

## Indianapolis, Indiana: A prototype of Midland convergence

The recently published *Atlas of North American English* (Labov, Ash and Boberg 2006) offers a finding that flies in the face of conventional wisdom: "the diversity of regional dialects in North America is not diminishing, but is increasing over time" (304). Yet these diverging regional dialects are expanding at the expense of smaller, distinctive speech islands within each region. One major, apparent exception to this pattern of regional convergence seems to be the American Midland, a region whose three largest urban centers – St. Louis, Pittsburgh and Cincinnati – have been shown to exhibit unique dialect patterns which distinguish them from the more general pattern of the surrounding region. But even these historic speech islands now seem to be disappearing in favor of a general Midland dialect that closely follows the Southeastern superlect (Labov 2006). Yet while the largest Midland cities have been thoroughly examined both in the *Atlas* and by scholars looking at each city individually (for example, Pittsburgh in Johnstone, Bhasin and Wittkofski (2002), Cincinnati in Boberg and Strassel (2000), St. Louis in Murray (2002) and Columbus, OH in Thomas (1989)), another major Midland center, Indianapolis, Indiana, has been largely ignored by previous research. As the capital and largest city of Indiana, this fifth largest Midland metropolitan area is a natural place to look in an ongoing investigation of the competing forces of dialect convergence and divergence in the American Midland.

This paper examines the state of Indianapolis English with regards to three key Midland identifiers: the fronting of back vowels /ow/, /uw/ and /aw/; the transitional merger of the low-back vowels /o/ and /oh/; and the monophthongization of /ay/ before resonants. Tape recorded sociolinguistic interviews were conducted with a sample of twenty-two Indianapolis natives balanced for age and sex. Spectrographic measurements were made of the nuclear F1 and F2 values for the vowels in question in wordlist and spontaneous speech environments. For /ay/ tokens, glide measurements were recorded as well. Measurements were also recorded for tokens of /in/ and /en/, which represent a conditioned merger found by the *Atlas* in central and southern Indiana though not considered a marker of the Midland dialect.

The results of this study suggest that Indianapolis follows the Midland regional pattern, but unlike other major Midland urban centers, it always has. First, all of the Indianapolis speakers show back vowel fronting – a process that appears to have stabilized for /aw/ and /uw/ but is still advancing among younger speakers for /ow/. Second, while Indianapolis does not have an unconditioned low-back merger, all of the youngest speakers showed a merger in some environment (before /l/, before /n/ or both) and only half of the oldest speakers did. Pearson coefficients confirm an age correlation. Finally, while there is no overall /ay/ monophthongization in any environment in Indianapolis, /ay/ glides show significant reduction before resonants as compared to non-resonants across all age groups. The data on /in/ and /en/ strengthens these results, as younger Indianapolis speakers are moving away from the merger demonstrated by older speakers. Thus, Indianapolis is a Midland speech prototype representing the target of convergence for the larger urban centers.

## References

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