

Sound change in the American Midland

Researcher

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Research focus

The phonetic and phonological systems of large urban areas in the US Midlands have not been sufficiently described.

Mechanisms driving ongoing sound changes in the US Midlands (and more broadly in American Englishes) have been widely studied, but are not yet fully understood.

Methodology

I conducted sociolinguistic interviews in Kansas City, and measured the acoustic characteristics of vowels spoken during these interviews.

I apply a range of quantitative approaches to measure and model the vowel system Kansas City English.

Key findings

- Kansas City English is undergoing a number of sound changes, including a series of conditional mergers of back vowels before /l/, 'Canadian raising,' and short vowel retraction, which all challenge the community's characterisation as a Midland dialect area (or challenge the characterisation of the Midland dialect area).
- The pattern of short vowel retraction in Kansas City has been attested to in many American English dialects, and is typically assumed to be a 'drag chain' caused by the low-back merger. Kansas City data shows that this sound change is not operating as a 'drag chain,' meaning researchers must examine the causation of the sound change in other American Englishes more closely.
- Changes in the phonological status of vowels advance perceptually (i.e., people stop recognising two vowels as distinct) more rapidly than they advance productively.

To find out more

Strelluf, Christopher. 2018. [Speaking from the Heartland: The Midland vowel system of Kansas City](#). [Publication of the American Dialect Society 103.] Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Strelluf, Christopher. 2016. [Overlap among back vowels before /l/ in Kansas City](#). *Language Variation and Change* 28(3). 379-407.