

The English of Southcentral Alaska

UAA Research & Creative Activity Showcase

David Bowie
david.bowie@uaa.alaska.edu



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We know very little about the phonetic system of English in Alaska.

So: Is Southcentral Alaskan English related to any of the systems found elsewhere in North America, and if so, to which?

Categorizing Vowels

Since regular English spelling can be phonetically ambiguous (for example, *ea* is different sounds in *bead*, *bread*, and *break*), linguists have developed a phonetic alphabet. This table gives a description of the symbols (shown in angled brackets, /like this/) for the vowels of English, to help you interpret the rest of the poster.

Phonetic symbol	Example word
/i/	key
/ɪ/	kit
/e/	cape
/ɛ/	kept
/æ/	cat
/u/	coop
/ʊ/	could
/o/	coat
/ʌ/	cut
/ɑ/	cot
/ɔ/	caught
/aɪ/	kite
/aʊ/	cow
/ɔɪ/	coy

Vowel Shifts in North America

There are significant regional differences in English spoken across North America, but linguists have found three main widespread shifts in the vowel system.

Northern Cities Shift: Heard primarily in a band stretching from southern New England and Upstate New York to the Great Lakes region and much of the Upper Midwest.

Southern Shift: Heard primarily throughout the United States Southeast, including most of Texas.

Third Dialect System: Originally documented nearly simultaneously in Canada and Northern California, it has since been found in places as diverse as the Pacific Northwest, Central Ohio, and the Intermountain West.

English in Alaska

Alaska is a multilingual state, with nineteen surviving indigenous languages and several immigrant languages (there are 94 home languages spoken by children in the Anchorage School District alone) spoken alongside the colonial languages of Russian and English. However, the vast majority of Alaskans (84.6%) speak only English at home, and only a relatively small proportion (5.8%) reported themselves as speaking English less than very well.

Permanent English-speaking settlers arrived in Sitka, Alaska in about 1867, but more widespread English-language settlement did not occur until the gold rushes around the turn of the twentieth century, and began to rise rapidly after World War II.

Despite English having more than a century of history in Alaska, relatively little work has been done on English in the state (and most of that work has focused exclusively on words used locally, rather than the sounds of the local variety). Part of this gap is due to its relative remoteness and the expense of reaching some parts of it, but even more easily accessible areas (such as the city of Anchorage) haven't been studied enough to give a starting point for further study.

This poster presents preliminary results from a pilot study of the phonological system of Alaskan English, with a geographic focus on Alaska's Southcentral region, home to the majority of the state's population.

Early English in Southcentral Alaska

Reports from the beginning of the 20th century claim that there were only two English-speaking residents in the Anchorage Bowl. An influx of English speakers began around 1914, coincident with the development of the Alaska Railroad.

To get a picture of the forms of English brought into what is now Anchorage, a review of US Census records for Southcentral Alaska from 1920 is ongoing, but early findings point to a large number of settlers from the Upper Midwest and Pacific Northwest.

Methodology and Analysis

Thirty lifelong residents of Anchorage were recorded reading a word list and a prose reading passage. An analysis of 8,161 vowels from the recordings was conducted to indirectly obtain fine-grained details of the articulation of all of the speakers' vowels. The speakers' pronunciation patterns were then compared to known vowel shift patterns to determine whether they matched any of them, or were different from any known pattern.

The Third Dialect Shift in Alaska

All of the respondents showed more similarities to the Third Dialect Shift than to the Northern Cities or Southern Shifts. Of course, some Third Dialect Shift features exhibited by all respondents are also found in other systems. However, all speakers produced /ʌ/ further forward in the mouth and /æ/ further back in the mouth than expected, which are diagnostic of the Third Dialect Shift. All speakers also collapsed together the historically distinct vowels /ɑ/ and /ɔ/ (so that *cot* and *caught* are pronounced the same), and the resulting vowel is produced with the tongue retracted and lowered in the mouth nearly as far as is physically possible. Most speakers also exhibited other features clearly emblematic of the Third Dialect Shift, such as /ɪ/ produced with the tongue lower in the mouth than expected, and /ʊ/ being produced with the tongue lower and especially more front in the mouth than its historical placement. In short, the Third Dialect Shift is well-established in Alaska.

Social factors

A few social factors were also investigated.

Sex: There was no obvious effect of sex, with men and women participating in the shift similarly.

Region: Speakers further from the Anchorage Bowl (e.g., Girdwood, Eagle River) participated to a lesser degree in the progress of the shift.

Age: This had a strong effect, with younger speakers participating in the shift to a much greater degree.

Questions Left Unanswered

This was a pilot study, and so there are, of course, a number of remaining questions. Some of the big ones include:

- We don't know the extent to which the Third Dialect Shift is present across Alaska. Alaska is large, and Anchorage's English-language settlement patterns are rather different from most of the state. This, plus the isolation of many Alaskan communities, leads us to expect large regional differences in the state.
- The data show residents of Anchorage producing /ɛ/ and /æ/ in very similar ways. However, listening to the recordings, it is clear that they haven't collapsed together (as /ɑ/ and /ɔ/ have), but remain completely separate. We need to describe and explain the way these are differentiated.
- We still don't completely know how the Third Dialect Shift came to Anchorage. There is some evidence that it arose independently in other communities, so we need to determine whether it was brought to the area with initial English-language settlement, or whether it developed later.
- We also hope to find out whether similar patterns are found in Yukon and northern British Columbia. This is particularly interesting given that anecdotal evidence says that the English of Haines, Alaska has Third Dialect Shift features, but its only road connections lead to Canada, not Alaska.

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