

Northern California Vowels in Southern Illinois

While there is much variation in the vowel systems of speakers from Southern Illinois, by far the most common forms are overall remarkably similar to descriptions of Northern California English (Eckert, 2004; Hall-Lew, 2004; Labov, Ash, Boberg, 2006). Among the major vowel movements found in both Northern California and Southern Illinois English are: the merger of low-back vowels in LOT and THOUGHT, pre-oral/pre-nasal split of TRAP (where TRAP is raised pre-nasally and retracted pre-orally), the fronting of the mid-central vowel in STRUT, the fronting of the high back vowel in GOOSE, the combined fronting and lowering of FOOT, and the lowering of the “lax” front vowels KIT and DRESS.

In fact, the only major difference between the speech of Southern Illinoisans and Eckert’s (2004) description of Northern Californians is that Southern Illinoisans lack fronted forms of the GOAT vowel. This is especially surprising given that GOAT-fronting is common more generally among Midland and Southern dialects of American English, falling squarely into the assumed regional domain of Southern Illinois.

These findings raise two major questions in terms of the regional dialectology of American English. First, how did the Northern California Vowel Shift make it to rural Southern Illinois? And second, why is it that fronted-/o/ is the only characteristic of the Northern California Vowel Shift that is not found among Southern Illinoisans? During the course of this presentation I will address several possible answers to these questions, including the idea that the “Northern California Vowel Shift” originated in the South Midlands, the possibility that geographically-determined variation is no longer applicable to the current (and future) generation(s) of speakers, and the possibility that these shifts are a case of convergent evolution of the vowel systems, à la Trudgill’s (2004) notion of linguistic drift. (291 words)

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