Hovering between South and West:
Houston's Merged Dialect

This paper explores the vowel system of Houston, Texas through acoustic analysis. Although Houston falls under the classification of 'South' in Labov's three dialects of American English (1991), further investigation shows that the dialect of America's fourth largest city is too complicated for such a simple designation, since it contains features of both the South and the West.

To date, twelve native white Houstonians between the ages of 40 and 70 of varying socioeconomic classes have been analyzed in order to determine the extent of change in progress in the Houston area. This group was selected to coordinate with a larger study which analyzes age, gender, and ethnicity in this region. Results show that these speakers display a mixture of tokens characteristic of the South, such as the pre-nasal merger of /i/ and /e/ and the raising of /ae/, particularly before nasals. The back upgliding vowels /uw/, /ow/, and /aw/ are fronted, and /ahr/ and /ohr/ are both raised.

However, the monophthongization of /ay/ and /oy/ are two Southern features which are noticeably absent in these speakers. Although this is consistent with Thomas's 1997 conclusion that metropolitan Texans lack monophthongal /ay/, Labov, Ash and Boberg (2006) suggest that the glide deletion of /ay/ is the first step in the Southern Shift. The rotation of the high front vowels /iy/ and /i/, the third step in the Southern shift, also never occurs here. However, there is an interesting overlap of /ey/ and /e/ in these speakers. This is an intriguing trend that cannot be explained by being the second step in the chain shift, since the steps before and after it are not present. Preliminary results indicate that this may be an age-based variation. Several speakers in the 60+ age group had considerable overlap along the F2 axis with /e/ generally directly above /ey/ along the F1 axis; in contrast, several speakers in younger groups had overlap along the F1 axis but /ey/ remained in front of /e/ along the F2 axis.

One feature common in the West and Midland areas but supposedly prevented by the Southern Shift is the merger of /o/ and /oh/. Significantly, most Houstonians examined in this study have this merger, resulting in homophonous 'cot' and 'caught.' This affirms Bernstein's 1993 findings of the emerging presence of the low back merger in Texas.

Combining this merger, other West and Midland features, and Southern features leaves the question of an actual dialect label in limbo, and Houston is left hovering between the West and the South in a uniquely fused area. This study emphasizes the complexity of the dialect of a major metropolitan area and allows for an initial analysis of the direction of language change in Houston.

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