Sounding Southern: Identities Expressed Through Language[1]

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"Where are you from?" is the question one often hears in the United States. Many English speakers from the Southern United States can hardly avoid this question (similar to speakers of English as a second language) unless they become bidialectal and learn to switch between a Southern accent and a more mainstream, Standard American accent, as many Southerners nowadays do (to compare Southern and Standard pronunciation of a bidialectal speaker, listen to **Multimedia1** at acousticstoday.org/shportmm). Southern US English stands out among North American English dialects as being talked about and stigmatized the most, similar to English spoken in New York City (Preston, 1988). It is often portrayed in the media and public as having a Southern drawl, twang, nasal, or sing-song quality to it. These labels serve to stereotype Southern speech and cast evaluative judgments on its speakers, although a lay person would hesitate to explain what twang is or why drawl is associated with low education. Sociophoneticians have studied Southern US English to better understand acoustic characteristics that make this English variety unique, social variables that influence the use of these characteristics in speech, and the social fabric of language attitudes. The work with Southern speech contributes not only to English dialectology but also to theoretical and applied speech acoustics and sociolinguistics.

In this article, first we discuss frequently cited characteristics of Southern US English, followed by a discussion of recent research that lends much more nuance to what it means to sound Southern nowadays. We end by synthesizing this work and discussing its importance to the field of speech communication and to society. Our goal is to provide context for understanding the acoustic descriptions of Southern US English, the methodological innovations necessary to understand them, and the interplay of sociolinguistic variables in identity expression through language. Elements typical to Southern speech are used selectively and creatively by individual Southern speakers rather than as a stereotypical bundle that some are accustomed to see in descriptions of Southern speech.

The Stabilized Representation of Southern United States English

Comprehensive overviews and synthesis of acoustic research on Southern US English can be found in works such as the *Atlas of North American English* (ANAE; Labov et al., 2006) and the special issue on Southern US English of *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* (Shport and Herd, 2020; Thomas, 2020). **Figure 1** represents a typical approach in an examination of (Southern) speech, where recordings are digitized, annotated, and acoustic measurements for speech segments under investigation are extracted for further statistical analyses.

Based on decades of research, pronunciation that is readily associated with English spoken by white Southern speakers includes the following features (listen to example words at **Multimedia3** at acousticstoday.org/shportmm).

(1) Monophthongization in the /ai/, /oi/, and /au/ diphthongs. This is the pronunciation of these two-part segments with less inherent vowel quality change, roughly speaking, as a long first part of a segment, so that *my* may sound as *ma* and *boil* as *bole*. Of these, /ai/-monophthongization has been a hallmark of Southern speech for many decades, pronounced as a long [aː] before voiced consonants and word-finally, so that *hi*, *my bride* may sound as *ha*, *ma bra* (compare the quality of the /ai/ vowels in **Figure 1**).

(2) Changes in the quality (formant trajectories) and quantity (duration) of vowels /ɪ, ɛ, æ/ in words like *sit*, *did*, *set*, *dead*, *sat*, *dad* (two words per vowel, respectively). These changes often involve vowel breaking when a vowel segment sounds like a

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2 We regret to share that Dr. Wendy Herd passed away on August 11, 2020.

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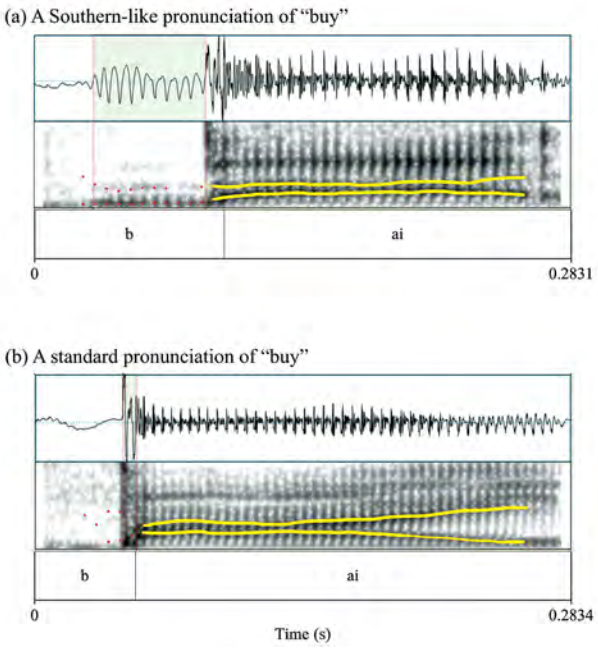


Figure 1. *Segmented waveform and spectrogram displays of the word "buy" produced by two female speakers from the state of Louisiana (see* ***Multimedia2*** *at acousticstoday.org/shportmm) and analyzed in Praat (Boersma and Weenink, 2019). Highlighted parts of the waveforms delimit the voice onset time (VOT) of the consonant /b/;* ***yellow lines*** *represent the first (F1) and the second (F2) formants of the vowel /ai/.* ***a****: Southern-like pronunciation with a long-lag VOT of a prevoiced /b/ and little change in F1/F2 when /ai/ is produced as a monophthong [aː]. **b:** Standard pronunciation with a short-lag VOT of an unaspirated /b/ and a diversion in F1/F2 when /ai/ is produced as a diphthong [ai]. The [aː]-like pronunciation of /ai/ is a unique marker quickly recognized as Southern. The prevoiced pronunciation of /b/ is not unique to Southern speech but is associated with it subconsciously.*

complex of two or more vowels, such that *sit* may sound like *see it* and set like *say it* (examples are from Labov et al., 2006). Similar to /ai/-monophthongization, vowel breaking has also served as a hallmark of Southern speech.

(3) Changes in the quality of vowels /u/ and /ʊ/, such that *room* may sound like *rum* or *rim* and *dude* as *deed*.

(4) Changes in some consonant pronunciations where, for example, *LSU* sounds like *Al a shoe*, *strong* as *shtrong*, and *buzz* as *bus* before pauses (also compare the highlighted difference in two pronunciations of /b/ in **Figure 1**).

(5) Differences in the quality and distribution of pitch accents (which are the elements of intonation contributing to perceived melodicity of Southern speech) as compared with other North American English dialects.

These and other relatively standardized Southern phonetic variants have been examined in dozens of acoustic studies, using recordings of words, reading passages, and interviews. The methods for acoustic analyses of relevant speech segments continue to develop, capturing nuances in their articulatory and acoustic characteristics. One of the most prominent contributions of research on Southern speech to the field of speech acoustics is the development of several new methods to analyze English vowels, which are great in number (compared with an average vowel inventory in world languages) and have several pronunciation variants associated with different English-speaking communities. Many Southern vowels change quality in the course of pronouncing words (i.e., vowel breaking), and new methods allow capturing this dynamicity that may be a fruitful approach to understanding vowels in other English dialects, in other languages, and in language learning processes.

The hallmark elements of Southern speech exemplified above have been fixed in the nation's image of the South, and they keep being exploited to establish Southernness in speech. Southern US English is imagined to be homogeneous and monolithic by outsiders, peppered with quintessential Southern markers such as *y'all* (*you* in Standard English), *bless your heart* (the idiom is explained at bit.ly/2Xj7UcJ), the pronunciation of /ai/ as a long [aː], and the stretching and breaking of vowels, hence the notorious Southern drawl among other perceived pronunciation characteristics. This is despite the fact that Southern English has been spoken in an extensive region, covering 2 time zones and 15 states, and in close contact with other languages historically spoken in these territories (Native American languages such as Cherokee and Choctaw and colonizers' languages such as Spanish and French; Picone and Davies, 2015), where further variation in English is undoubtedly noticeable even to the untrained ear.

Southerners may also perpetuate this myth for media and tourist consumption, as evident in locally published folk

dictionaries and travel brochures. For example, in "a dixie dictsunary" written by Powers and Powers (1975), Southern states are presented as if they share the same Southern English variety, with the following excerpt illustrating Southern pronunciation through nonstandard orthography (standard orthography is provided for the ease of reading; listen to **Multimedia4** at acousticstoday.org/shportmm as well).

*Lairnin' the stayuts, az well az how to pro-nounce them cowreckly, (*Learning the states, as well as how to pronounce them correctly,*)*

*iz absolutely vital to visitahs in the Sowth, the Sowth Ah sed! (*is absolutely vital to visitors in the South, the South I said!*)*

*If yawl should git lost 'n hav to ask direcshuns, (*If y'all should get lost and have to ask directions,*)*

*why we wudn't hav the foggiest ideah whatchua wuz talkin' about... (*why we wouldn't have the foggiest idea what you're talking about...*)*

*'n we wud be unable to tell yawl wheah to go like we wud like to do! (*and we would be unable to tell y'all where to go like we would like to do!*)*

Some of this colorful, nonstandard orthography illustrates characteristics that have been documented in acoustic research on Southern speech, for example, /ai/-monophthongization as in "Ah" for *I*, breaking vowels as in "stayuts" for *states*, and changes in vowel quality as in "git" for *get*. Other orthographic choices characterize speech of many communities that are not necessarily Southern. Examples include dropping 'g's as in "talkin" for *talking* and simplifying sequences of consonants as in "cowreckly" for *correctly*. Yet other choices seems to be just a caricature, signaling the nonstandardness of speech and making it difficult to interpret in sociophonetic terms. It is clear, however, that Southernness in the popular imagination is attributed to white speakers, especially older ones who do not code switch between the Southern and Standard accents, as illustrated in much of the media and recognized in the speech of celebrities from the South (e.g., see performers such as Dolly Parton at bit.ly/36OihbO or Leslie Jordan at bit.ly/3du4xVX). This white Southernness is propelled and self-propels, generously supplying standardized acoustic indicators to both outsiders and insiders.

The Evolving Diversity of Southern United States English

Anyone who has spent time in the South would readily attest that standardized indicators of Southern speech described above are overgeneralizations. In reality, vowel, consonant, and intonation patterns differ among Southern subregions and among populations within the same subregion (the same can be said about other areas, as language variation exists even in relatively small communities). The distribution of Southern elements in the speech of the different Southern populations and the perception of Southernness is discussed next.

Distribution of Unique Southern Speech Markers

The probability of occurrence of any sound patterns unique to the South significantly varies among different populations of Southern speakers. In the ANAE, for example, two unique sound patterns are postulated to define the region, the Southern Vowel Shift and the Back Upglide Shift (Labov et al., 2006, p. 240-241). More specifically, however, the criterion of 20% of /ai/-monophthongization before voiced consonants (as in words *tide*, *rise*) is used to define the outer linguistic boundaries of the South. This criterion maps the South "from North Carolina in the east to Texas in the West, and from the Ohio River in the north to the Southern tip of Florida in the South" (p. 240). Compared with a folk definition (Powers and Powers, 1975) or previous linguistic surveys (Carver, 1987, as cited in Labov et al., 2006), this approach extends Southern boundaries to partially include a couple of other states (**Figure 2**). At the same time, Southern areas that do not fit the main linguistic criterion for the region outline are duly noted in the ANAE, including Atlanta (in Georgia), Austin (in Texas), New Orleans (in Louisiana), and most of the state of Florida. It is also noted that /ai/-monophthongization before voiceless consonants (as in words *tight*, *rice*) is associated with lower socioeconomic status of speakers (occurring more frequently in rural speech throughout the South) and that /ai/-monophthongization before sonorant consonants (as in words *time*, *tile*, *tiny*) occurs outside of the South's borders. Thus, the ANAE shows that the degree of the /ai/-monophthongization already considerably varied within the region in the second half of the 20th century.

Other research findings further expand the ANAE notes on significant variation in the occurrence of this hallmark element of Southern speech. Data collected in the last 25

Figure 2. *A linguistic outline of the US South based on the data in Labov et al. (2006) and the public-domain USGS's national map. The 15 states where the Southern English is spoken are listed in standard and folk orthography (see* ***Multimedia5*** *at acousticstoday.org/shportmm; Powers and Powers, 1975).*

years show that /ai/-monophthongization is in decline in the speech of younger generations of Southerners in metropolitan areas (Thomas, 1997, in several Texan sites; Fridland, 2003, in Memphis) and in nonurban areas (Jacewicz et al., 2011, in North Carolina). Female speakers may be using this marker of Southern identity less than male speakers (Fridland, 2003). Even within the same Southern family, the rate of /ai/-monophthongization may differ significantly among family members depending on the strength of speaker's orientation toward (or affiliation with) their local community (Reed, 2014).

Urban/rural divide, speaker age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and local orientation influence the selective use of all elements in the standardized Southern speech element palette, not only /ai/-monophthongization to long [aː]. Other indexical features of Southern speech in the 20th century listed above also undergo similar distributional changes. They have been in decline in speech of mainstream-oriented speakers, especially in younger and urban populations (Fridland, 2001; Jacewicz et al., 2011; Dodsworth and Kohn, 2012).

Figure 3 illustrates differences among Southern speakers in adopting Southern-like vowel pronunciation by contrasting acoustic characteristics of vowels in two young adults from Memphis, TN (Gunter et al., 2020). Compared with the more locally oriented speaker, Isaac, the less locally oriented speaker, Brittany, has a longer /ai/ trajectory, showing that it is no longer an /aː/-like monophthong in words like *I like my bike riding in the time of coronavirus*. Furthermore, Brittany has less overlap between her /ɛ/-/ɪ/ and /ɛ/-/æ/ vowel categories, resulting in a more mainstream pronunciation of words like *beg-big* and *beg-bag*. Similar findings were reported for comparisons of locally "rooted" adults and child speakers in North Carolina in the study by Jacewicz and Fox (2020), adding to the numbers of non-Southern-sounding residents of the US South, at least in terms of their vowel pronunciations.

Whether the distributional changes (declines) in the use of Southern speech markers influence the robustness of this regional English variety and endanger it (in the same way other dialects or languages become endangered) remains to be seen. Alcorn et al.'s (2020) study on the ability of American English listeners to classify talkers' speech as pertaining to six major dialects of North American English showed a surprisingly low accuracy of grouping Southern talkers together compared with talkers from North, West, and mid-Atlantic regions of the country. This finding may

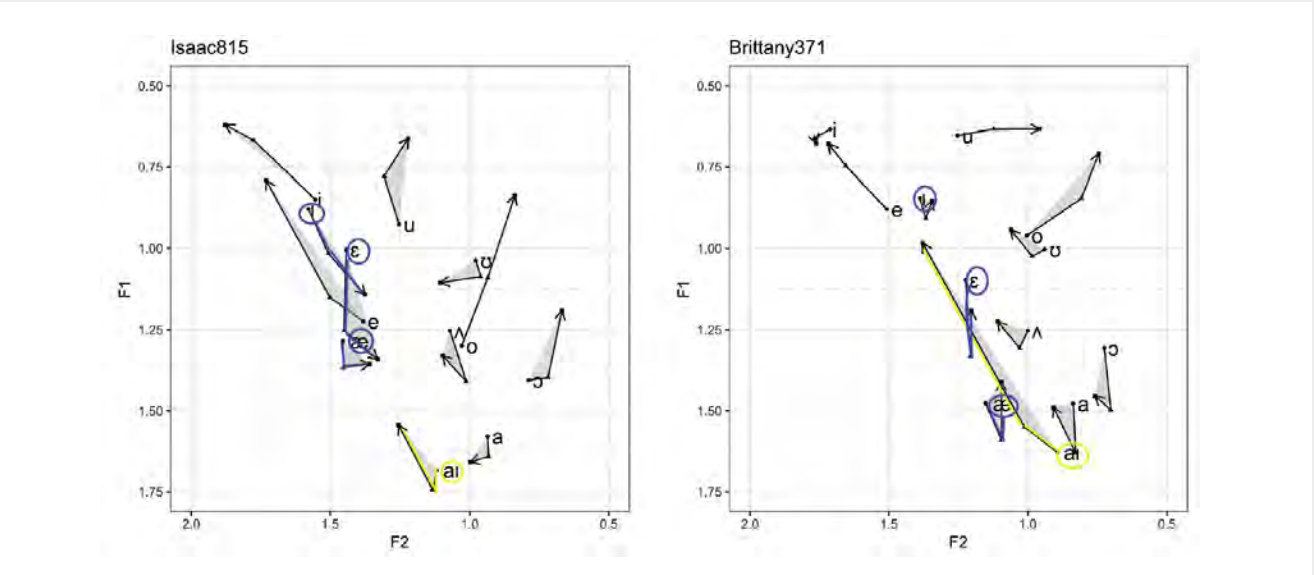
be interpreted as evidence of a decline in the robust cues to identification of Southern US English (i.e., dialect endangerment) or as evidence of a change-in-progress (i.e., dialect evolution). Research so far suggests that the distribution of unique speech elements, dominating the narrative of standardized Southern US English in the 20th century, shrinks, yielding way to mainstream pronunciations. However, other, less known elements that may contribute to the perception of Southernness (Gunter et al., 2020) and new elements that are not uniquely Southern but may develop social meaning unique to the region are also attested. An example of the latter is a change in the pronunciation of the /au/ diphthong, first described in relation to Canadian English (think of stereotypical Canadian pronunciation of *out*, *about*, *house*) but then observed as far south as New Orleans (Carmichael, 2020).

Distribution of Nonunique Southern Speech Markers

Although variation in the distribution of standardized, unique features of Southern speech such as /ai/-monophthongization is well-established in current research, the variation in nonstandardized but similarly widespread characteristics are less overtly discussed. An example of such a feature that often flies under the radar of public consciousness is the degree of prevoicing of word-initial consonants /b, d, g/. Voice onset time (VOT) is one of the acoustic-phonetic characteristics of these consonants that varies across languages (/b, d, g/ in different languages are not acoustically the same) and within a language (the variation in /b, d, g/ may be socially meaningful). **Figure 2** illustrates that the VOT duration (long or short) and quality (presence or lack of voicing) may result in different acoustic variants of these consonants.

This acoustic feature may serve as a sociolinguistic marker, for example, distinguishing between those who earn their livelihood off land (and tend to have particular sociopolitical beliefs) and those who do not in inland California (Podesva et al., 2015), between those from North Carolina and those from Wisconsin (Jacewicz et al., 2009), or between Black and white speakers in Mississippi (Herd, 2020). Although this marker is not talked about in the public sphere and is not reflected in the folk Southern orthography, American English speakers are aware of this distributional pattern at some level because they produce more prevoiced /b, d, g/ under the Southern guise than under the Standard English guise

Figure 3. *Mean vowel plots of two Southern speakers. Isaac exhibits the Southern vowel shift in his speech (**left**) and Brittany does not (**right**). The acoustic quality of each vowel is represented by plotting a trajectory based on three sets of F1 and F2 values (presented in normalized units) recorded at three time points during vowel productions where the latest F1/F2 value is represented by an arrow. Color was added for vowels discussed in the text. Reproduced from Gunter et al., 2020, with permission of the Acoustical Society of America.*



(Walker, 2020). Thus, the marker itself is not unique to the Southern United States, unlike previously discussed /ai/-monophthongization. However, Southerners seem to be prevoicing their stops more than non-Southerners (Jacewicz et al., 2009; Walker, 2009), and within the US South, Black speakers have a greater rate of /b/ prevoicing than white speakers, at least in some states (Herd, 2020).

Some nonunique Southern speech markers like prevoicing of /b, d, g/ have an older history of use in the South than others. One relatively new trend is the spread of so-called Canadian raising, which involves changes in the pronunciation of the diphthongs /au/ and /ai/ before voiceless consonants. The Canadian raising of the /au/ diphthong has been reported, for example, in the speech of younger speakers in Chalmette, LA, who were more oriented toward the greater New Orleans region than their hometown of Chalmette (Carmichael, 2020). Depending on the demographic history of the Southern subregion, this change in progress may be due to natural phonetic variation or due to contact with speakers of other English dialects that feature Canadian raising. In either case, it is open to speculation what social meaning Canadian raising might have in the South once it is established in certain Southern populations. The documentation of this marker in the South suggests that Southern US English may be developing and adopting new speech elements serving social functions unique to Southern communities. Thus, the palette of Southern English elements may change colors but will continue to distinguish itself from other regions.

In addition to typically studied sociolinguistic factors such as age, ethnicity, class, and gender, research on Southern US English shows that community integration and rootedness is also a key factor determining the degree to which speakers use various Southern acoustic features (Dodsworth and Benton, 2017; Reed, 2020). The interplay of these factors themselves may change over time, and it is challenging to build a general model of Southern speech in a demographically diverse region where involvement of different communities with different Southern speech patterns varies. The majority of work so far has been centered around white Southern English. More research is needed with Southern speakers who self-identify as Black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans, among other groups.

What It Means to Sound Southern

Considering different elements in the Southern palette, unique and nonunique alike, that a speaker may choose to adopt in speech, what does it mean to sound Southern? Perhaps, if we wanted to voice coach an actor to pass as a Southerner for a national or international audience, we can point the trainee toward the most salient, standardized features of Southern speech (see the list in **The Stabilized Representation of Southern United States English**; also, Thomas, 2020). Is the adoption of these elements sufficient? Such speech performance may help you sound as a stereotypical (most likely, white) Southern American in national imagination but is likely to be critiqued as not convincing because it would not be associated with a particular subregion or community.

Nonetheless, unique and nonunique markers of Southern speech are often collectively used to establish Southernness. For example, accent features that make pop singer Brittney Spears sound Southern are illustrated in accent dissection of Spears's speech by a blogger with undergraduate training in linguistics (Karen, 2019). Highlighted markers in Spears's speech include the notorious /ai/-monophthongization, similar sounding /ɛ/ and /ɪ/ before nasal sounds (the blogger's transcription of *spend* as *spind*), and change in the quality of /u/ (the blogger's transcription of *you*, *true* as *yew*, *trew*). This accent dissection relies on markers of Southern speech established in research that the blogger references. This standardized Southernness is typically imagined and practiced with reference to white speakers.

Considering the intersection of geography and ethnicity, what is currently less clear is how Southerness sounds in other speaker groups from the same parts of the United States. Relatively little research has been done with Southern Black and Latinx American populations. In this previous work, Black Americans are typically compared with white Americans in terms of the degree of their participation in Southern vowel shift (/ai-monophthongization and /ɪ, ɛ, æ/ breaking) or the differentiation of /ɔ/-/ɑ/ (observe if your vowels sound the same in *Don-Dawn* and *bot-bought* word pairs; Fridland, 2003; Risdal and Kohn, 2014). For example, in western North Carolina, Black male speakers were found to exhibit the Southern vowel shift similar to white male speakers from the same area, whereas in eastern North Carolina, neither

Black or white speakers had those distinct Southern markers in their speech (Holt, 2018). This finding suggests that in some communities, Black and white speakers align in their use of patterns associated with Southern speech, and in other communities, they do not.

In addition to investigations of the degree of convergence to Southern sound trends in different populations, Southern Black speech has to be examined in its own right. Frequently cited acoustic characteristics of Black speech in the South include changes in pronunciation of the /ɪ, ɛ, æ/ vowels called African American shift and changes in the quality of the /ɑ/ vowel (Holt, 2018). In comparison to white speakers from the same geographical area, Black speakers have been described as (1) having longer vowels before voiced consonants and (2) having more variable intonation assessed as the number of pitch accents per syllable, which may be considered ethnolect-distinguishing features (Holt et al., 2016; McLarty, 2018).

Even less of this type of research exists with Latinx English speech, which has been generically described as influenced by Spanish in characteristics of vowels, consonants, and rhythm (see an overview in Thomas, 2020). We can speculate that Southern Latinx speakers, similar to other minority groups, may or may not use features associated with Southern white speech, depending on a particular geographical location, speaker orientation, and overall community integration. In white imagination, however, Latinx residents of the South are not likely to be Southerners and sound as Southerners. **Figure 4** illustrates folk dialect awareness in two Southern college-aged white speakers from Northern Louisiana who were asked to "outline and label different speech areas of the United States" following the methodology developed by Preston (1986, and his later work). In these informants' perception of different accents spoken across the United States, Latinx American English speech is not Southern. The highlighted area was labeled "general country southern" by the female informant in the upper portion of **Figure 4** and as a combination of "Southern"-"messy Southern"-"mixed Southern" by the male informant in the lower portion of **Figure 4**. Notice that to the left of the highlighted area in each map, a "lots of Spanglish" and "Mexican" regions were outlined, suggesting that the informants do not perceive Latinx speech in these areas as Southern.

Figure 4. *Dialect regions in the United States hand drawn by two white college-aged informants (color added for regions labeled by them as Southern).*

Recognition of Southern Talkers by Listeners

Given what we know about the distribution of Southern speech markers across different populations and the relatively recent changes in their use, it is not surprising that the perception of a Southern accent is more stereotyped (and homogeneous) than warranted by actual subregional variation in the production of unique and nonunique markers of Southern speech (Kendall and Fridland, 2012). The occurrence of these standardized features of Southern speech do not seem to provide a local dialect advantage to Southern listeners, at least in tasks such as multiple-choice vowel identification (Jacewicz and Fox, 2020) or free-response dialect identification (Alcorn et al., 2020). That is, everyday experience with a dialect may not make listeners more subconsciously or consciously aware of the

current dialect-specific features. Both Southerners and non-Southerners are not particularly accurate in identifying the Southern US dialect compared with other dialects of North American English (Alcorn et al., 2020).

This finding is surprising because Southern speech arguably has been standardized and stereotyped the most among the US dialects. Perhaps this is a result of distributional changes in markers of Southern speech. In addition, the perception of Southernness may be determined by a broader range of speech characteristics (in vowels, consonants, intonation, rhythm) than the ones reported most frequently. For example, Gunter et al. (2020) found that when Western listeners rated to what degree words containing a range of vowels sounded Southern, words with vowels other than those implicated into the Southern vowel shift received higher Southernness ratings. These results do not conform to the previous research on South-defining sound features.

Evolution of Southern Speech

Southern speech communities continue to evolve. The demographic is changing, the standardized Southern features of the 20th century become less common, new speech elements with a potential to have a unique function in the South emerge, and the awareness of within-region differences is on the rise. Current sociophonetic research on Southern US English is valuable because it describes variation in sound patterns more accurately than research on Standard American English. It identifies and analyzes linguistic features of targeted and underrepresented speech communities, with particular attention to the historical time frame. This research also generates diverse, non-mainstream data that highlight theoretical questions in speech acoustics that otherwise would not be addressed and that facilitates practical applications of research findings in areas such as education, forensics, and artificial intelligence. Last but not least, sociophonetic research on Southern speech can broadly impact society because it can promote an understanding of, and respect for, accents and language diversity, serving to counteract linguistic profiling and stigmatization. This line of research is necessary for embracing diversity in public and academic spaces and for developing implicit bias training to improve the social climate and trust.

Future Research

Future acoustic research on the perception and production of Southern varieties of US English should consider a range of socio-indexical acoustic parameters, wider than has been studied previously. Researchers should strive to recruit diverse participant groups to better understand social variation within different regions of the South. Similar to work on understudied languages, work on dialects has urgency. Southern US English may be endangered or at least undergoing significant changes due to the socioeconomic development, influence of the media, and Standard-English-only educational systems. Some of its most iconic and salient features (e.g., Southern drawl or breaking, /ai/-monophthongization) are receding. We hope that sociophonetic research in the US South will stimulate the use of articulatory-acoustic data to address larger theoretical and methodological issues in the fields of speech acoustics and communication.

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