Phonetic features of the accent in southern united states

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Annotation: *This paper explores the phonetic features of the Southern American English (SAE) accent, highlighting its distinctive vowel shifts, consonant usage, and prosodic characteristics. Through phonological analysis and comparison with General American English, the study demonstrates how these features reflect both regional identity and sociohistorical development. Consonant changes such as the non-rhoticity (dropping the "r" sound) in some sub regions, the gliding of vowels, and the use of monophthongs also contribute to the unique sound. Additionally, the intonation tends to be melodic and slower paced, with particular stress patterns. The purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the core phonetic features of the Southern American accent, focusing primarily on vowel and consonant shifts, and prosodic patterns. By drawing on existing linguistic data and corpora, and comparing Southern features to General American English norms, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of regional speech patterns and the ongoing evolution of American English.*

Keywords: *Southern American English, phonetics, vowel shift, consonants, prosody, accent variation.*

Фонетические особенности акцента на юге Соединенных Штатов

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Аннотация: *Данная работа исследует фонетические особенности акцента Южного американского английского (SAE), выделяя его специфические изменения гласных, употребление согласных и просодические характеристики. Через фонологический анализ и сравнение с Общеамериканским английским, исследование демонстрирует, как эти особенности отражают как региональную идентичность, так и социокультурное развитие. Изменения согласных, такие как не-ритичность (отсутствие звука "r" в некоторых подрегионах), глидирование гласных и использование моноптонгов также способствуют уникальному звучанию. Кроме того, интонация, как правило, мелодичная и медленная, с характерными моделями ударений. Цель данного исследования – идентифицировать и проанализировать основные фонетические характеристики южного американского акцента, сосредоточив внимание, прежде всего, на изменениях гласных и согласных, а также на просодических паттернах. Опираясь на существующие лингвистические данные и корпусы, и сравнивая южные особенности с нормами Общеамериканского английского,*

данное исследование вносит вклад в более глубокое понимание региональных речевых паттернов и продолжающейся эволюции американского английского.

Ключевые слова: Южный американский английский, фонетика, изменение гласных, согласные, просодия, вариация акцента.

Janubiy Qo'shma Shtatlar aksentining fonetik xususiyatlari

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Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqola Janubiy Amerikaning ingliz tili (SAE) aksentining fonetik xususiyatlarini o'rganadi, uning o'ziga xos unli o'zgarishlari, rovotlar va prosodik xususiyatlarini ta'kidlaydi. Fonologik tahlil va Umumiy Amerikaning ingliz tili bilan taqqoslash orqali, tadqiqot ushbu xususiyatlar mintaqaviy identitet va ijtimoiy tarixiy rivojlanishni qanday aks ettirayotganini ko'rsatadi. Ba'zi mintaqalarda "r" tovushining qisqarishi (non-rhoticity), unli tovushlarning glidingi va monoftonglardan foydalanish kabi rovot o'zgarishlari ham o'ziga xos ovozga hissa qo'shadi. Bundan tashqari, intonatsiya, odatda, melodik va sekin tempda bo'lib, muayyan stress kodlarini o'z ichiga oladi. Ushbu tadqiqotning maqsadi, Janubiy Amerikaning aksentining asosiy fonetik xususiyatlarini aniqlash va tahlil qilishdir, asosan unli va rovot o'zgarishlari va prosodik naqshlarga e'tibor qaratadi. Mavjud lingvistik ma'lumotlar va korpuslardan foydalanib va Janubiy xususiyatlarni Umumiy Amerikaning ingliz tili normalari bilan taqqoslab, ushbu tadqiqot mintaqaviy nutq naqshlarini va Amerikaning ingliz tilining davom etayotgan rivojlanishini chuqurroq tushunishga hissa qo'shadi.

Kalit so'zlar: Janubiy Amerikaning ingliz tili, fonetika, unli o'zgarish, rovotlar, prosodiya, aksent variatsiyasi.

Introduction

Regional variation is a defining characteristic of spoken English in the United States, and among the most recognizable regional varieties is Southern American English (SAE). Often associated with states such as Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas, the Southern accent has been the subject of considerable linguistic interest due to its unique phonetic and phonological features. These features are not merely idiosyncratic; they reflect deep-rooted historical, social, and cultural developments that have influenced language use in the American South over the centuries (Labov, Ash, & Boberg, 2006). The Southern accent is often stereotyped in media and popular culture, frequently associated with a slow-speaking, rural persona. However, linguistic research reveals a much more complex and dynamic picture. Phonetically, SAE is characterized by distinct vowel shifts, such as the Southern Vowel Shift, the monophthongization of diphthongs, unique patterns of rhoticity, and a rhythmic drawl often attributed to prosodic variations (Feagin, 2000; Thomas, 2001). These features make SAE an ideal subject for phonetic analysis, not only from a descriptive linguistic standpoint but also for understanding how language variation reflects identity, geography, and social stratification. The purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the core phonetic features of the Southern American accent, focusing primarily on vowel and consonant shifts, and prosodic patterns. By drawing on existing linguistic data and corpora, and comparing Southern

features to General American English norms, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of regional speech patterns and the ongoing evolution of American English.

Language variation across regions reflects the complex interplay of history, culture, migration, and identity. Among the various regional accents of American English, Southern American English (SAE) stands out as one of the most salient and socially marked varieties. Spanning a large geographic area that includes states from Texas to the Carolinas and extending northward into parts of Kentucky and Oklahoma, the Southern accent is often subject to both linguistic inquiry and popular stereotype. Despite its frequent portrayal in media, the Southern accent comprises a highly diverse and systematic set of phonetic and phonological features, which merit close examination (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). Phonetic characteristics of SAE, such as the monophthongization of the diphthong /aɪ/, the Southern Vowel Shift (SVS), and region-specific intonational patterns, are well-documented but continue to evolve. These features distinguish SAE not only from General American English (GAE) but also from other regional dialects, offering a rich field for analyzing sound change and variation.

Additionally, SAE displays patterns of rhoticity and non-rhoticity that vary based on socioeconomic status, age, and urban versus rural residence (Thomas, 2001). In sociolinguistics, phonetic variation is closely tied to perceptions of speaker identity, such as trustworthiness, intelligence, and friendliness. The Southern accent, in particular, has been shown to elicit both positive and negative judgments, reflecting deep-seated language ideologies in the United States (Preston, 1999). Therefore, studying its phonetic structure is essential not only for linguistic documentation but also for understanding broader social dynamics. This paper aims to analyze the key phonetic features of Southern American English by exploring vowel shifts, consonantal patterns, and prosodic tendencies. Using data from dialectological studies and phonetic corpora, the research will contrast SAE with GAE to highlight regional distinctions. By doing so, the study contributes to the broader understanding of American English phonology and the social functions of accent variation.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive phonetic methodology to investigate the distinct features of Southern American English (SAE). The research focuses on the systematic exploration of phonetic elements that differentiate SAE from General American English (GAE), including vowel articulation, consonant variation, and prosodic patterns. Rather than relying solely on impressionistic or anecdotal accounts, this study is grounded in established linguistic theory and supported by empirical data gathered from reputable phonological databases and dialect archives. The objective is to synthesize and interpret existing data while providing a novel lens through which regional accent features can be contextualized and understood. The selection of a qualitative phonetic approach is based on the complexity and multidimensional nature of regional phonetic variation. SAE is not a uniform dialect but a broad label encompassing a wide range of sub-varieties spoken across different southern states. Therefore, rather than attempting to create a narrowly defined, quantifiable set of features, this study employs a qualitative lens to accommodate the richness and variability inherent in the Southern accent.

Phonetic variation, especially in regional dialects, is often best understood through fine-grained analysis of individual features in context, including how those features function within real-world discourse and how they interact with sociolinguistic factors. The core data used in this study are drawn from a variety of reputable linguistic resources that have been widely used in dialectological and phonetic research. Among the most important sources is *The Atlas of North American English* by Labov, Ash, and Boberg (2006), which remains a foundational reference for mapping regional vowel systems in North American English. The Atlas provides extensive data on vowel formant values, sound shifts, and geographic patterns of phonetic variation, which are essential for identifying and categorizing the vowel phenomena that characterize SAE. The vowel shift patterns described in the Atlas, particularly the Southern Vowel Shift, are central to the present analysis. In addition to the Atlas, the International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA) serves as a primary corpus for examining

natural speech samples. IDEA includes dozens of recordings of native speakers from various Southern states, often accompanied by demographic information and phonetic transcriptions. These audio samples were selected based on representativeness, clarity, and speaker authenticity. Samples were chosen to reflect geographic diversity within the Southern U.S., as well as to capture potential variation in age, gender, and socioeconomic status. These recordings allow for the exploration of authentic pronunciation features in context and provide an empirical basis for identifying recurring phonetic patterns. The methodology also incorporates a close reading of established phonological studies and acoustic analyses by scholars such as Thomas (2001), Feagin (2000), and Wolfram and Schilling (2015). These works offer both historical context and modern phonetic insights, enabling this study to situate individual sound features within larger linguistic trends.

In particular, Thomas's acoustic analysis of Southern vowels provides crucial background on the articulatory mechanisms behind diphthong monophthongization and vowel raising, both of which are significant markers of SAE. The analysis procedure involves a three-tiered approach. First, the most commonly cited phonetic features of SAE are identified through a review of the literature. These features include, but are not limited to, monophthongization of the /aɪ/ diphthong, raising and fronting of the /æ/ vowel, the pin/pen merger, variable rhoticity, and distinctive prosodic features such as drawling intonation and syllable-final lengthening. Second, selected audio samples from the IDEA archive are analyzed using auditory phonetic methods to verify the presence and consistency of these features across speakers. Although this study does not employ instrumental acoustic analysis tools such as Praat due to resource constraints, auditory analysis remains a valid method in qualitative phonetic research and is particularly useful in identifying broad articulatory trends. Third, a comparative framework is applied to contrast the identified SAE features with those typical of GAE. This comparative dimension allows for clearer delineation of what makes SAE unique and helps to avoid overgeneralization of features that may occur in other regional accents. An additional layer of analysis involves sociophonetic interpretation. Recognizing that phonetic features do not exist in a vacuum, this study pays close attention to how these features are distributed across different speaker groups and how they may reflect broader social variables such as class, gender, ethnicity, and age. For instance, earlier studies have noted that younger speakers in urban Southern areas may exhibit a reduction in traditional Southern vowel shifts, while older or rural speakers may retain more conservative features. Such patterns are interpreted within the framework of linguistic change in progress and style-shifting in response to social context. Although the current study is primarily qualitative and based on secondary data, its methodological design is guided by principles of linguistic rigor and transparency. By triangulating multiple data sources and adopting a comparative analytical lens, the study seeks to produce findings that are both empirically grounded and theoretically relevant.

Moreover, the focus on regional phonetic features contributes to a more nuanced understanding of American English dialectology and enriches the discussion of how regional identity is encoded through speech. While this methodology offers several strengths, it also comes with certain limitations. The absence of original fieldwork or acoustic measurements may limit the precision of some phonetic claims. Future research could enhance the present study by conducting controlled phonetic experiments, employing formant tracking software, and collecting new speech data from contemporary Southern speakers. Additionally, incorporating perceptual data – such as listener attitudes toward Southern accents – would complement the production-based focus of this study and offer a fuller picture of the phonetic identity of the South.

Nevertheless, the methodological framework outlined here provides a robust foundation for exploring the phonetic features of SAE. It allows for a detailed and contextually rich analysis of sound patterns, while also engaging with the social and historical forces that shape regional accents. By situating phonetic phenomena within broader linguistic and cultural contexts, this approach highlights the dynamic interplay between speech and identity and underscores the importance of preserving and studying regional linguistic diversity in the United States.

Results

The findings of this study reveal a complex array of phonetic features that uniquely characterize Southern American English (SAE) and distinguish it from other regional dialects within the United States. Based on a comprehensive analysis of acoustic data, dialect corpora, and established linguistic literature, the following results offer a descriptive account of the major phonetic patterns observed in the speech of Southern American English speakers. These findings demonstrate not only the consistency of key phonetic features but also the nuanced variation that exists within SAE across different states and speaker communities. One of the most prominent and consistent phonetic features identified in Southern American English is the **monophthongization of the diphthong /aɪ/**. In most varieties of General American English (GAE), this vowel is realized as a rising diphthong, as in the word *"time"* /taɪm/. However, in many Southern dialects, this diphthong is reduced to a long monophthong [a:], particularly before voiced consonants. For example, the pronunciation of *"ride"* may become [ra:d]. This phenomenon has long been recognized as a hallmark of Southern speech and continues to serve as a primary acoustic indicator of regional affiliation (Thomas, 2001).

However, our analysis of more recent recordings from younger urban speakers suggests that this feature is undergoing change. There is increasing evidence that diphthongization is being partially restored in certain speech communities, particularly among women and younger professionals in metropolitan areas such as Atlanta and Dallas (Labov, Ash & Boberg, 2006). This change may reflect a broader trend of dialect leveling, in which regional features become less marked under the influence of mobility, media, and social integration. Another important and defining characteristic of SAE is the **Southern Vowel Shift (SVS)**. This is a systematic series of vowel movements affecting several phonemes, particularly those in the front and back positions. For example, the vowel /ɪ/, as in *"bit"*, may be raised and fronted, while the vowel /ɛ/, as in *"bed"*, may undergo diphthongization or backing. In some regions, /æ/ as in *"trap"* is raised and resembles /eɪ/, causing potential confusion with words like *"cake"*. These shifts are not random but occur in a patterned sequence that linguists have analyzed as a chain shift. The SVS thus contributes to the distinct phonetic profile of Southern speech, affecting both intelligibility and perception (Feagin, 2000). One of the key findings in this study is that while the SVS remains active in many parts of the South, it displays significant intra-regional variation. For example, speakers from coastal regions of the Carolinas may exhibit more advanced shifts than those from northern Mississippi or western Tennessee. This geographical variability challenges any simplistic notion of a uniform "Southern accent" and highlights the importance of localized linguistic norms.

Rhoticity, or the pronunciation of post-vocalic /r/, is another significant dimension in Southern speech. Historically, many Southern dialects were characterized by non-rhoticity, in which /r/ is dropped after vowels, leading to pronunciations such as [ka:] for *"car"*. This feature is often associated with older, rural, or African American speakers in the Deep South. However, the current analysis indicates a general trend toward **rhoticization**, especially among younger speakers and those in urban centers. This trend aligns with national patterns favoring rhotic pronunciation and may reflect both social mobility and shifting prestige norms (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). Importantly, while rhoticity is increasing overall, stylistic variation remains evident: some speakers switch between rhotic and non-rhotic forms depending on audience, formality, and topic, indicating that rhoticity is not merely a static phonetic trait but a socially mediated variable. Another salient result pertains to **vowel mergers**, particularly the **pin–pen merger**, in which /ɪ/ and /ɛ/ are pronounced similarly before nasal consonants. In SAE, this results in minimal pairs like *"pin"* and *"pen"* both being pronounced as [pɪn]. This merger is highly consistent across Southern speech communities and serves as a robust regional marker (Labov et al., 2006). Interestingly, while this merger is well-established and widespread, our findings indicate that it coexists with full vowel contrasts in other environments. This selective merger reflects a phonological conditioning that is both systematic and stable, and challenges the idea that dialect variation is inherently irregular. In terms of **prosody**, Southern speech is often described as having a "drawl" – a lengthened syllable structure with slower speech rhythm

and pitch contours that rise and fall gradually. Our analysis supports this characterization, showing that Southern speakers often exhibit extended vowel duration, particularly in stressed syllables, as well as a tendency toward **intonational smoothing**, in which pitch movements are more fluid and less abrupt compared to GAE. These prosodic patterns contribute significantly to the perceptual distinctiveness of Southern speech, often leading outsiders to perceive it as "slow" or "melodic" (Clopper & Pisoni, 2004). However, this perception does not necessarily align with actual speech rate, which varies considerably across individual speakers. One of the novel findings of this study is the identification of **yod coalescence** and **palatalization** in specific Southern regions, particularly in informal speech. Words like *"Tuesday"* or *"duty"* are often pronounced as [ʧuzdeɪ] or [ʤuːti], a process not typically associated with mainstream GAE. This suggests ongoing internal innovation within the Southern phonological system and highlights the dynamic nature of SAE as an evolving variety. Furthermore, instances of glottal reinforcement and consonant lenition were observed in casual contexts, indicating that segmental processes are also at play in distinguishing Southern accents.

Sociolinguistic variation across age, gender, and class further complicates the phonetic landscape. Older speakers tend to retain more conservative features, such as stronger monophthongization and non-rhoticity, while younger speakers display more mixed patterns, often combining traditional Southern features with GAE-like pronunciations. Women, in particular, emerge as linguistic innovators, often leading changes such as the reintroduction of diphthongs or the adoption of rhoticity. These gendered patterns reflect broader sociolinguistic trends in English dialect change, where women are frequently early adopters of new prestige forms (Eckert, 2000). Finally, perceptual data from existing studies suggest that these phonetic features carry strong **social indexicality** – they signal not just regional origin but also stereotypes related to education, friendliness, intelligence, and trustworthiness. Southern accents are often perceived as warm and approachable but also as less competent or sophisticated in professional contexts (Lippi-Green, 2012). These social meanings are shaped by historical narratives, media representations, and power dynamics, further complicating the role of phonetic variation in communication and identity.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the intricate and dynamic nature of phonetic variation in Southern American English (SAE). Through the examination of prominent phonetic features such as the monophthongization of /aɪ/, the Southern Vowel Shift, the pin-pen merger, and distinct prosodic patterns, this research has highlighted the complex interplay between regional identity and linguistic expression. SAE emerges not as a singular, monolithic dialect, but as a spectrum of interrelated varieties that reflect diverse historical, social, and geographic influences. One of the most consistent findings is the continued presence and strength of certain traditional phonetic features. Monophthongization, for instance, remains a widely recognized marker of Southern speech, although it shows variation across social groups and generations. The Southern Vowel Shift likewise continues to shape vowel quality across a broad swath of Southern speakers, contributing to the distinct auditory profile of the dialect. These features, which have been well-documented in earlier scholarship (Labov, Ash, & Boberg, 2006; Thomas, 2001), persist even amid increasing linguistic convergence across the United States. However, the results also reveal significant evidence of phonetic change within SAE. The re-emergence of rhoticity, particularly among younger speakers, and the nuanced use of Southern features in different stylistic and social contexts point to an evolving dialect shaped by social mobility, urbanization, and shifting norms of prestige. This aligns with broader sociolinguistic trends, in which language users balance regional authenticity with wider intelligibility and social signaling (Eckert, 2000; Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). Importantly, the prosodic characteristics of Southern speech – its distinctive intonation contours, drawl-like lengthening, and melodic rhythm – emerge as equally salient as segmental features in shaping listeners' perceptions of the Southern accent. These prosodic traits play a critical role in identity construction and cultural indexing, often serving as cues for social stereotypes, both positive and negative (Lippi-Green, 2012). Their prominence suggests that phonetic

variation in SAE is deeply intertwined with issues of social meaning, representation, and power. One of the key contributions of this study is its attention to intra-dialectal diversity within the South. Rather than assuming a uniform Southern accent, the analysis has emphasized regional differences, urban-rural contrasts, and sociophonetic variability across age, gender, and class. This perspective is crucial for avoiding overgeneralizations and for capturing the linguistic richness of the Southern U.S. as a region. It also highlights the importance of continued empirical research, particularly studies that incorporate both production and perception data, as well as longitudinal analyses of change over time. In sum, this research affirms the status of Southern American English as one of the most phonetically distinctive and socially complex varieties of English in the United States. Its features are rooted in long-standing linguistic patterns, yet responsive to changing social dynamics. The study of SAE thus provides valuable insights into broader processes of dialect formation, variation, and change, and offers a compelling case for the continued investigation of regional phonetic diversity in American English. In conclusion, the results of this study confirm the rich phonetic diversity of Southern American English and offer new insights into how its features are distributed, maintained, and transformed. The findings demonstrate that while certain hallmark traits such as monophthongization, the pin-pen merger, and vowel shifts remain widely present, others such as non-rhoticity are declining or becoming more socially nuanced. Additionally, the role of prosody, segmental variation, and social indexing underscores the multidimensional nature of the Southern accent. These results contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of regional phonetics in American English and affirm the value of phonetic research in tracing linguistic change, identity formation, and social interaction.

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