

Public Abstract

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Title:We have such a normal, non-accented voice:

A sociophonetic study of English in Kansas City

A popular myth of American English is that, due to the influence of national media and increased inter-connectivity, regional dialects are disappearing. In fact, linguistic research has shown that, in many ways, Americans are speaking more differently from one another today than they have in the past. Popular myth also suggests that the English spoken in the Midwestern United States is accent-free. This research explores language in Kansas City--a large Midwestern metropolis spanning the borders of Missouri and Kansas--and shows that myth to be false, too.

Working from interviews with fifty-one Kansas Citians, this research uses acoustic measurements of vowels to build a profile of the sound of English in Kansas City. It identifies a series of substantial changes occurring in the local language. In some cases, vowels that are distinct in other dialects are becoming the same in Kansas City. This includes the vowels in words like LOT and THOUGHT, which most young Kansas Citians perceive to be a single vowel. Similar sound mergers are explored in pairs of vowels like those in PIN and PEN, POOL and PULL, and BOWL and BULL. In other cases, vowels are simply being pronounced differently. Young Kansas Citians, for instance, are saying the vowel in words like TRAP so that it sounds more like the vowel in LOT, the vowel in words like PRICE so that it sounds more like the vowel in STRUT, and the vowel in STRUT so that it sounds more like the vowel in THOUGHT.

The identified changes are explored for correlations with age, gender, and socioeconomic class. A complex set of social explanations emerges for the changing sound of Kansas City English. In total, these changes result in a dialect that is dynamic, innovative, and distinct--and not the stable, generic, accent-free English depicted by popular myth.