

What we hear and what it expresses: The perception and meaning of vowel differences among dialects

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The research was approached through the integration of three separate, but interlinked, research projects: (1) a study of vowel production measuring the stylistic and ethnic dimensions of the Southern shift, (2) a perception study using synthesized vowel variants replicating Northern and Southern vowel pronunciation measuring Southernness, education and pleasantness ratings, and (3) a perceptual dialectology language attitude study.

Study Objectives:

1. To provide a descriptive account of language variation and change in Southern English varieties from the vantage point of a mid-sized Mid-Southern community.
2. To examine how these changes are realized within the local community in terms of their social distribution and their perceptual salience to speakers as in-group sociolinguistic markers.
3. To determine the ethnic integration of the Southern speech community based on participation in the current vowel changes or the maintenance of co-existent separate and sociolinguistically meaningful African-American and European-American varieties.
4. To situate this variety both presently and historically in terms of the geographic, economic and social progress of the Southern U.S. relative to surrounding U.S. regions and to examine the impact of such factors on Southerners' own folk-linguistic evaluations of Southern speech in comparison to Northern varieties.
5. To evaluate the vowel shifts occurring in the South relative to other geographically-defined shifts, namely the Northern Cities shift in Northern U.S. dialects and the low-back vowel merger and back vowel fronting in Western U.S. dialects to address the divergence/convergence question.

Results Summary:

Memphians are productively quite active in several of the shifts characterizing the South and the nation more generally. They are also quite adept at recognizing their own local speech and the shifts that regionally characterize them in contrast to that characterizing other regions or shifts active more widely across dialects. In addition, while they productively and perceptually show evidence and awareness of local shifts, they find these Southern-based variants less correct and less pleasant than non-Southern variants. Attitudinally, Memphians appear to buy into the stereotypes about their region, rating it comparatively and significantly more incorrect than other regions, although it is comparatively pleasant. In terms of ethnic group comparison, White and Black speakers in Memphis showed a surprising unanimity in terms of production, perception and attitudes toward speech, with few significant differences emerging. What is clear from these results is that, in many ways, Southern speech is not an ethnic marker but a cultural one.¹

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