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The Persistence of Southern American English

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If our recent move to Las Vegas has done nothing else, it has reminded us that we speak a rather easily recognizable variety of American English and that this variety is not held in great esteem outside the South. In fact, outside the university (and sometimes inside it) we are reminded of our accents almost every day; the reminders range from polite condescension to not so subtle implications that maybe we missed the last wagon out of town. As a result, in a place that runs on "juice" (the Las Vegas term for 'influence' or 'pull') we have occasionally stooped to letting insurance and travel agents, doctors, dentists, and others know what we do for a living to ensure good service and polite treatment. This situation is quite a bit different from the one we experienced in small-town Texas and Oklahoma, where half the people do not know what a dean (or a professor) is, and the other half do not care: in personal interactions, lowered /e/ and monophthongal /ai/ are much more important than a title.

In spite of its relatively low status among non-Southerners—not only among those living outside the South but also among those living in the region—Southern American English (SAE) continues to thrive, even in places such as Texas and Oklahoma, where migration from other parts of the country has been extensive. The persistence of SAE raises an interesting question. At a time when traditional Southern society has been radically reshaped, when migration into the South continues to transform the population, and when the existence of minority languages and dialects elsewhere in the United States is increasingly threatened by standardizing forces, many grammatical and phonological features of SAE are holding their own, even as the folk vocabulary is disappearing. Why? A look at SAE in Texas, a state in which major demographic and social trends argue against its continued existence, may provide some answers to that question and may suggest something about the kinds of circumstances under which minority dialects can persist—even in the face of forces that threaten their existence.

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Although Southerners have long understood that other Americans look down on their speech, recent work by Dennis Preston (1996) demonstrates the extent of the negative attitudes toward SAE. To explore folk beliefs about American dialects, Preston had respondents from Michigan, Indiana, and South Carolina draw boundaries on a U.S. map around areas where they believed regional dialects were spoken. He then had respondents rate each of the fifty states on (1) the degree of difference of its speech from their own and (2) the pleasantness and correctness of its speech. The results of these activities show clearly that the South is by far the most salient dialect area for both Northern and Southern respondents: 90 percent of the Michigan and Indiana respondents and 96 percent of the South Carolina ones depict it in their drawings. Salience is not always a good thing, however. Preston points out that for non-Southerners, the South is also the area that is evaluated most negatively, especially on the correctness dimension, with New York City its only serious rival.[1] The situation for Southern respondents is more complex. Many of the Southern respondents believe that their speech is as correct as that of their Northern counterparts. They do not evaluate themselves as positively as the respondents from Michigan do, though, and they also find an area of Southern incorrectness (Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas).

Given the negative view of SAE by non-Southerners and the complex reactions of Southerners, we might ask whether the use of SAE is declining. Finding evidence that might help us answer this question is not easy. Conventional linguistic research is not very helpful: linguistic surveys give us a great deal of information about the distribution of linguistic features of SAE but little information about the percentage of Southerners who currently use that variety. The best evidence on the persistence of SAE comes from the Southern Focus Poll (SFP), an omnibus public opinion survey conducted semiannually by the Center for the Study of the American South at the University of North Carolina.[2] On selected surveys, SFP interviewers are asked to indicate at the conclusion of the interview whether the respondent has a Southern accent. According to SFP interviewers, 73.4 percent of the Southern respondents to the spring 1995 poll had a Southern accent, with 32 percent of these having a strong accent; these figures are quite similar to those from the fall 1993 poll, with 68.4 percent of the Southern respondents having a Southern accent and 36.6 percent having a strong one. The fact that these numbers include areas such as south Florida and the northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C., areas whose expansion during the past forty years has come largely from the in-migration of non-Southerners, makes them even more impressive. If we isolate only native Southerners in the fall 1993 survey, we find interviewers indicating that 87.7 percent of these respondents have a Southern accent. The data from SFP, then, suggest that SAE persists in spite of the negative attitudes that non-Southerners have toward it.

It is important to recognize, however, that persistence does not equal immutability. Although even younger Southerners can often be identified as Southerners

on the basis of their speech alone, research done during the past seven years suggests that SAE, both in Texas and elsewhere, has undergone radical changes over the past century.[3] Kurath's (1949) original delimitation of American dialects (including SAE) was based on folk vocabulary. Thus the linguistic South was distinguished by such lexical terms as *mosquito hawk* (for *dragonfly*), *snap bean* (for *green bean*), and *singletree* (for the bar of wood on a wagon to which the traces are attached). With rapid urbanization and the transformation of the Southern economy over the past fifty years from one based on agriculture to one based on service and industry, though, much of the folk vocabulary has been lost. What distinguishes the linguistic South today is not its lexicon but its pronunciation and grammar.

Even the pronunciation and grammar of SAE have undergone radical changes, however. Table 1, taken from Bailey (forthcoming), is a list of phonological and grammatical features that have been documented in Texas. Although some of these features could not be used to identify speakers as Southern (and in fact are not limited to the South), items 1-12 and 24-31 are stereotypes of SAE and must be the kinds of features that listeners are responding to when they identify speakers as Southern. A look at the history of these twenty features shows just how extensively SAE has changed over the past century and a half.

Table 2, also taken from Bailey (forthcoming), summarizes much of the information we have on the history of these features. Two things become immediately apparent from Table 2. First, most of the features that were clearly established in mid-nineteenth century SAE have disappeared from the present-day Texas speech—at least among Anglos. Both older pronunciation features, such as the loss of constriction in postvocalic and syllabic /r/, and older grammatical features, such as the *a*-prefix and plural verbal *-s*, are virtually nonexistent among Anglos under fifty. Second, many of the stereotypes of current SAE seem either to have emerged during the last quarter of the nineteenth century or to have begun to spread during that time. Thus we find no evidence of features such as monophthongal /ai/ and the Southern Shift before the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and features such as the merger of /ɛ/ and /ɪ/ before nasals (the *pen/pin* merger) and *fixin to* are rare before that time. The work of Vivian Brown (1991) on the *pen/pin* merger demonstrates how these changes evolved. Brown shows that /ɪ/ in words such as *pen* was a low-frequency variant that alternated with the more common /ɛ/ before 1875; the raised variant began to spread rapidly after 1875, until by World War II it was almost universal in SAE. Grammatical features, such as *fixin to*, *might could*, and even *yall*,[4] show patterns of expansion that parallel the *pen/pin* merger (see Bailey et al. 1991; Tillery and Bailey forthcoming-a, forthcoming-b).

Thomas and Bailey's (1993) spectrographic analysis of the vowel systems of Southerners whose births range from 1846 to 1976 suggests a similar pattern of evolution for the use of vowel space in SAE. Figures 1 through 3, which are taken

TABLE 1
Some Well-Documented Features of White SAE in Texas

Feature	Sources	Example
1. Unconstricted /r/ as a stressed syllabic	Kurath and McDavid (1961); McMillian (1946); Lambert (1995)	word = [wɜd]
2. Unconstricted postvocalic /r/	Kurath and McDavid (1961); McMillan (1946); Lambert (1995)	four = [foə]
3. Intrusive /r/	Kurath and McDavid (1961); Bailey et al. (1991)	wash = [wɔəˑʃ]
4. Long offglide in /æ/ before voiceless fricatives	Kurath and McDavid (1961); McMillan (1946); Schremp (1995)	half = [hæɪf]
5. Upgliding /ɔ/	Kurath and McDavid (1961); Thomas and Bailey (1993)	caught = [kɔot]
6. Fronted /u/ and /ʊ/	Kurath and McDavid (1961); Labov (1991); Thomas and Bailey (1993)	food = [fʉd]
7. Fronted /au/	Kurath and McDavid (1961); Thomas and Bailey (1993)	house = [hæos]
8. Merger of /ɛ/ and /ɪ/ before nasals	Kurath and McDavid (1961); Brown (1990, 1991)	pen = [pɪn]
9. Monophthongal /ai/ before voiced obstruents	Kurath and McDavid (1961); Bailey et al. (1991); Tillery (1992)	ride = [rad]
10. Lowered/retracted /e/—The Southern Shift	Labov (1991); Thomas and Bailey (1993)	way = [wæɪ]
11. Lowered/fronted /o/—The Southern Shift	Labov (1991); Thomas and Bailey (1993)	no = [nʌʉ]
12. Southern Drawl	Feagin (1987)	bed = [bɛˑəd]
13. Loss of /j/ after alveolars	Kurath and McDavid (1961); Phillips (1981, 1994); Pitts (1986); Bailey et al. (1991)	due = [dʊʉ]
14. Merger of /ɛr/ and /ɛɪr/	Kurath and McDavid (1961); Taylor (1995)	Mary = [mɛəˑi]
15. Merger of /ɔr/ and /or/	Kurath and McDavid (1961); Thomas and Bailey (1992)	for = [foəˑ]
16. Loss of /h/ before /w/	Kurath and McDavid (1961); Reed (1991)	which = [wɪtʃ]
17. "Merger" of /u/ and /ʊ/ before /l/	Labov, Yeager, and Steiner (1972); Tillery (1992); Bailey et al. (1991)	fool = [fʊəl]
18. "Merger" of /i/ and /ɪ/ before /l/	Labov et al. (1972); Tillery (1992); Bailey et al. (1991)	feel = [fil]
19. "Merger" of /e/ and /ɛ/ before /l/	Labov et al. (1972); Tillery (1992); Bailey et al. (1991)	bale = [bɛl]
20. Monophthongal /ai/ before voiceless obstruents	Kurath and McDavid (1961); Bailey et al. (1991)	right = [rat]
21. Merger of /ɛr/ and /ær/	Kurath and McDavid (1961); Taylor (1995)	marry = [mɛəˑi] or merry = [mæəˑi]
22. Merger of /ɔ/ and /ɑ/	Kurath and McDavid (1961); Tillery (1989, 1992)	caught = [kɑt]
23. Loss of /h/ before /j/	Kerr (1989)	hue = [jʉ]

(continued)

TABLE 1 Continued

Feature	Sources	Example
24. *a*-verb-*ing*	Atwood (1953); Wolfram (1976, 1980, 1988)	he left **a**-running
25. Plural verbal *-s*	Atwood (1953); Montgomery (1989); Bailey, Maynor, and Cukor-Avila (1989)	folks **sits** there
26. Existential *it*	Schremp and Bailey (1995)	**it's** two of them
27. *liketa*	Atwood (1953); Feagin (1979); Bailey and Ross (1988)	**I liketa** died
28. perfective *done*	Atwood (1953); Feagin (1979)	she's **done left**
29. *you-all/yall*	Atwood (1953); Montgomery (1992); Tillery and Bailey (forthcoming-b)	we saw **yall** there
30. *fixin to*	Ching (1987); Bailey et al. (1991); Tillery (1992)	I'm **fixin to** eat
31. Multiple modals	Atwood (1953); Butters (1973, 1991); Di Paola (1986, 1989); Montgomery (1989); Mishoe and Montgomery (1994); Bailey et al. (1991); Tillery and Bailey (forthcoming-a)	We *might can* make it
32. Inceptive *get to/got to*	Bean (1991); Montgomery (1980)	I **got to** talking and forgot it
33. Preterite *dove*	Atwood (1953); Bernstein (1994)	they **dove** in
34. Preterite *drug*	Atwood (1953); Bernstein (1994)	he **drug** it in

from Thomas and Bailey (1993), include F1/F2 formant plots of three Texans; they illustrate many of the phonetic and phonological developments outlined in Table 2. The speaker represented in Figure 1, born in 1847, is typical of other mid-nineteenth century Southerners we have analyzed. As Figure 1 shows, he has fully diphthongal /ai/, centralized onsets of /au/, upgliding /ɔ/, back /u/ and /ʊ/, and /e/ to the front of /ɛ/. Figure 1 does not show his unconstricted /r/ after vowels; this man also shows no evidence of the *pen/pin* merger. Figure 2 shows the vowel system of a woman from west Texas born fifty years later; again, she is typical of others analyzed in Thomas and Bailey (1993) who were born during this period. Her system reflects the initial stages in the development of a number of features that are now stereotypes of SAE. These include (1) monophthongization of /ai/, with shortened offglides before voiced obstruents, and (2) the Southern Shift, with /e/ somewhat lower than /ɛ/ and both /ʊ/ and /u/ centralized. The onset of /au/ is already fully front for her. She maintains upgliding /ɔ/, but she has constricted /r/ after vowels.[5] In Figure 3, which shows the vowel system of a west Texan born in 1976, many of the processes begun in Figure 2 are taken to completion. Features such as front onsets in /au/ remain essential parts of the vowel system, but /ai/ is now fully monophthongal before voiceless as well as voiced obstruents, /e/ is considerably lower than /ɛ/, and /u/ and /ʊ/ are essentially front rounded vowels. In addition, upgliding /ɔ/ disappears as that phoneme merges with /ɑ/. This woman is completely rhotic and has the *pen/pin* merger.

TABLE 2
The Changing Shape of White Vernacular English in Texas

Period	Before 1875	1875-1945	1945-1980
Phonological Features			
loss of constriction in syllabic /r/[a]	+	+/–	–
loss of constriction in postvocalic /r/	+	+/–	–
intrusive /r/[a]	+	+/–	–
/æi/[a]	+	+/–	–
upgliding /ɔ/[b]	+	+	+/–
fronted /u/ and /ʊ/ (Southern Shift)[c]	–/+	+	+
fronted /au/	–	–/+	+
merger of /ɛ/ and /ɪ/ before nasals	–	–/+	+
monophthongal /ai/ (voiced environment)	–	–/+	+
lowered/retracted /e/ (Southern Shift)	–	–/+	+
lowered/fronted /o/ (Southern Shift)	–	–/+	+
Southern Drawl	–	–/+	+
loss of /j/ after alveolars	–	–/+	+
merger of /ɛr/ and /ɛɪ/	–	–/+	+
merger of /ɔr/ and /or/[d]	–	–/+	+
loss of /h/ before /w/	–	–/+	+
"merger" of /u/ and /ʊ/ before /l/	–	–/+	–/+
"merger" of /i/ and /ɪ/ before /l/	–	–/+	–/+
"merger" of /e/ and /ɛ/ before /l/	–	–/+	–/+
monophthongal /ai/ (voiceless environment)	–	–/+	–/+
merger of /ɛr/ and /ær/	–	–	–/+
merger of /ɔ/ and /ɑ/	–	–	–/+
loss of /h/ before /j/	–	–	–/+
Grammatical Features			
a+verb+*ing*	+	+/–	–
plural verbal *-s*	+	+/–	–
existential *it*	+	+/–	–
liketa	+	+/–	+/–
perfective *done*	+	+	+
you-all/yall	–/+	+	+
fixin to	–/+	–/+	+
multiple modals	?	–/+	+
inceptive *get to/got to*	–	–/+	+
dove for *dived*	–	–/+	+
drug for *dragged*	–	–/+	–/+

SOURCES: Bailey et al. (1989); Bailey, Wikle, and Sand (1991a, 1991b); Bailey et al. (1991, 1993, 1994, 1996); Bean (1991); Bernstein (1994); Brown (1990, 1991); Kerr (1989); Lambert (1995); Reed (1991); Schremp (1995); Taylor (1995); Thomas (1989, 1992, 1995); Thomas and Bailey (1992, 1993); Tillery (1989, 1992); Tillery and Bailey (forthcoming-a, forthcoming-b); additional data from *LAGS*, PST, and GRITS.

a. It is not clear how widespread these features were in mid-nineteenth century Texas, but our records suggest that *r*-lessness was quite widespread (probably dominant) while intrusive /r/ and /æi/ were quite variable.

b. Upgliding /ɔ/ is currently disappearing rapidly as the merger of /ɔ/ and /ɑ/ expands.

c. This classification is misleading. Although the fronting of /u/ and /ʊ/ seems to have begun in the mid-nineteenth century, the vowels have recently moved further to the front: in the mid-nineteenth century, /u/ was probably a central vowel, in present-day Anglo speech a front rounded vowel.

d. This merger is complicated by a competing merger—that of /ɔr/ and /ɑr/, which makes *lord* and *lard* both sound like *lard*. For more than half a century the two mergers competed both with each other and with the three-way distinction, but the /ɔr/-/ɑr/ merger has lost out to the /ɔr/-/or/ merger just as the three-way distinction has.

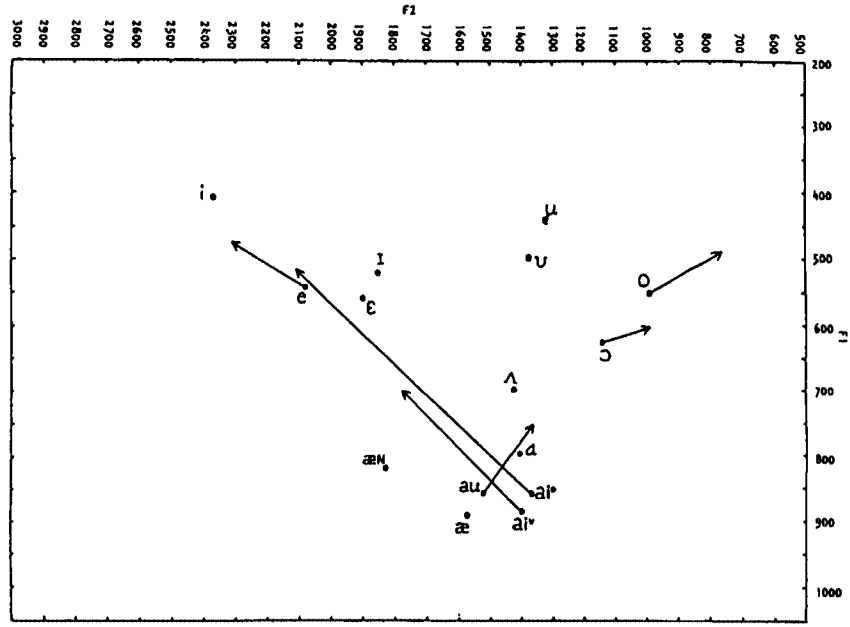

Figure 1: Vowel System of a White Male from Dallas, Texas, Born in 1846.

It is clear, then, that even as SAE has persisted, it has undergone radical change. Change does not equal death, however. Rather than make SAE more like other varieties, many of the changes discussed earlier have maintained or perhaps even enhanced its distinctiveness.[6] The fact that SAE is a vital, changing variety that adapts to the needs of its users is surely one of the reasons it continues to persist. The histories of languages around the world show that change is a sign of life—the only languages that do not change are dead ones.

Change alone, of course, does not guarantee persistence. In fact, the consequences of linguistic change are sometimes convergence with other varieties and the loss of distinctiveness. The persistence of SAE as a divergent variety in the face of extensive migration into the South, of standardizing forces such as universal education, and of the negative attitudes of non-Southerners toward it is surely a result of its situation in a culture that values its divergence and fosters its independent development. In a book that explores some of the sources of the persistent cultural differences between the South and the rest of the United States, Jack Temple Kirby (1995, 1) argues that "a not-quite-measurable but substantial minority of southerners are counter cultural"; that is, they resist or at least do not collaborate with the larger, hegemonic national culture. According to Kirby, this resistance has

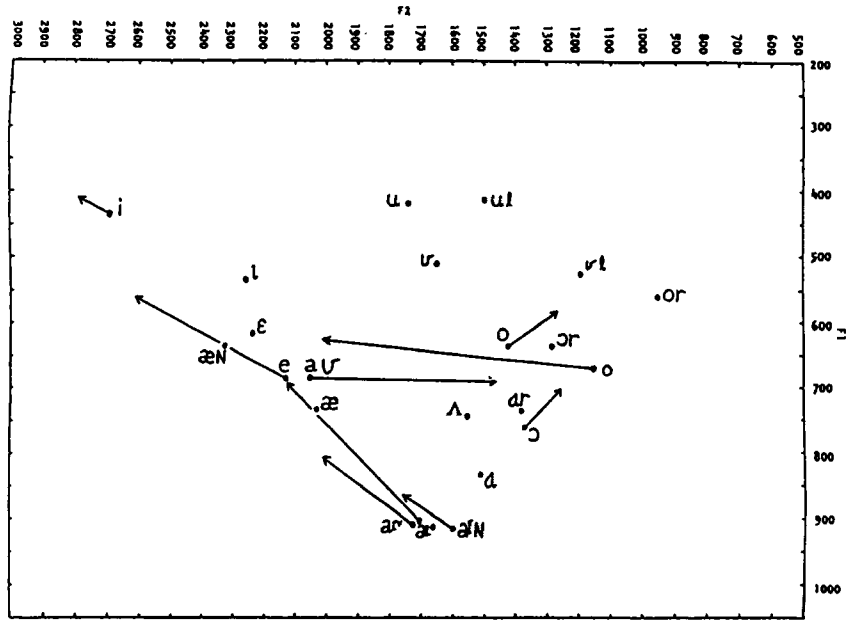

Figure 2: Vowel System of a White Female from Canyon, Texas, Born in 1899.

its origins in the antebellum South, whose civilization was based "upon noncapitalist . . . labor and social relations 'and whose people were devoted to' leisure and indiscipline, maddeningly indifferent to technology and growth" (2). After the Civil War, Kirby asserts, it persisted in spite of the efforts of country store merchants, railroad operatives, and fertilizer salesmen, who fostered the expansion of the cotton culture and who tried to impose structures of modern exchange, beliefs, and behaviors associated with bourgeois culture. Although the hegemonic national culture has made significant inroads since World War II, Kirby believes that the countercultural behavior of Southerners still manifests itself in a number of ways. These range from relatively acceptable but distinctive forms of cultural expression such as traditional country music to clearly unsanctioned behaviors such as woods arson, the latter a legacy of a time when woods were not owned by timber companies and were open for hunting and running hogs. As John Shelton Reed (1975, 90) points out, "although [the South] is in some respects rejoining the Union at last, the accommodation is a tentative one. Southerners continue to see themselves as others see them, as different." This sense of "differentness" and the pride in it has provided the context for the persistence of SAE. Perhaps the most concise statement of the traditional Southern attitude toward the differences between the South and the rest

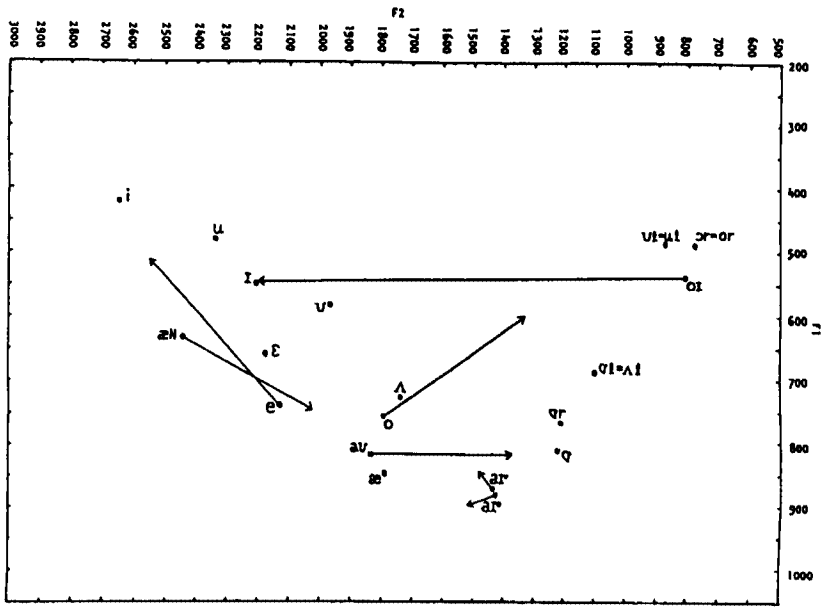

Figure 3: Vowel System of a White Female from Perryton, Texas, Born in 1976.

of the country is in Hank Williams, Jr.'s, "A Country Boy Can Survive." Hank, Jr., notes that

> we say grace and we say ma'am
> and if you ain't into that we don't give a damn.

Attitudes such as these provide precisely the kind of cultural context that might ensure the survival of a minority dialect.

The fact that SAE has continued to persist in the face of standardizing forces does not mean it will do so in the future. Many of the distinctive characteristics of Southern culture, of course, are in serious jeopardy. Although it has been half a century since agriculture formed the basis of the Southern economy, the economy continues to undergo transformations that make it more like that of the rest of the nation. Whereas in the past the movement of business and industry into the South meant the construction of a new cotton mill or the development of a new coal mine, it now means the movement of the corporate headquarters of J. C. Penney to Plano, Texas. We simply do not know what cultural consequences changes like these will have. They certainly have the potential of making the South more like the rest of the country, but they also have the potential of making the rest of the country more like the South. Either development is potentially a problem for the future of SAE.

It is not clear that linguistic distinctiveness can persist among cultural hegemony, and recent trends in country music illustrate how the convergence of the rest of the nation with the South can have negative consequences for the persistence of a unique Southern culture. Kirby (1995, 69) notes that even as country music has become the nation's music, it "has lost its identity as the music of southern white folk." Garth Brooks is not Merle Haggard; even as Nashville gains an audience, working-class Whites in the South lose a voice.

Our work in Texas and elsewhere shows some evidence both of the convergence of SAE with other varieties and also the adoption of features of SAE into those varieties. The second and fourth sections of Tables 1 and 2 are lists of features that either have emerged or have expanded rapidly in SAE since World War II. Many (perhaps most) of these features are also expanding in other varieties of American English. For instance, the loss of /h/ before /w/, the loss of /j/ after alveolars, and the /ɔ/-/ɑ/ merger are all expanding in large parts of the United States. Even as these changes make inroads into SAE, features of SAE, such as the *pen-pin* merger and *yall* as a second-person plural personal pronoun, are expanding in other parts of the country. Our research suggests that the expansion of *yall* is particularly dramatic. We placed a series of questions designed to explore the use of some traditional features of SAE on the fall 1994 Southern Focus Poll. All respondents were asked if they had heard *yall* and if they would use it themselves. Not surprisingly, 78.68 percent of the respondents living in the South and 88.2 percent of the native Southerners living there acknowledged using the form. However, 43.51 percent of the non-Southerners (i.e., those living outside of the South) acknowledge using *yall*, too. Although the expansion of *yall* outside the South may well signal an increasing acceptance of SAE (just as the popularity of Garth Brooks signals an increasing acceptance of country music), its expansion makes *yall* far less useful as a marker of group identity. It may be that as SAE gains an audience, like country music, it will lose its distinctive voice.

The prognosis for SAE is not all bad, though. Our research shows that even as some of the distinctive phonological traits of SAE are disappearing in Texas, others such as the monophthongization of /ai/ and the "Southern Shift" are holding their own, as are morphosyntactic features such as *fixin to* and *might could* (Bailey et al. 1991; Tillery and Bailey forthcoming-a, forthcoming-b). Again, there are interesting parallels with country music here. For every Garth Brooks who comes out of Nashville, a Wayne Hancock or a Junior Brown comes out of the honky-tonks and dance halls of Texas. Thus, even as Nashville adopts nontraditional musical styles and the rest of the country appropriates Nashville's music, country music as a form of Southern cultural expression regenerates and reformulates itself among live audiences in the working-class South. The survival of SAE depends on its ability to do much the same thing.

Notes

1. The responses for pleasantness reflect a preference for local speech.

2. We wish to thank Dr. Beverly Wiggins, Associate Director of Research for the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences at the University of North Carolina, for providing us with the data from SFP. Dr. Wiggins is also Director of SFP. SFP is an excellent source of evidence on the attitudes and beliefs of Southerners and includes a great deal of information directly relevant to the sociolinguistics of SAE.

3. See Bailey (forthcoming) for a more complete discussion of change and stability in SAE.

4. We spell *yall* as one word because we do not think that it is a contraction of *you-all* but rather a "compacted form" that developed as *you-all* became grammaticalized—in much the same way that *gonna*, developed from *going to*, became grammaticalized as a future (see Hopper and Traugott 1993, for a discussion of these concepts).

5. Of course west Texas has always been more "*r*-ful" than east Texas, and it is not clear to what extent that part of the state was ever "*r*-less." Unconstricted /r/ was maintained until the middle of the twentieth century in east Texas.

6. We should point out that not all the changes that began after 1875 enhance the distinctiveness of SAE. The loss of /j/ after alveolars and /h/ before /w/, for example, are changes that occurred in a number of varieties of American English.

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