

Redefining the South

Teenage Houstonians challenge the Southern Shift

The teenage speakers in this pilot study show Houston to be a region that defies currently-drawn definitions of regional dialect. Specifically, this study shows the absence in Houston of two of the defining traits of the American South and the Houston speech community as detailed in Labov's Telsur Study (Labov et al. 2006): the monophthongization of the glide /ay/ and the distinguishing of /o/ and /oh/. In addition, among these teenage speakers, social roles affect the number and types of Southern Shift traits the speakers exhibit. Consistent with Eckert's 'jocks and burnouts' findings, more socially-entrenched teenagers exhibit more conservative Southern Shift characteristics in their speech than teenagers that are less so (Eckert 1999).

To date we have examined the vowel production of eleven European American teenagers between fourteen and nineteen years of age from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. This analysis is part of a larger and continuing study of native Houstonians from different socioeconomic classes, age groups and ethnic origins. Teenage speakers were selected for this paper for the purpose of analyzing the change in progress in the Houston area.

The speakers were recorded reading lists of 291 words, including eight to ten tokens for each vowel of interest and three to five tokens of the remainder of the vowels. The speakers also read a written passage that included most of these same tokens.

All eleven subjects exhibit at least some speech traits typical to the Southern United States, including the fronting of /uw/, /ow/ and /aw/ and the raising of /ae/, especially before nasals. However, the existence of the remainder of the Southern speech traits, except the monophthongization of /ay/ and the merger of /o/ and /oh/, varies among the individual speakers. Of these speakers, CE, a 16-year-old male football player, exhibits the most Southern Shift characteristics, including some tense/lax rotation of non-low front vowels, the merger of /i/ and /e/ before nasals, the raising /ahr/ and /ohr/ and the merger of /u/ and /uw/ before the lateral /l/. In contrast, RM, a 16-year-old female self-professed social outsider, exhibits the fewest Southern Shift speech characteristics of the group. RM's speech traits do not include the tense/lax rotation of non-low front vowels, the raising of /ohr/ or /ahr/, or the merger of /i/ and /e/ before nasals.

This paper suggests that Houston falls outside currently-understood regional dialect boundaries and adds to an understanding of the

complexity of regional dialects, including the impact of social roles on speech traits. In addition, by examining the speech of teenagers, we contribute to a better understanding of the direction of speech change, and to the status and future of Houston's language varieties.

Resources

Eckert, Penelope. 1999. *Linguistic Variation as Social Practice*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Labov, William et al. 2006. *The Atlas of North American English: Phonetics, Phonology and Sound Change*. Berlin: Mouton/de Gruyter. ('Telsur')