How the Northern Cities Shift Is Revolutionizing the English Language

By Rob Mifsud | Posted Wednesday, Aug. 22, 2012, at 7:34 AM
| Posted Wednesday, Aug. 22, 2012, at 7:34 AM
Slate.com

Vowel Movement

How Americans near the Great Lakes are radically changing the sound of English.

Still from the classic Saturday Night Live sketch "Bill Swerski's Super Fans," whose characters spoke in NCS accents Courtesy Saturday Night Live /NBC/Hulu.

On July 4, 1960, the Eugene (Ore.) Register-Guard rang in Independence Day with a dire Associated Press report by one Norma Gauhn headlined "American Dialects Disappearing." The problem, according to "speech experts," was the homogenizing effect of "mass communications, compulsory education, [and] the mobility of restless Americans." These conformist pressures have only intensified in the half-century since the AP warned "that within four generations virtually all regional U.S. speech differences will be gone." And so as we enter the predicted twilight of regional American English, it's no surprise that publications as venerable as the Economist now confirm what our collective intuition tells us: "Television and the Internet are definitely doing something to our regional accents: A Boston accent that would have seemed weak in the John F. Kennedy years now sounds thick by comparison."

Before you start weeping into your chowdah, though, I have some news: All these people are wrong. Not about the Boston accent, necessarily; that one might really be receding. But American linguistic diversity as a whole isn't dying—it's thriving. Despite our gut-level hunch about the direction of the language; despite the fact that 70-cent, three-minute, off-peak, coast-to-coast long-distance calls that cost four inflation-adjusted dollars in 1970 are now free; despite cheap travel, YouTube, and the globalization of film and television, American dialects are actually diverging.

There are multiple examples of such divergence. But none is as dramatic, as baffling to linguists, and as mysteriously under the collective radar as what's happening in the cities that ring the Great Lakes. From Syracuse, N.Y., in the east to Milwaukee in the west, 34 million Americans are revolutionizing the sound of English. Linguists first noted aspects of the change in the late 1960s. In 1972, three linguists, led by William Labov of the University of Pennsylvania, christened the phenomenon the Northern Cities Vowel Shift or, more simply, the Northern Cities Shift (NCS). What they observed may be the most important change in English pronunciation in centuries.

***

All of us speak a dialect: a collection of words, sounds, and grammatical patterns that, taken in combination, mark us as members of a particular linguistic tribe. The Atlas of North American English divides the United States into roughly a dozen broad dialect regions. With few exceptions—African-American Vernacular English,

or AAVE, being the most prominent—U.S. dialects vary relatively little from each other in grammar and vocabulary. It is phonological differences—accents, in layman's terms—that distinguish the Western dialect spoken in California from the Midland dialect of Nebraska and the Eastern New England dialect of Maine, to cite just a few.

And when it comes to accents, nothing divides English dialects more efficiently than vowel pronunciation. Consider the three-letter words that begin with b and end in t: bat, bet, bit, bot, and but. All five of those words contain short vowel sounds. Their long-vowel equivalents—bate, beet, bite, boat, boot, and bout—arrived at their modern pronunciations as a result of the Great Vowel Shift that began around 1400 and established the basic contours of today's English. But those short vowels have remained pretty much constant since the eighth century—in other words, for more than a thousand years. Until now.

Some linguists believe that the NCS began with a simple change to the short a sound. When using words with that sound, speakers in the region began moving their tongues forward and up. This "tensing," as linguists call it, produces a nasal-like sound that is the hallmark of the NCS dialect. Many speakers tense their short a so much that monosyllabic words like cat nearly take on a second syllable. The a sound begins to resemble the word yeah or the final two syllables of the word idea. "If that were the end of it," Labov explains, "it wouldn't be a problem, but a language is a set of connected items." And so, he says, all the vowel sounds start to move around in "something like a game of musical chairs."

This is called a chain shift, and it stems from a fundamental problem with short vowel sounds: Too many of them occupy too little phonological space, so they constantly jostle to defend their linguistic turf. As a result, a change in one vowel sound can force the rotation of some—or even all—of the others. That's exactly what's happening in the northern cities—with a twist. There's a phenomenon in North American English that linguists refer to as the cot-caught merger. In some North American dialect regions—including Boston, the Western United States, and Canada—the two vowel phonemes in these and similar words are pronounced identically. But the Inland North dialect region, which includes the northern cities, maintains a distinction between them. Caught preserves a wha sound that differs noticeably from the short o of cot. And why not? Distancing the short o in cot from the wha of caught gives many English dialects an extra short vowel sound.

In the NCS region, that extra vowel sound is an integral part of the big shift. The tensing of the short a starts a domino effect. First, the short o rotates into the newly created short-a void. People in Detroit have a jab, not a job. (Or don't have one, as the case these days may sadly be.) NCS speakers then slide the wha sound into the slot formerly occupied by short o. They now pronounce caught like people from Boston do, but they pronounce cot the way other people say cat. One link down the chain, but tilts toward bought, and further down the short e in words like bet starts to sound like but. The final link in this chain may be the short i of bit elbowing its way in the direction of bet, though its course isn't entirely clear just yet.

This may seem a bit abstract on paper. But when you hear someone refer to "bosses with the antennas on the tap," and realize he or she is talking about buses that have antennas on top, the drastic nature of this shift becomes clear as a bell. Or a bull, perhaps. You see the problem.

***

If news of this radical linguistic shift hasn't made it to you yet, you are not alone. Even people who speak this way remain mostly unaware of it. Dennis Preston, a professor of perceptual linguistics at Oklahoma State University—he doesn't merely study how people speak, he studies how people perceive both their own speech

and the speech of others—discovered something peculiar about NCS speakers when he was teaching at Michigan State University. “They don’t perceive their dialect at all,” he says. “The awareness of the NCS in NCS territory is zero.” (Well, almost zero. The high point for NCS awareness may have come 20 years ago, when “Bill Swerski’s Super Fans” was a popular recurring sketch on Saturday Night Live.)

According to Preston, most American dialect regions are oblivious to their quirks, but NCS speakers show a particularly striking lack of self-awareness. In one experiment, shifters were asked to write down a series of words, some affected by the NCS, some not, but all dictated by someone with an NCS accent. The expectation is obvious: Shifters should ace this test. But, amazingly, NCS speakers frequently did not understand their own speech. When they hear the word cat in isolation, for example, they seem to flip a mental coin to decide whether the speaker is talking about a common pet or a folding bed.

In a separate experiment, Nancy Niedzielski, an associate professor of linguistics at Rice University, told 50 NCS speakers that she was going to play a recording of a speaker from Michigan saying the word B-A-G, which she spelled out for them. She then asked the test subjects to identify whether the signal they heard sounded like byag (the NCS pronunciation), bag (the “standard” pronunciation), or baahg (a vaguely British pronunciation). Not one of the 50 subjects said that they heard the NCS pronunciation. “There’s just an incredible deafness to the local pronunciation,” Preston says—adding that the reason, in his opinion, is clear. “They believe that they are standard, normal, ordinary speakers, and when they’re confronted with evidence to the contrary, they reject it. They reject it in their daily lives, and they reject it even experimentally. They don’t even understand themselves.”

And the NCS dialect is, it appears, becoming more ordinary. Forecasting the likely growth of a dialect is tricky, but the NCS dialect appears to have spread in recent decades. Only in the United States, though: While dialect boundaries tend to blur at the edges and pay no heed to political borders, “the starkest dialect boundaries in North America are the boundaries between Detroit and Windsor and the boundaries between Buffalo” and Canada, according to Aaron Dinkin, an assistant professor of sociolinguistics at Swarthmore College. George Mason University maintains a database of native English speakers from across the globe reading the same paragraph. It includes samples of a woman from Detroit and a man from Windsor that highlight the stark contrasts in their dialects. Her classic NCS pronunciations of the short a and short o vowels belie the fact that her hometown is separated from his hometown and radically different Canadian dialect pronunciations by nothing more than a 7,500-foot bridge. Geographically, these people might as well live in the same city. Linguistically, they inhabit different worlds.

When Labov first observed the NCS in the 1970s, it appeared to be a distinctly urban accent, hence its name (the Northern Cities Shift). Dinkin’s research in northern and eastern New York state, however, suggests that the NCS has leaked into smaller communities there. An earlier study by Matthew Gordon of small towns in Michigan revealed similar results. More recently, Labov’s own research shows that some elements of the NCS have spread south into the small towns along Interstate 55 between Chicago and St. Louis. St. Louis itself may be undergoing the shift. “You do find the Northern Cities Shift in the St. Louis area,” according to Gordon, an associate professor of English at the University of Missouri, “but it tends to be stronger with a vowel like the ah of box than with the a of cat.”

***

One boundary the NCS rarely crosses: race. While a linguistic segregation of black and white is typical in American dialects, “it’s especially true of the NCS,” according to Dinkin. “There are much bigger differences between white and black speakers in the NCS region,” he says, “than in, for example, the South.”

The limited penetration of the NCS into African-American and Latino communities—and its complete absence amongst Canadians—helps explain why dialects continue to diverge, despite the ever-increasing connectedness caused by new technologies. While our skin color is often the first and most obvious indicator of our membership in a social group, our dialect is the first outward signal that we consciously influence. I am Canadian, and though I was raised in Toronto, just 100 miles down the highway from Buffalo, my accent is strongly Canadian. I wouldn't have it any other way. Likewise, African-Americans and Latinos in Chicago and Detroit decline to adopt NCS pronunciation, indicating just as strongly their own distinct identities. In his forthcoming book, The Politics of Language Change, Labov even posits a relationship between Democratic political leanings and the NCS, though he's quick to add that "being associated together doesn't mean cause and effect." Dialect is neither entirely inherited nor entirely chosen. It is made up of countless choices—some unconscious, some not—about our preferred social identity.

In any case, fears that TV and the Internet are funneling us toward a standard dialect don't hold up to basic scrutiny. Dialect formation occurs long before we become ensnared in the web of modern communications technology. Children acquire language from face-to-face interaction with their parents and peers, and this learning is shaped profoundly by our desire to fit in. People wring their hands about the supposed disappearance of dialectic diversity for the same reason that such diversity is not, in fact, going anywhere: We cling to our specific identities and peer groups, and we defend our individual and regional idiosyncrasies when and where we can. Our dialects are often the weapon readiest to hand in that fight.

Which doesn't mean that aspects of our dialects won't evolve—and even, in some cases, blend with others over time. But years from now you'll still learn a lot about a person's identity just by listening closely.