Grandfawther’s Mardi Graw: The PALM vowel in New Orleans

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New Orleans English shares some features with New York City. Traditional NYC English maintains rare 3-way contrast between LOT, PALM, and THOUGHT, with PALM between LOT and THOUGHT. Our research question: what is PALM’s status in New Orleans?

Background: shared features of NYC/NOLA; linguists have argued they’re due to diffusion:

ARGUED NOLA → NYC
Berger (1980)
• Historic documentation of BIRD-palatalization in South & NYC

ARGUED NYC → NOLA
Labov (2007)
• Compared split short-a system constraints
Carmichael & Becker (2018)
• Constraint ranking comparison; evidence for diffusion of (r) but inconclusive for THOUGHT

PALM in NYCE: Newman (2016) finds LOT words with voiced codas transferred to PALM: god, job, etc.

Methodology:
• Lobanov-normalized vowel tokens for 57 white NOLA speakers (sample balanced across age, gender, etc.)
• F1/F2 for THOUGHT, LOT, PALM extracted & plotted in F1/F2 space (N=4054; ~70 per speaker)
• Visually examined plots for distribution of PALM for speakers with unmerged THOUGHT/LOT

Findings: PALM words are divided between LOT and THOUGHT in New Orleans

What vowel is in PALM words in NOLA?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOT</th>
<th>THOUGHT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>nacho</td>
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<tr>
<td>bra</td>
<td>taco</td>
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<tr>
<td>camouflage</td>
<td>tsunami</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>yada yada</td>
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<td>debacle</td>
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Common, long-standing words mostly THOUGHT; rarer words and recent loanwords mainly LOT.

Conclusion: Our findings support diffusion NYC → NOLA

• NYCE = only other known dialect with PALM regularly backer than LOT
• We propose: NOLA speakers perceived PALM backer than LOT in NYCE during period of contact, incorrectly identified it in THOUGHT category
  • But later PALM words (e.g. taco, garage) identified as LOT
• End result: NOLA English PALM distribution unlike anywhere else