

F17 Research Abstract

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There is a vowel shift that is sweeping the nation (Labov, Ash, & Boberg). This change in pronunciation, called the California Vowel Shift, has been found on both the west coast (Fridland et al.) as well as in Kansas (Kohn & Stithem) in recent years. One feature of the California Vowel Shift involves the merger of the vowel sounds found in COT and CAUGHT. In his dissertation published in 2014, Strelluf determined that there was slight variability in the pronunciations of both vowels by speakers in Kansas City, but that among the youngest speakers, the merger was complete (171-173). However, research completed for the Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE) indicated that the merger was present enough in the 1960s to describe all but the southeast portion of Kansas as containing this feature (lxi). These results were based on impressionistic analyses rather than a quantitative analysis of acoustic information. Therefore, using acoustic analysis, we sought to determine just how far back the COT/CAUGHT merger goes in Kansas' history, beginning in the 1960s.

Eight recordings were chosen from the Kansas DARE interview set based on sound quality, the representation of different rural regions of Kansas, and the maintenance of a 1:1 male/female ratio. The recordings were transcribed using PRAAT, and before an analysis was conducted, the interviews were force-aligned using the software FAVE. Using 408 total tokens, the average F1 factor (corresponding to tongue height) and F2 factor (corresponding to tongue frontness) of the vowel sounds in COT and CAUGHT were recorded for each speaker. The program R was then used to plot the data to show if there was an overlap between COT and CAUGHT (and therefore if the merger was present) and the speakers were then sorted by gender. As demonstrated in Figure 1 below, our results found that at least among older white Kansans

during the 1960s, the COT/CAUGHT merger was not reliably present. In contrast to similar research performed in California, the men regardless of age tended to have a smaller distance between the pronunciation COT and CAUGHT than the women. These findings stress the importance of using archival data to study the history of Kansans' speech and how we came to become participants in the California Vowel Shift.

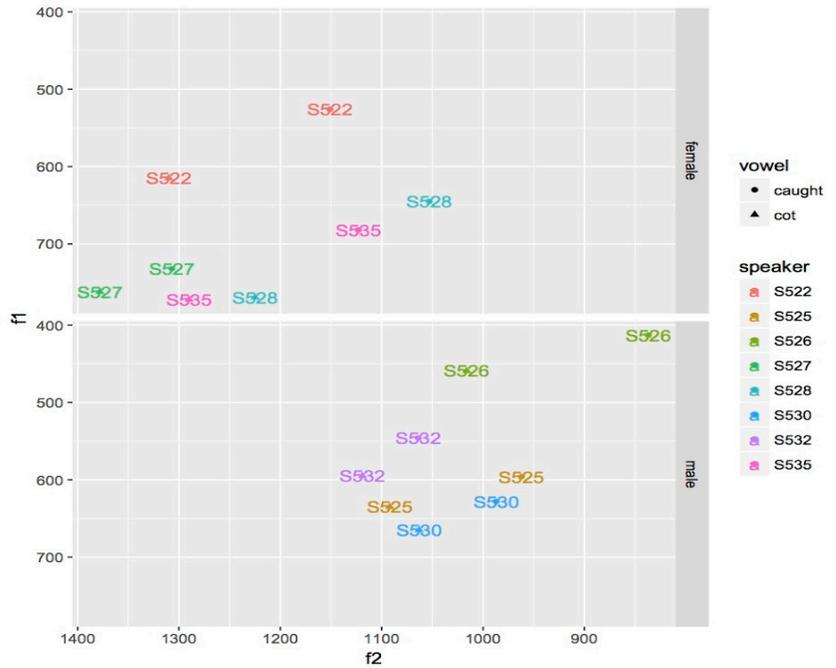


Figure 1: F1 and F2 values of the speakers' production of the vowel sounds found in COT and CAUGHT.

Works Cited

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