

Aussie accents to be preserved for posterity

Our accent is a powerful and enduring symbol of national identity that we preserve despite the influx of electronic media and cultural icons from overseas. However, just as society changes, so too does accent as it constantly evolves to meet the changing needs of its users.

A national initiative to collect the accents of 1000 Australian English speakers is being launched today, Australia Day. Australian English accents from adults of all ages from various locations in all states and territories will be collected to represent the regional and social diversity of Australian English.

“The resulting audio-visual database AusTalk will provide a valuable and enduring digital repository of present day speech as a snapshot of this important time in our linguistic history,” says project co-ordinator Dr Dominique Estival of the University of Western Sydney. “There has not been a collection of Australian English voices of this magnitude for 50 years and there has never before been a large scale collection of audio and visual speech data in Australia.”

Dr Felicity Cox of Macquarie University says the Australian accent has proved resilient to the American cultural onslaught, but was diversifying because of the multicultural nature of its youth – who are usually the change agents of accent.

“The Australian accent is distinctive and uniquely ours,” says Cox. “The things we talk about and the ways we talk about them are intimately entwined with our sense of self. Accents can vary depending on age and gender, as well as social, cultural and regional history or affiliation.”

As well as providing a permanent record of Australian English to support speech science research and development, AusTalk will also help develop a range of speech technology applications, says Project Leader, Professor Denis Burnham at the University of Western Sydney.

“This should lead to improved telephone-based speech recognition systems for things like taxi bookings right through to hearing aid and Cochlear Implant improvements, or better computer aids for learning-impaired children,” he says.

AusTalk is a collaborative project between 11 major universities headed by the University of Western Sydney and Macquarie University and involves 30 top speech science and technology experts from around Australia. Together they have obtained Australian Government funding to create the largest-ever auditory-visual database of Australian speech.

The researchers invite Australian English speakers to contribute their voices to AusTalk. Anyone over 18, who has had all their schooling in Australia, is invited to be part of the national collection of Australian English accents. Participants will be recorded on three separate occasions, reading words and sentences, having a conversation, and playing a game with another participant.

Volunteers can register their interest in the project by visiting <http://austalk.edu.au/>

MEDIA OPPORTUNITIES

Professor Denis Burnham and Dr Felicity Cox are available for interview on Australia Day or for pre-recorded interviews to go to air on Australia Day. Interview topics might include:

Professor Burnham (UWS contacts Mark Smith 0404 016 236/Paul Grocott 0406 429 304):

- the AusTalk project; how data will be collected; speech technology applications.

Dr Cox (Macquarie contact Greg Welsh 0407 200 474, greg.welsh@mq.edu.au):

- Australian accent, its history and characteristics; regional variations in the Australian accent; emergence of new ethnocultural dialects resulting from multiculturalism.