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American English: speech analysis of the Southern dialect

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2016-2017

Index

| | |
|---|----|
| Abstract | 3 |
| 1. Introduction | 4 |
| 2. Literature review | 5 |
| 2.1. Preliminary comments on the American English vowel system..... | 6 |
| 2.2. Phonological characteristics of the South | 7 |
| 2.3. Phonological characteristics of the North | 9 |
| 2.4. Phonological characteristics of the Midland accent..... | 10 |
| 2.5. Phonological characteristics of the West | 11 |
| 2.6. Phonological characteristics of General American..... | 12 |
| 3. Methodology | 14 |
| 4. Results | 15 |
| 4.1. Speaker 1 | 16 |
| 4.2. Speaker 2 | 18 |
| 4.3. Speaker 3 | 21 |
| 4.4. Speaker 4 | 24 |
| 5. Discussion | 26 |
| 6. Conclusion | 28 |
| Reference list | 28 |

Abstract

Language is a complex phenomenon every human ends mastering, independently of the mother tongue they have acquired in their childhood. In this globalised world, however, an increasing number of speakers are multilingual and, in order to be competent in foreign languages, these speakers need to pay heed to the characteristics of the target language pronunciation, among other linguistic features. The purpose of this project is to improve the service that the company Forvo, specialised in pronunciations of more than three hundred languages in the world, offers to its community of users in relation to the most requested language on their web page: English. Interested in promoting high-quality pronunciations of English words and phrases, the company is decided to classify these pronunciations according to the different regional accents of this language, so that users may learn what a particular accent sounds like.

In this respect, this paper describes the different dialects that coexist in the United States, as this is the country where the majority of users of the company come from, and studies some of the pronunciations that users from that country have recorded. Taking into consideration the characteristics of this dissertation, this analysis will be limited to speakers from the southern region of the United States.

The study compares pronunciations produced by these Southern American English speakers with those produced by users who speak the standard variety of American English, i.e. General American. The analysis shows that although users who speak Southern American English may not produce every phonological characteristic that describes this accent, they can be considered Southern speakers taking into account their overall production. Moreover, the study demonstrates that some characteristics that have been traditionally assigned to this accent, such as rhoticity, are retreating due to the influence of other American English dialects, especially General American.

Keywords: dialectology, English phonology, speech analysis, Southern American English

1. Introduction

Many aspects have to be taken into consideration when learning a language, and pronunciation of the target language appears to be one of the most difficult aspects to master, especially when the inventory of phonemes in the first language differs from the one in the second or foreign language. Consequently, many learners try to obtain audio data recorded by native speakers of the language they are learning, so that they can observe the subtleties of a particular language, the Internet being the most useful tool to access this type of information. However, the quality of the input that can be found there may vary from source to source and it is crucial for these learners to obtain data with enough quality to discern those nuances more easily.

Inspired by this idea, the company Forvo was founded in 2008 and, to this day, it has become the biggest pronunciation guide on the Internet, since its users can find pronunciations of 342 different languages, with more than four million words and phrases in its database. As the company keeps growing, its aim is to offer a more comprehensive insight into languages and their pronunciations, as well as to provide users with methods to learn some of these languages. In this respect, considering that users of Forvo may be interested in learning a particular variety of a certain language, one of the objectives of the company is to classify existing recordings of words and phrases into accents.

In this sense, this dissertation is the first attempt to do this classification. As the most requested language in Forvo is English and the vast majority of the company's users are American, a decision has been reached to analyse American English and its dialects. Nevertheless, due to the formal constraints of this dissertation, only some of the users who belong to a particular variety within American English will be analysed, this variety being Southern American English.

For that purpose, I will first review the literature about the different regional varieties that exist in the United States, placing the emphasis upon the phonological characteristics that account for the divergence between one region and its neighbour or neighbours. And secondly, I will search for some Southern American English speakers in Forvo, preferably those who have produced recordings with the best possible quality, and I will analyse their recordings in the light of the phonological characteristics described in the literature review.

2. Literature review

American English is regarded as the most important variety of English nowadays around the globe, basically because the United States is the most influential country in the world and this fact implies that the language of that country receives increasing attention from society. Consequently, many researchers (Wells, 1982a; Wells, 1982b; Carver, 1987; Labov, 1991; Wolfram, 1991; Labov, Ash, & Boberg, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2007, to name a few) have investigated the evolution of American English, trying to describe the characteristics that can be attributed to this variety.

Considering the vastness of the American territory, it is not possible to talk about a homogeneous variety of English, since there are certain characteristics that differentiate the speech of one region from another area. However, it is difficult to say exactly how many regional dialects can be found within American English. As Wolfram (1991) states, many times the differences that make two dialects distinct are hard to delimit and it is the task of each researcher to decide which elements are the ones that make that distinction possible.

One of the most renowned studies classifying the dialectal areas of North America was carried out by Kurath (1949, in Wells, 1982b). Although his research analysed the speech areas in the east of the United States, he already proposed a three-way division that would be supported by subsequent authors, like Carver (1987, in Wolfram, 1991). Kurath suggests that the three areas correspond to the North, the Midland and the South, from where the characteristics of each speech area would expand westwards. This is the reason why the isoglosses in the United States run horizontally (Wells, 1992b). With regard to the territories that include each area, we find New England and New York State in the North, as well as the lands from Maine to northern New Jersey. In the case of the Midland area, it runs from New Jersey to Pennsylvania. Finally, the South comprises Virginia and both Carolinas.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Carver (1987, in Wolfram, 1991) also conducted important research. Taking advantage of previous investigations like *Dictionary of American Regional English* (DARE), he provided a comprehensive account of the different regional dialects he found in the United States, and not just for the eastern area, as Kurath. Although both DARE and Kurath (1949, in Wells, 1982b) claim that there are three dialectal regions (the North, the Midland and the South), according to Carver, there are two main dialects in the United States: the North and the South.

Nevertheless, these classifications are not particularly convenient for this dissertation, as their analyses were based exclusively on the lexicon. In other words, phonology was not taken into consideration when drawing distinctions between different dialects. However, they have served as a basis for future studies, like the ones by Wells (1992a, 1992b). This author also supports the three-way division of the United States accents, but he asserts that the three accents are Eastern, Southern and General American, as first put forward by Bronstein (1960, in Wells, 1982b). The first dialect includes Boston, eastern New England and New York; and the second one Virginia, both Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, Arkansas, Louisiana and the eastern Texas. Finally, Wells uses the term of *General American* to cover the rest of American accents that do not show the marked features of the eastern and southern dialects.

As the last study, I will highlight the work by Labov (1991), who analysed American English taking phonology as the main criterion. Just from the title of his article, “The three dialects of English”, it is clear that he differentiates three main speech areas in the United States, and in his study, he puts forward the idea that the differences among those areas reside in the vowel system of each dialect. In this sense, he talks about the West as another variety that differs from the North and the South, since he finds there enough characteristics to treat the speech of this territory as a distinct dialect.

In sum, it can be seen from these authors and their respective investigations that it is not easy to define how many dialects can be found in the United States. However, it appears that the three-way division (the North, the Midland and the South) is the classification that enjoys more support. Nevertheless, as my analysis will be focused on phonology, I will regard the West as a distinct accent, following the considerations of Labov, and I will also define General American, which is the standard variety for the entire North America, as it has certain characteristics that make this accent different from the rest.

2.1. Preliminary comments on the American English vowel system

Before starting to define each dialect and its characteristics and although I will also analyse consonantal characteristics of different varieties, it becomes necessary to clarify the phonetic symbols that I will be using throughout this dissertation, as each of the mentioned authors use a different notation, as far as vowels are concerned. In this

sense, the notation I will use is the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) phonetic notation. Wells (1982a, 1982b) is one of the authors that use this system, which is considered a unary notation, while other researches like Labov (1991) or Labov, Ash and Boberg (2006) prefer the binary notation, which uses the symbol /h/ to express that the preceding vowel is long and the symbols /y/ and /w/ to represent front and back diphthongs, respectively. In the case of IPA, these two diphthongs are represented with /ɪ/, as in /tʰaɪm/ (in the word *time*), and with /ʊ/, as in /pʊt/ (in the word *put*).

2.2. Phonological characteristics of the South

After clarifying the notation system, I will start analysing each of the regions mentioned previously. With regard to the South, this dialectal area comprises the following regions, according to DARE (2013): central Alabama, southern Alabama, Florida, central Georgia, southern Georgia, central Louisiana, southern Louisiana, eastern Maryland, southern Maryland, central Mississippi, southern Mississippi, central North Carolina, eastern North Carolina, central South Carolina, eastern South Carolina, eastern Texas, eastern Virginia and Washington, DC. Kirkpatrick (2007) also adds the states of Arkansas and Tennessee to this list.

Previously, I have mentioned that Labov (1991) differentiates dialectal regions in North America according to the vowel system of each accent. More specifically, he proposes two questions, the answers of which will establish the boundaries between those regions (Labov, 1991: 12):

1. Does *short a* remain as a single phoneme /æ/?
2. Do *short open o* and *long open o* remain as distinct phonemes /ɒ/ and /ɔ/, or are they merged to a single low back vowel?

In the particular case of the Southern region, what makes this area part of the phenomenon called the *Southern Shift* (which is the feature that will characterise the speech of this area) is explained with two conditions. On the one hand, in the *Southern Shift*, the *short a* remains almost always in its corresponding place at [æ]. On the other hand, the *low back merger* does not apply, since *long open o* (/ɔ/), in *caught*, and *short o* (/ɒ/), in *cot*, are not merged and the latter stays at the back.

This *Southern Shift* affects primarily the front diphthongs. As Labov, Ash and Boberg (2006) explain, this shift was triggered by a change in the diphthong /aɪ/ of *bite*, which can behave in two different ways. On the one hand, the starting point of the diphthong is moved back and upward, as in “most southern British dialects, Australia,

New Zealand, and South Africa” (Labov, Ash, & Boberg, 2006: 244). On the other hand, in the case of the *Southern Shift*, what happens is that this diphthong is realised as the long *a*, /ɑ/; in other words, a monophthongization is applied to the diphthong.

The second stage of this shift has an effect upon the diphthong /eɪ/ in *bait*, which is centralised and lowered, occupying the phonological space that would correspond to the starting point of /aɪ/ in *bite*. And finally, as the third stage, the three authors notice that the vowel /i/ of *beat*, which once was tense, has become progressively more centralised and lower than its corresponding short vowel /ɪ/ of *bit*.

As for the back diphthongs, the vowel /u/ of *boot* shares the same process as /i/ of *beat*. Therefore, this back vowel has become more centralised and lower than its corresponding /ʊ/ of *put*. With regard to the low back diphthong, /aʊ/ in *bout*, it shares a similar position with /aɪ/ in *bite* (Labov, Ash, & Boberg, 2006).

These movements of long vowels also have an impact on the quality of short vowels. Since the starting point of /aɪ/ in *bite* has been monophthongised, the consequence is that /ɛ/ in *bet* is fronted and raised. This view is also supported by Bailey (1997, in Kirkpatrick 2007), who explains that there is a merging between the sounds /ɪ/ and /ɛ/, as happens in the case of the words *pin* and *pen*, which are pronounced exactly the same way ([pɪn]), in a process called the *pin-pen merger*. This characteristic happens especially before nasals, and not before voiceless consonants.

However, this author, as well as Wells (1982b), claims that the most significant characteristic of Southern American English is what he calls the *Southern Drawl*, which implies the prolongation of some vowel sounds and the fact that some vowels and diphthongs become triphthongs. This accentuation also provokes the further weakening of unstressed syllables. This characteristic may be the reason why Southern speech is stereotyped as being slow comparing to other accents, like the Midland and the Northern dialects, a view that is supported by the studies of Jacewicz and Fox (2007), and Jacewicz, Fox, O’Neill and Salmons (2009).

As far as consonants are concerned, Southern speech has been traditionally regarded as a non-rhotic accent, while American English is characterised by its rhoticity. However, this feature cannot be generalised to the whole dialect, as non-rhoticity is associated with African-Americans and upper-class whites (Wells, 1982b). Moreover, Labov, Ash and Boberg (2006) have reported that the /r/ is actually pronounced in syllable-final position, as in words like *car*, *card*, *beer* or *board*.

Another consonantal characteristic of Southern American English is the reduction of some clusters, like the cluster /nt/, whereby the /t/ sound is deleted when these two consonants appear between two vowels. Therefore, the word *winter* can become a homophone of *winner*. If not followed by a word boundary (represented by #), the clusters /st, ld, nd/ can also be reduced. In these particular cases, words like *banned* /bæn#d/ is pronounced as [bænd], while the word *band* is simplified to [bæn] (Wells, 1982b).

Finally, other consonantal characteristics of this dialect would be:

- The distinction between /hw/ and /w/ in words like *which* and *with*, or *whale* and *wail*.
- The use of /s/ instead of /ʃ/ when followed by /r/, as in *shrink* [srɪnk].
- The fact that the sound /l/ is alveolar and not velarized, as it is in General American. I will further explain this last feature in the section devoted to this accent.
- The lack of *Yod Dropping* in /ju/ after coronal consonants (/z, s, ð, θ, ʒ, ʃ, n, d, t, r/), as in *dew* (/dju/), *tune* (/tjun/) or *Tuesday* (/tjuzdi/).

2.3. Phonological characteristics of the North

Following the criteria of the two questions proposed by Labov (1991), the regions that take part in what is called the *Northern Cities Shift* are characterised by the next two conditions:

1. *Short a* is tensed and is realised as the phoneme /æ/. However, the raising of this sound may happen if followed by a voiced velar (/g/ and /ŋ/). In this sense, the words *bag* and *beg* would be homophones.
2. As in the south, *long open o* (/ɔ/) and *short o* (/ʊ/) are not merged and the latter, with this shift, moves toward front [æ]. The former is also moved towards central positions.

According to Labov (1991: 14), these characteristics are found in the following regions: “western New England, New York State, the Northern Tier of counties in Pennsylvania, northern Ohio, Indiana and Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin and a less well defined area extending westward”. Practically, it is the same classification that Kurath made (1949, in Labov, 1991) for the northern region, as this author also includes eastern New England. In this particular case, DARE (2013) is more exhaustive, and also

includes the territories of northern Iowa, Minnesota, northern South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, northern Wyoming, northern Idaho, Washington and Oregon.

As regards other characteristics, on the one hand, the front diphthongs, /ei/ of *bait* and /i/ of *beat*, are tense and peripheral, in contrast with the vowels in the South. On the other hand, the back ones, /oo/ of *boat* and /aʊ/ of *bout*, behave conservatively, and thus they are not fronted in Northern American English. According to Labov, Ash and Boberg (2006), this characteristic is what delimits the division between the North and the Midland accents.

In the case of the first mentioned diphthong, /eə/ in *Mary*, its sound is merged with /æ/ in *marry* and /ɛ/ in *merry*, when these sounds are followed by /r/. This feature, called *Mary-marry-merry merger*, is also found in the West.

Finally, with regard to consonants, the most important aspect to consider is the rhoticity in the whole region, like most of the United States. However, there is a difference between the North and the South as far as the sound /r/ is concerned. In fact, it has been said that in Southern American English, this sound is alveolar, when in Northern American English it is dark, i.e. velarized, in any environment.

2.4. Phonological characteristics of the Midland accent

At this point, it should be noted that the Northern and Southern accents of the United States are fairly homogeneous in terms of phonological characteristics and their boundaries can be marked with enough precision. However, the Midland area does not show that homogeneity and, therefore, the regions assigned to this area may differ depending on researchers and/or criteria applied in the analysis of American dialects.

Be that as it may, in general, when talking about the Midland area, I am referring to the region that corresponds to the territories that can be found between the northern and southern areas described above. Therefore, in terms of phonology, the states which share the characteristics of the Midland area are the following ones: northern Alabama, Arkansas, northern and southern Delaware, northern Georgia, central and southern Illinois, central and southern Indiana, central and southern Iowa, Kentucky, northern Louisiana, central and northern Maryland, northern Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, southern New Jersey, western North Carolina, central and southern Ohio, northeastern Oklahoma, central and southern Pennsylvania, western South Carolina, southern South Dakota, Tennessee, western and northern Virginia and southern West Virginia (DARE, 2013).

What differentiates this dialect from the surrounding ones is the characteristic behaviour of the phonological feature of the *low back merger* (Labov, Ash, & Boberg, 2006), a process whereby the vowel /ɒ/ in *cot* is merged with /ɔ/ in *caught*. Nevertheless, a word of caution is in order, as this merger does not happen in all the above-mentioned territories of this region. In fact, this process shows a transitional treatment, and this transition is what defines this area. In general, it can be said that the merger does not apply in the eastern, the northern and the southern territories; but in the west, it does apply.

There are also two other phonological characteristics that need to be considered when describing this dialect. The first one is related to the low back diphthong, /aɪ/ of *bite*, which is monophthongised. In their research, Labov, Ash and Boberg found that speakers of this region delete the glide when it is followed by a voiced sound, as in “words like *time, tire, mile*” (2006: 266), although they also found occasional instances where the glide was not deleted after a voiced sound, in words such as *five*.

On the other hand, it is the fronting of /ʌ/ of *but* and /ɒ/ of *cot* that makes the North and the Midland area different. In the case of the latter area, a tendency has been found for the two vowels to move to the front. These movements, however, are progressive and hence the degree of fronting varies from one place to another. According to Labov, Ash and Boberg (2006), this fronting manifests mainly in the big cities and among the younger generations.

As for the consonants, this region is also rhotic, as the North and as opposed to the traditional view of the South, and the sound /l/ is velarized, as in other dialects except the South.

2.5. Phonological characteristics of the West

The Western region of the United States is another area where the levels of homogeneity and consistency are low, as happens in the Midland area. Although there are certain phonological patterns in the West that contrast with the other aforementioned areas, some particular features of the North, the Midland area and the South can be found occasionally in the Western dialect, which I will discuss below.

But firstly, I will list the states or areas that are considered to be part of this region, emphasising the fact that some of them have already been cited in previous dialects, but which share nonetheless certain characteristics. Thus this would be the list of those areas, as described by DARE (2013): Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho,

western Kansas, Montana, western Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, western North Dakota, western Oklahoma, Oregon, western South Dakota, western Texas, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

As the basic characteristics of this area, Labov, Ash and Boberg (2006) explain that the predominance of the *low back merger* explained above is what sets this dialect apart from the Northern and Southern accents in general, since in these last two regions the *short o*, /ɒ/, of *cot* and *long o*, /ɔ/, of *bought* are not merged. In the case of the Midland area, however, the *low back merger* is in process, but not complete in every territory. Therefore, the boundary of the West and Midland is not always clear if we take this characteristic into consideration.

Another aspect of the West that differs from the South is linked to the low back diphthong /aɪ/ of *bite*, which in the West is not deleted as in the South. As for the back diphthongs, the West shares a similar feature with the Northern regions of the United States, since /oo/ shows a conservative behaviour in both areas. The treatment of /aʊ/ in *bout* could be used, however, to differentiate these regions, since it remains normally in its original place in the West, and, in the North, its position is backer. In contrast, in the South, we find this sound is much fronter.

As for short vowels, the previously mentioned *Mary-marry-merry merger* is complete, as in the North, so the respective sounds /eə/, /æ/ and /ɛ/ are pronounced as [ɛ] before /r/.

2.6. Phonological characteristics of General American

Although, up to this point, I have been describing the different regional dialects that can be found across the vast territory of the United States, there is still an accent that is considered standard, called General American, even though it cannot be regarded as a homogeneous dialect. In general, it is an accent without strong regional features and is accepted as the most appropriate dialect to be used on the television networks.

As far as vowels are concerned, one of the most important features of General American is that the *low back merger* applies to this dialect, since an increasing number of Americans cannot tell the difference between the *short o*, /ɒ/, of *cot* and the *long o*, /ɔ/, of *caught*. Therefore, they would pronounce the words *cot* and *bought* with the same vowel sound (/ɒ/).

Another aspect that should be taken into consideration is the raising of the vowel [æ] of *bat*. In Trager's words (1930, in Wells, 1982b: 477), General American

has an allophone of /æ/, which is “phonetically longer, tenser, and slightly closer” than the original sound. In general, this allophone appears mainly word-finally; and followed by voiced plosives (/b, d, g, dʒ/), fricatives (/f, v, θ, s, z, ʃ/) and nasals (/m, n/).

With regard to consonants, if compared to other English varieties that are spoken around the world, one of the most noticeable phonological characteristics may be the rhoticity that we have seen in the previous sections. In fact, General American retains /r/ in all environments, although there are instances where this sound is deleted, in a process called *R Dissimilation*. This process happens when the /r/ is “in unstressed non-final syllable adjacent to /r/ in another syllable” (Wells, 1982b: 491).

Another element is *Later Yod Dropping*, which is an expansion of *Early Yod Dropping*. The latter meant the deletion of /j/ from the sequence /ju/ after palatals, /r/ and clusters with /l/ (Wells, 1982a). With *Later Yod Dropping*, the same consonantal sound has been deleted from the sequence /ju/ in the following environments: /t_, d_, n_, θ_, s_, z_, l_/. In consequence, in General American, we can find pronunciations like /tun, duk, nu/ for *tune, duke* and *new*. The dropping, so far, has been applied to stressed syllables. However, another phenomenon is applied in the case of unstressed ones: *Yod Coalescence*. In this case, the affricates /tʃ, dʒ/ are used instead of /tj, dj/, as in the words *situate* /sitʃueyt/ or *education* /'edʒə'keɪʃən/. In this particular case, another tendency of General American can be found, since /(j)u/ is moved towards /ə/, if it is followed by a consonant. Continuing with *Yod Coalescence*, this process also happens in other words like *issue*, since this word is transcribed as /ɪʃu/.

The third feature related to consonants corresponds to *Tapping*, which may be very striking for non-American speakers. Intervocalic /t/ and /d/ are produced as a tap, which would be represented as /ɾ/. It can happen both word-internally or across word boundaries, as in *atom, getting, get it in, ready* or *bad egg*.

Another aspect is the darkness of /l/, which has been mentioned in section 2.2. Although before stressed vowels it is not dark or velarized, preconsonantly and finally it is definitely dark. In the case of intervocalic /l/, in General American it is dark and, therefore, it can be distinguished easily from the Southern accent.

Finally, it is possible to find some instances of /hw/ that makes words like *whine* and *wine* sound different, although the merging of /hw/ and /w/, called *Glide Cluster Reduction*, is generally increasing in the whole territory.

To sum up, there is no exact answer to the question of how many dialects there are in the United States. Depending on the criteria utilised in the analysis of the speeches found in this vast territory, researchers may propose different classifications. Nevertheless, there seems to be a general agreement on the fact that there exists at least a dichotomy between the North and the South. Most of the researchers also accept that there is a region between these two areas that needs to be treated separately, which is the Midland region. In my case, I have also included the West in this analysis, since there can be found concrete phonological characteristics that draw a distinction between the West and each of the three regions mentioned earlier. Finally, there is also a standard accent that spreads over most of the American territory, although it differs considerably from the South and some speeches of the Atlantic coast.

3. Methodology

At this point, I find it necessary to remind the readers of the aim of this dissertation. This paper was the first step to classify American speakers' recordings into American English dialects described above. However, because of the length constraints of this dissertation, I will only analyse those users of Forvo who live in the southern region of the United States¹, considering if their accent can be assigned to the Southern variety.

So far, I have explained how researches have described the different dialects that coexist in the United States. Nevertheless, the vocabulary used for the descriptions is highly technical and some characteristics are extremely challenging to perceive by a person who is not an expert in accents and even more difficult for someone whose native language is not English.

Therefore, always bearing the aim of this dissertation in mind, in this section I will adapt those descriptions to the reality of Forvo's users, focusing only on those characteristics that these users could perceive with ease. Here is the table where I list the characteristics that I will take into account when analysing the recordings made by our users:

¹ I infer that the users that I will analyse live in the southern region with the data provided by them when signing up in Forvo, although it is possible that they are originally from another region.

Table 1. Selection of traditional phonological characteristics of Southern American English

| | Phonological characteristics | Description | Environment |
|-------------------|--|---|---|
| Vowels | Lack of <i>low back merger</i> | <i>Long open o, /ɔ/, and short o, /ɒ/, are not merged</i> | In all cases |
| | Monophthongization of /aɪ/ | The glide in /aɪ/ becomes <i>long a, /ɑ/</i> | At the end of words and before voiced consonants |
| | <i>Southern Drawl</i> | Prolongation and/or breaking of vowels | One-syllable words containing a short front vowel |
| Consonants | Lack of rhoticity | The sound /r/ is not pronounced | Except before vowels |
| | Lack of <i>Glide Cluster Reduction</i> | Distinction between the sounds /w/ and /hw/ | In all cases |
| | Lack of <i>Yod Dropping</i> | Lack of deletion of /j/ before /u/ | After coronal consonants |

After listing the characteristics, I will search for them in the recordings made by some users from the southern territories of the United States. For that purpose, I will select some words in which these characteristics are supposed to appear. If, as expected, the speakers show these phonological characteristics, I will provide the standard pronunciations for each of the word, in General American if possible, so that users can tell the difference between the two versions.

4. Results

In the following paragraphs I will analyse four different speakers who come from the southern area of the United States. For each speaker, I will provide the pronunciations where the characteristics of Southern American English can be heard, as well as the General American version of each of the words. In order to see the difference graphically, I will also provide the phonologic transcription for each word.

4.1. Speaker 1

The username of the first speaker whose pronunciations I will explain is “Southernborn”. This user, who is from North Carolina, has produced five pronunciations: *vagina*, *damn*, *shit*, *southern* and *what*.

In section 2, I have explained that the main phonologic characteristic of Southern American English is the process called the *Southern Shift*, in which the starting point was the deletion of the glide in /aɪ/, as in *ride*, whereby this diphthong became a monophthong (/ɑ/). This characteristic can be heard in the word *vagina*:

- (1) S.A.Southernborn²: vagina³
[və'dʒɑnə]



The next pronunciation is how a speaker of General American would pronounce the same word:

- (2) G.A.Imscotte1: vagina
[və'dʒaɪnə]

With this example, it becomes clear that the user “Southernborn” deletes the glide in the stressed syllable, producing the *long a*, /ɑ/, while the second user, called “Imscotte1” and who comes from California, pronounces the vowel sound as a diphthong.

As explained in the literature review, this shift in long vowels has also an impact on short vowels, as the front ones (*short a* in *bat*, *short e* in *bet* and *short i* in *bit*) are prolonged and/or broken, when they are found in monosyllabic words, in a process called the *Southern Drawl*. This is what can be noticed when listening to the pronunciation by “Southernborn” of the word *damn*:

- (3) S.A.Southernborn: damn
[daɪəm]

² In order to make clear whose pronunciation is provided in each example, I will use the forms S.A.username (in this case S.A.Southernborn) for the corresponding user of Southern American, and G.A.username for the user of General American.

³ Click on the symbol to hear the pronunciation.

The following recording is the pronunciation by “DanDanimals”, from California, which exemplifies the standard pronunciation of the same word in American English:

- (4) G.A.DanDanimals: damn
[dæm]

The next pronunciation corresponds to the word *shit*, where a prolongation of the vowel sound can be perceived:

- (5) S.A.Southernborn: shit
[ʃiːt]

This is also provoked by the *Southern Drawl*, as the monophthong /ɪ/ has been produced as /i/. This prolongation of stressed vowels may be one of the reasons why southerners speak generally slower than the rest of Americans. The following example is made by the user “Jackabrams”, from Texas, where the standard short vowel /ɪ/ can be heard:

- (6) G.A.Jackabrams: shit
[ʃiːt]

With regard to consonants, there are two pronunciations made by “Southernborn” in which two of the consonantal characteristics of Southern American English were expected to appear: *southern* and *what*. In the case of the former (example 7), we can see that this user has a rhotic accent, when traditionally this accent was characterised by its non-rhoticity. As for the latter (example 8), this user does not distinguish the sounds /hw/ and /w/.

- (7) S.A.Southernborn: southern
[ˈsʌðərn]

In Forvo's database, all the pronunciations of the word *southern* have been made by Americans and none of them has a non-rhotic accent. In consequence, I could not compare the rhotic and the non-rhotic pronunciations of this word.

Finally, with regard to the second consonantal characteristic, the following examples serve to conclude that the user "Southernborn" does not make a distinction between the sounds /hw/ and /w/. Example 8 is made by this user, while example 9 is made by a user called "Floridagirl", from Florida, who actually makes the distinction between the two sounds:

(8) S.A.Southernborn: what
[wat]

(9) G.A.Floridagirl: what⁴
[hwat]

With these examples, we can conclude that the user "Southernborn" has the Southern American English accent, as their pronunciations are characterised by the *Southern Shift* and the *Southern Drawl*, although I did not expect to find the *Glide Cluster Reduction* in the word *what* and rhoticity in the word *southern*.

4.2. Speaker 2

The second user that I will analyse is a speaker from Georgia, whose username is "Sydney". From the many pronunciations that she recorded, there are some phonological characteristics that fit Southern speech patterns, such as the *Southern Drawl*, lack of *low back merger* or rhoticity. However, there are certain pronunciations where some other characteristics were expected to appear, but they do not, like *Southern Shift*, *Glide Cluster Reduction*, or lack of *Yod Dropping*. These are the words that I will use to exemplify these characteristics: *hot damn*, *boiled*, *hoarseness*, *freezer*, *blasphemer*, *wrier*, *shiny*, *wheat*, *duration* and *enquiry*.

As explained in the literature review, Labov (1991) states that the lack of the *low back merger* is one of the most prominent characteristics of the Southern dialect, which means that the sounds /ɒ/ and /ɔ/ are pronounced differently by speakers of this variety.

⁴ In the website, this particular pronunciation can be heard more properly: <https://forvo.com/word/what/#en>

It is the case of this user, as can be seen with the examples of the words *hot damn* and *hoarseness*:

(10) S.A.Sydney: hot damn
[hɒt daɪəm]

(11) S.A.Sydney: hoarseness
[ˈhɔːrsnəs]

This first example of *hot damn* also serves to claim that the speech of this user is characterised by the *Southern Drawl*, converting the monophthong in *damn* in a triphthong, like the user “Southernborn”. Another example of this *Southern Drawl* can be seen in the pronunciation by “Sydney” of the word *boiled*, where the diphthong /ɔɪ/ becomes a triphthong:

(12) S.A.Sydney: boiled
[bɔɪəld]

In the case of the pronunciation of the second word in *hot damn*, it can be compared again with example 4 so that we can see again how a speaker with a Southern accent pronounces this word (10) and how a speaker of General American would do (4). In the case of the user “Sydney”, she adds an extra vowel sound [ə] after the diphthong, while user “DanAnimals” does not make this breaking.

In the case of the word *boiled*, “Sydney” again converts the diphthong in a triphthong (11) by adding the [ə] sound that appears in example 10. In contrast, the previously introduced user “Floridagirl” produces again the General American version of the same word (13):

(13) G.A.Floridagirl: boiled
[bɔɪld]

This characteristic of the *Souther Drawl* does not seem to be accompanied by the *Southern Shift*, since in those words that a typical Southern American speaker would

delete the glide in the sequence /aɪ/ this user does not do so, as in the following examples, thus producing a General American version in the words *shiny* and *wrier*⁵:

(14) G.A.Sydney: shiny
[ˈʃaɪni]

(15) G.A.Sydney: wrier
[ˈwraɪər]

This last example of *wrier* is also useful to argue that this user’s accent is rhotic, as the sound /r/ can be heard when listening to the audio. Other examples that illustrate this rhoticity are *blasphemer* (15) and *freezer* (16):

(16) S.A.Sydney: blasphemer
[ˈblæsfɪmər]

(17) S.A.Sydney: freezer
[ˈfrɪzər]

Although in the database there cannot be found an alternative version of the word *blasphemer* in the non-rhotic accent, it does exist for the word *freezer*, even though it has not been produced by an American user, but by a British woman, whose user name is “Gemmelo” and who is from the region of West Country, often rhotic:

(18) R.P.Gemmelo⁶: freezer
[ˈfriːzə]

Apart from rhoticity, there are two other consonantal characteristics in the pronunciations by “Sydney” that are worth explaining, both of which would not be expected in the speech of a Southern speaker: the *Glide Cluster Reduction*, and the lack of /j/ glide between a coronal consonant and /u/, in the words *wheat* (19) and *duration*

⁵ In Forvo’s database there is no recording that reflects the Southern pronunciation of these two words so that the reader could compare both versions.

⁶ RP stands for Received Pronunciation, which is the standard variety of British English.

(20), respectively. Consequently, they can be taken as examples of General American speech:

(19) G.A.Sydney: duration
[du'reɪʃən]

(20) G.A.Sydney: wheat
[wɪt]

Finally, there is another aspect that may surprise those who listen to the pronunciations made by “Sydney”. Although it is not related to vocalic or consonantal characteristics and has not been mentioned before, the particular prosody of certain type of words may facilitate the recognition of the Southern accent. In this sense, speakers of this variety might stress the first syllable of a word, when General American speakers stress the second one. This difference can be exemplified with these two versions of the word *enquiry*, although the second one (22) has been produced by a British man from the South East region:

(21) S.A.Sydney: enquiry
[ˈɪŋkwəri]

(22) R.P.Piccadilly: enquiry
[ɪŋˈkwəri]

After analysing some of the words pronounced by this user, it can be argued that she has a Southern accent, although some of the most important characteristics that describe this accent are missing in the recordings, such as the monophthongisation of /aɪ/. However, I believe that the breaking of vowels and the prosody pattern that I demonstrated in this section are two characteristics with which I can conclude that “Sydney” speaks the Southern dialect.

4.3. Speaker 3

The third speaker is from Florida and her user name is “Pinkie”. In her recordings some interesting Southern characteristics can be found, such as the *Southern*

Shift, the *Southern Drawl*, rhoticity and lack of *Yod Dropping*. In this sense, the words in which these characteristics can be found are the following ones: *sky*, *butterfly*, *bad*, *booger*, *new* and *dew*.

As explained previously, two of the most important aspects to differentiate the Southern accent from the rest of the American English dialects are the *Southern Shift*, which can be noticed in the words *sky* (23) and *butterfly* (25), as well as the *Southern Drawl*, noticeable in the pronunciation of the word *bad* (27). In the case of the first two words, the glide of /aɪ/ becomes *long a*, /ɑ/.

(23) S.A.Pinkie: sky
[skɑ]

(24) S.A.Pinkie: butterfly
[ˈbʌtərflɑ]

Standard pronunciations of American English of these two words can be found in the recordings (24) and (25), where the glide is actually pronounced. The first one has been produced by a woman who comes from the state of New York and whose user name is “Griffeblanche”, while the second one has been recorded by a man from Michigan:

(25) G.A.Griffeblanche: sky
[skɑɪ]

(26) G.A.Jollysunbro: butterfly
[ˈbʌtərflɑɪ]

As far as the *Southern Drawl* is concerned, user “Pinkie” shows a tendency to prolong the vowel sound, as in *bad* (27), when a speaker of General American would keep it short, as user “SeanMauch”, from Pennsylvania, although the quality of the vowel does not change:

(27) S.A.Pinkie: bad
[bæd]

- (28) G.A.SeanMauch: bad
[bæd]

As regards consonantal characteristics, rhoticity is one of the elements that can be noticed in her recordings, as can be seen with example 24. Another recording that support the statement that her accent is rhotic is the one of the word *booger* (29):

- (29) S.A.Pinkie: booger
[ˈbugər]

As all pronunciations of the word *butterfly* and *booger* by American speakers have been pronounced with a rhotic accent, I will use a pronunciation of the word *butterfly* (30), made by a Londoner, in order to exemplify how this word would sound in these two types of accent:

- (30) R.P.TopQuark: butterfly
[ˈbʌtəflaɪ]

Finally, the last characteristic is that user “Pinkie” keeps the glide /j/ between coronal consonants and the vowel /u/, as in the word *new* (31) and *dew* (32), when speakers of General American would delete this sound.

- (31) S.A.Pinkie: new
[nju]

- (32) S.A.Pinkie: dew
[dju]

The following examples are the standard pronunciations of these two words in American English, made by “JessicaMS” (a woman from Florida) and “Falconfling” (a man from Texas), respectively. In the case of the latter, he gives the two pronunciations, the first one with the glide and the second one without it (34):

(33) G.A.JessicaMS: new
[nu]

(34) G.A.Falconfling: dew
[du dju]

With these examples of user “Pinkie”, we have seen four characteristics that are included in the description of the Southern accent: the *Southern Shift*, the *Southern Drawl*, rhoticity and lack of *Yod Dropping*. Consequently, I can conclude that this user also has a Southern accent.

4.4. Speaker 4

The last speaker that I will analyse is a woman from Tennessee, whose username is “Ashgreen”. When listing the states over which the different accents spread, I have commented that DARE (2013) includes this state inside the Midland area, although there are some researchers, like Kirkpatrick (2007), who also consider Tennessee as another region where the Southern dialect is spoken. Taking into consideration the recordings that I will provide next, it could be argued that, in fact, this user has a Southern accent. The words that I will use to justify this claim are the following ones: *plot*, *calls*, *surprising*, *violator*, *tumor*, *Tuesday* and *rebound*.

One of the main characteristics that can be found in the pronunciations by “Ashgreen” is the distinction between *short o*, /ɒ/, and *long o*, /ɔ/, as she differentiates the vowel sounds in *plot* (35) and *calls* (36), when General American speakers do not:

(35) S.A.ashgreen: plot
[plɒt]

(36) S.A.ashgreen: calls
[kɔlz]

However, another important phonological characteristic of the Southern accent is the *Southern Shift*, although it cannot be noticed in those pronunciations by “Ashgreen”, where this characteristic was expected to appear. This means that this user does not delete the glide in /aɪ/ in order to produce a long monophthong. Two examples

of this phenomenon are *surprising* (37) and *violation* (38). Therefore, the pronunciations of these two words have been produced like in General American:

(37) G.A.ashgreen: surprising
[sə'r'praɪzɪŋ]

(38) G.A.ashgreen: violation
['vaɪələɪtər]

Unfortunately, in the database there is no pronunciation of these two words where the *Southern Shift* is applied. Be that as it may, both examples are also useful to conclude that the accent of “Ashgreen” is rhotic, since she does not delete the /r/ sound in any of the cases. In order to compare again the rhotic and non-rhotic accents, I will provide next a pronunciation of *surprising*, made by the previously introduced user “TopQuark”, who pronounces this word (39) with his non-rhotic accent:

(39) R.P.TopQuark: surprising
[sə'praɪzɪŋ]

Finally, the pronunciation of the word *tumor* (40) is also useful to confirm the rhotic accent of “Ashgreen”, although it is also pertinent to demonstrate that this user do not delete the glide /j/ between coronal consonants and the vowel /u/. The same characteristic can be perceived with the word *Tuesday* (41):

(40) S.A.ashgreen: tumor
['tjʊmə]

(41) S.A.ashgreen: Tuesday
['tju:zdeɪ]

The standard version of these two words can be found in the pronunciations provided by users “MrTaxman”, from Washington, and “Imscotte1”, both of which delete the glide /j/:

(42) G.A.MrTaxman: tumor
[ˈtʊmə]

(43) G.A.Imscotte1: Tuesday
[ˈtʊzdeɪ]

In sum, in these recordings we could find three different qualities that characterise the Southern American English: lack of *low back merger*, rhoticity and lack of *Yod Dropping*. However, in those environments where the *Southern Shift* was expected to appear, the user “Ashgreen” has not produced the monophthong /ɑ/, but the diphthong /aɪ/.

5. Discussion

After analysing certain words of four users, it can be concluded that these users (“Southernborn”, “Sydney”, “Pinkie” and “Ashgreen”) have a Southern accent, although in none of the cases could we find every characteristic that describes this dialect.

With regard to the user “Southernborn”, he only pronounced five words, which does not allow us to analyse if the six characteristics we were looking for could be found in his speech. Therefore, the limited number of pronunciations by this user has not allowed us to carry out a more comprehensive study of his speech, although the evidence provided is enough to conclude that he speaks Southern American English, as the instances of the *Southern Shift* and *Southern Drawl* appear in the pronunciations, even though he does not make the distinction between the sounds /w/ and /hw/ and his accent is rhotic.

Secondly, the user “Sydney”, a woman from northern Georgia, shows two different characteristics that are used to describe the Southern accent of American English: lack of *low back merger* and *Southern Drawl*. In contrast, she does not apply the *Southern Shift*, her accent is rhotic and does not differentiate the /w/ and /hw/ sounds. However, she does apply *Yod Dropping*. Although I cannot explain with certainty why some of the characteristics of Southern American English do not appear in her pronunciation, my hypothesis is that Georgia is in a transitional area between the Southern and the Midland regions and, consequently, her Southern accent may be mitigated by the influence of other accents, like General American.

Thirdly, the user “Pinkie”, from Florida, has produced some recordings where characteristics such as the *Southern Shift*, the *Southern Drawl* and lack of *Yod Dropping* can be found. Therefore, it becomes clear that her speech corresponds to the Southern dialect, although sometimes Florida is not considered part of the Southern accent because of the diversity of population that coexists in this state. Her speech also shows rhoticity.

As for the last user who has been analysed, “Ashgreen” is from Tennessee, a state that some researchers include within the Southern area, while others place it in the Midland region. Nevertheless, she shows some characteristics of the Southern accent, like the lack of *low back merger* and *Yod Dropping*. In contrast, the *Southern Shift* is not present in those environments where I could expect it and she has a rhotic accent. In this sense, my hypothesis is also that the influence of neighbouring accents has mitigated her Southern speech.

If we compare the results of this study with what have been explained in the literature review, there are two aspects that I would like to highlight. The first one is that in the literary review it has been said that Southern accent was traditionally a non-rhotic accent, while rhoticity has been one of the salient characteristics of American English. With these results, it appears that rhoticity is increasingly spreading over the Southern area, since the four users analysed have a rhotic accent. As the second point, it seems that the distinction between the sounds /h/ and /hw/ is not relevant any longer to define if a speaker has a Southern accent or not. However, it is also true that more speech analysis is required, since the result obtained by the analysis of four users cannot be generalised to all the speakers of the southern region of the United States.

Finally, I have mentioned that one of the possibilities to understand that speakers of a particular accent, Southern American English in our case, do not show every characteristic of their dialect is that these characteristics may be mitigated by the exposure of these speakers to other dialects, which is the norm in our globalised world, where people are exposed to different accents, mainly through television and radio. In fact, it is increasingly challenging to find people to fall under the category of NORMs, an acronym that stands for non-mobile, older, rural, males and that was coined by Chambers and Trudgill (1980) for a group of people that is reticent to changes because they have lived isolated and have not been exposed to other speeches.

6. Conclusion

This study was designed in order to search for Forvo users who speak Southern American English, so that users who would like to learn what this variety sounds like could have clear speech examples. With this study, these users may understand that it is not straightforward to differentiate each of the varieties in any of the languages.

This is what happens in North America, a country where several dialects coexist, but where the boundaries between them are not always clear. In this sense, I have opted to divide the country in four different accents: Southern American English, Midland American English, Northern American English and Western American English. Furthermore, there is a standard variety, General American English, which spreads over the whole territory and influences the rest of the varieties.

Bearing this situation in mind, I have found four different users who speak Southern American English: “Southernborn”, “Pinkie”, “Sydney” and “Ashgreen”. I have analysed their pronunciations in the light of six of the characteristics with which researchers describe this accent, taking into account that Forvo users would be unable to perceive every phonological characteristic that researchers mention in their studies.

All in all, the first two users (“Southernborn” and “Pinkie”) are consistent in the use of those characteristics of Southern English, even though they have not pronounced yet sufficient words to analyse if their speech has each of the six characteristics I was looking for (*Southern Shift*, *Southern Drawl*, lack of the *low back merger*, rhoticity, *Glide Cluster Reduction* and lack of *Yod Dropping*). In contrast, “Sydney” and “Ashgreen” do not show every characteristic. Therefore, this means that it is possible to conclude that a person speaks Southern American English even if they do not use all the characteristics that qualify this speech, which might happen because of the increasing influence of the General American.

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