Convergence and Divergence Trends of the Western Pennsylvania Dialect
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Introduction

• The Western Pennsylvanian dialect, colloquially termed “Pittsburghese,” is characterized by unique and well-defined phonological, semantic, and syntactic markers. These characteristic linguistic patterns are believed to be the result of cultural influences of early settlers of the area.

• Some researchers suggest that the Western Pennsylvanian dialect, and in fact all dialects, may be slowing disappearing and we will eventually all speak a similar homogeneous version of American English due to factors such as increasing mobility of American society and the influences of mass media.

• Conversely, other researchers suggest that dialects will persist as people may resist being homogenized and purposely use a specific dialect as a source of local pride.

• This study investigated factors that may contribute to the stability – or lack thereof – of the Western Pennsylvanian dialect in regards to the use of eight vowel patterns that have been previously identified as characteristic of the dialect.

• Information regarding individual perceptions, beliefs, and values regarding the Western PA dialect were explored to assist in determining possible reasons for convergence and divergence.

Methods

Participants

• The fifty one participants who took part in this investigation were born within the 26 county region identified

Vowel Patterns Evaluated

• The phonological markers of the Western Pennsylvania dialect are generally very noticeable by non-speakers of the dialect and are documented in the chart that follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>W PA Vowel</th>
<th>SAE Vowel</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/ɔ/</td>
<td>/a/</td>
<td>/hɔt/ for /hɑt/ (hot); /ɔd/ for /aʊd/ (odd)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɪ/</td>
<td>/i/</td>
<td>/vɪl/ for /vɪl/ (veal); /mɪl/ for /mɪl/ (meal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɔr/</td>
<td>/ʊr/</td>
<td>/tɔr/ for /tʊr/ (tour); /lɔr/ for /lʊr/ (lure)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/u/</td>
<td>/u/</td>
<td>/pʊl/ for /pʊl/ (pool); /skʊl/ for /skul/ (school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ʊ/</td>
<td>/oʊ/</td>
<td>/pʊl/ for /pʊl/ (pole); /kʊld/ for /koʊld/ (cold)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/a/</td>
<td>/au/</td>
<td>/dɑn/ for /dɑn/ (down); /at/ for /aʊt/ (out)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/æ/</td>
<td>/ɛt/</td>
<td>/tæŋə/ for /tæŋə/ (tiger)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Procedures

• Participants read twelve sentences aloud, which had been constructed so that each of the eight target vowels was produced six times.
• Participants then completed a written survey regarding their personal perceptions, beliefs, and values regarding the Western PA dialect.
Results

Vowel Usage Demonstrated by Participants
Use of the characteristic vowel patterns by individual participants of the dialect ranged from 10 to 37. Composite percentage of use for each vowel across all participants is provided above.

Influence of Mobility on Dialectical Vowel Use
Participants who had a history of living only in PA used significantly more of the characteristic vowel patterns than participants who had a history of living elsewhere for at least 2 years. (p=.028)

Influence of Age on Dialectical Vowel Use
Older speakers used less of the characteristic vowels patterns of Western PA dialect than younger speakers. This difference was significant at the .05 level.(p = .025)

Self-Identification as a W. PA Dialect Speaker and Characteristic Vowel Use
Interestingly, there was no significant relationship between participants’ self-identification of dialect use and use of the characteristic vowel patterns. (p = .089)

Discussion
These results:
• support earlier studies regarding specific vowel patterns present in the speech of natives of Western Pennsylvania.
• suggest that speakers of the dialect are typically unaware of their use of the vowel patterns.
• reveal that younger speakers have more positive perceptions of the dialect (convergence).
• suggest that older and more mobile speakers demonstrate fewer of vowel patterns in their speech (divergence).
• indicate that speakers associate dialect with location and semantics more than phonology.