Family portraits: Similarities and differences in leveling among sisters

Anne Violin-Wigent
Michigan State University, USA

This study explores how two groups of three sisters in Briançon (a small remote town in southeastern France) participate in the leveling of five phonetic variables: two mid vowels (/E/ and /O/) and three nasal vowels (found in words such as ‘vin’, ‘blanc’ and ‘bon’). By focusing on these two families, I seek to balance overall community/cohort trends with personal histories and individual factors to help explain behaviors that do not pattern with the larger group.

Based on the auditory transcription of nasal vowels and on the formant measurements of mid vowels, the results of all five variables combined show strong family similarities among sisters but also a division by ”generation” since the older siblings show a stronger tendency toward leveling than the younger sisters (0.81 vs. 0.65, respectively). This ”generation gap” seems to be linked with the year of birth since those with higher leveling score were born before 1965. This date corresponds, in the region under study, to a radical change in the local economy with the upsurge in tourism, which may have triggered a resistance against wider norms.

A detailed study of each variable reveals a slightly different picture. Nasal vowels (other than ‘vin’, being categorically leveled) seem to follow the overall tendency against leveling. Mid vowels, on the other hand, underline differences between siblings based on individual characteristics. For example, the youngest sister in one family shows no leveling with mid vowels but fairly high levels for nasal vowels, probably linked to her lower level of formal education. Her middle sister shows categorical leveling of /O/ but very low leveling of /E/. Her mobility and profession might help explain this difference, where /O/ seems to be a more salient regional marker than /E/, an image that she clearly tries to shed.

Keywords: families, leveling.