

Shifting Kansas Dialects By Mary Kohn

Originally aired 3/1/21

What does the state of California have to do with the way Kansans speak? More than you might think.

You might be familiar with this clip (*Aunty Em recording*)

“Just because you own half the county, doesn’t mean you have the power to run the rest of us.”

That’s Aunty Em from the Wizard of Oz. But Kansans know very well that who we are is very different from the stereotypes presented in TV. And Aunty Em’s voice is no different. Let’s listen to a REAL Kansan, Evelyn, who was a participant in the Dictionary of American Regional English project interviewed in 1968. (*clip of Evelyn*)

“Well one time when we went to California my cousin took me into Topeka and we got on the train there **Thursday.**”

Evelyn’s voice sounds old fashioned to us now, representing a generation born close to the turn of the 20th century, showing the legacy of Kansas speech. This is a speech system born out of migration, some of which came from the midlands, some of which came directly from countries abroad, bringing Swedish, French, German, Spanish and a host of other languages that came to dominate the landscape where peoples had formerly spoken Kansa, Osage, and Kiowa among other languages.

This kind of language mixing might be why so many Kansans, even today, can blend into parts of the country where similar patterns of language contact and immigration occur, including California.

Language and dialect contact often favor a process called merger, where formerly distinct sounds become homophones. In Kansas, this process made all the vowel sounds in the famous KU chants merge into a single “ah” sound – Rather than Rock Chalk Jayhawk (*model Eastern US pronunciation with distinct thought and lot vowels*), you get Rock Chalk Jayhawk (*Model Kansas pronunciation with merger*). This process set off a chain reaction, causing vowels to move around the vowel space, a process that has occurred many times in English, including at the end of the Middle English period during Chaucer’s lifespan. In these next two clips you can hear how Kansas English has been changing by paying attention to the differences between Susan and Kaitlin in the pronunciation of the word “Dad,” (*clips of older and younger dad*).

Kaitlyn has a much more open mouth space than Susan in the word “Dad,” all the result of vowels moving due to the merger of the vowels in THOUGHT and LOT! We can see this change in lots of places where immigration at one time or another brought lots of languages and dialects in contact, including California, Canada, and Ohio!

While Hollywood may think of Kansas as remote and behind the times, our immigrant heritage keeps us on the national forefront of language change!

This transcript of “Shifting Kansas Dialects” is part of the Humanities Kansas Humanities Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are

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