ABSTRACT

This research explores the vowel system of Kansas City, a large metropolitan community spanning the borders of Missouri and Kansas in the Midwestern United States. Using acoustic measurements from interviews with fifty-one Kansas Citians, this research builds a phonetic profile of the English in Kansas City and identifies a number of emerging changes in the dialect. Changes are explored for correlations with speaker birth year, sex, and socioeconomic class.

Of particular interest are historically distinct vowel classes that may be undergoing merger. The vowels in words like LOT and THOUGHT are argued to have undergone a phonemic merger that is complete among speakers born in the 1990s. Front short vowels that occur before nasal consonants—as in words like PIN and PEN—showed movement toward merger among speakers born before 1975, but the trend appears to have reversed among young speakers. Back vowels that occur before /l/ in words like POOL, BULL, and BOWL are variably merged for Kansas Citians, but young speakers show a trend toward merging BOWL and BULL.

Also of interest are vowels that appear to be changing because of structural connections with other vowels. In particular, the vowel in words like TRAP appears to be moving backwards as a result of LOT’s merger with TRAP. On the other hand, the vowel in MOUTH shows signs of moving backward in vowel space, despite the continued fronting of the similar back vowels in words like GOOSE and GOAT.

Finally, several incipient changes in the vowel system are identified. These include backing of the vowel in STRUT and “Canadian raising” of the vowel in PRICE. In total, these changes represent a significant restructuring of the phonological system of Kansas City. The research explores structural and dialectological implications of these changes.