korean was a sound change in progress led by younger, female and lower social class speakers in the 1990s. The current study aims at (i) examining how people produce this vowel 20 years after Chae’s (1995) study, focusing mainly on if the vowel raising is still a sound change in apparent time, and (ii) investigating possible alternative explanations if it is not a sound change any more.

Sociolinguistic interviews were conducted with 45 speakers of Seoul Korean, and the participants were divided into different groups according to their age, gender, and social class. A total of 1033 tokens of –ko and –to were collected from the interviews, and in Praat, F1 and F2 values of each vowel were extracted and normalized. The normalized data were fit into linear mixed effects models using the statistical tool R. The results showed that speaker’s age is the only social factor that changes vowel height in the AP-medial position. Among the three age groups, the older group used the most raised vowel ($p < 0.01$), and there is a tendency that middle-aged group used the most unraised variant as shown in Figure 1.

According to Meyerhoff (2006), if the vowel raising is a generational change, which is change over apparent time, new young generations would adopt vowel raising and use it more and more. Nonetheless, as the interview data show, the younger generation is no longer the group that is using the most raised vowel. Instead, vowel raising seems to be highly influenced by the linguistic marketplace, an important concept for age-grading. People show a higher frequency of using standard variants at a certain age, which is most likely to be the period when they start to take part in the workforce. Although Sankoff and Laberge (1978) identified this age as the late teens and early twenties, this age range does not apply in Korean society. A growing number of people in Korea first enter the workforce in their early 30s (Population Association of Korea, 2010), which therefore is the age at which they might be trying to adjust themselves to a new linguistic marketplace; in other words, the time that they start to use standard variants such as the unraised variant of /o/ in constituent-finals. For this reason, the middle-aged speakers who took part in the interviews would be expected to use the most unraised variant. Moreover, after the working years, when people have retired, their tendency to favor standard variants may be attenuated as they feel less pressure to use standard forms; as expected, therefore, the older group in this study used the most raised variant, which is considered the “not standard” form of /o/.

Furthermore, in the case of a stable variable that is associated with age-grading, one variant does not force out another variant. The raised vowel variant in Korean –ko and –to co-exists with the unraised vowel variant, even though the raised variant is not considered a standard form. The Standard Korean Language Dictionary (2008) also states that the standard form /o/ is commonly replaced by /u/, a raised vowel, in colloquial speech in some circumstances, which implies that both unraised and raised forms have significance in the community. In conclusion, at least in the AP-medial position, vowel raising of /o/ in constituent-final –ko and –to is an age-graded stable variable rather than a generational sound change. It is supported by the idea of linguistic marketplace of Korean society which is different from that of Western Society.
Figure 1. Boxplot of normalized F1 means depending on speaker age group

Note: On the y-axis, the smaller the number is, the more raised the vowel is.

References