

New York City English: Sociolinguistic Issues

Contents

1	Myth of Borough Dialects in NY City	1
2	Ethnicities in NY City	2
3	Gender Influence	2
4	Using Language to Establish one's Social Identity	2
5	Questions	3

1 Myth of Borough Dialects in NY City

Do Queens/Brooklyn/Bronx accents exist? It is a common belief among New Yorkers that it is easy to identify which borough the person is from based on their accent: e.g. Brooklynese.



Linguistically:

- No difference between accents in different boroughs.
- Problem: need to compare speakers of similar backgrounds from different boroughs; this comparison has not been done.

- Where do these perceived differences come from? New Yorkers conflate social class difference and their ideas about populations of boroughs.
 - Brooklynese: People with higher degree of presence of New York City English features are viewed as more “working class,” and New Yorkers tend to associate this dialect with Brooklyn — traditionally, a working class borough on NYC.
- Perception study: Can you identify which borough the dialect is from? Quiz is accessible at <http://www.newyorkcityaccents.com>.
 - Results: New Yorkers cannot identify the borough from the accent.
 - Listeners do not randomly guess: the distribution of answers is not uniform.
 - Heavy New York accents are placed outside of Manhattan.
 - Voices with lower rates of classic NY City features are placed in Manhattan.
 - No features distinguishing outer boroughs, i.e. Queens or Brooklyn.
 - Class differences are important.

2 Ethnicities in NY City

- In Labov’s 1966 study: Lower East Side: Jewish vs. Italians. Everyone is using the same dialect, but degrees differ.
- Currently, it is non-white speakers that maintain classical New York City features more, while white speakers lose these features at a greater rate.
- Interesting picture appears from considering Hispanics, African-Americans, Asians: this is currently the main locus of variability in NY City English.

3 Gender Influence

- Women are innovators, while men are more conservative.
- Women use more *r*-ful pronunciations than men.
- Women withdraw from *thought*-raising faster than men.
- It is possible that gender in such contexts is a byproduct of class : “how maleness intersects with working class identity.”

4 Using Language to Establish one’s Social Identity

Humans are social agents and play out their identity differently at different times.
Study of *r*-lessness on Lower East Side (Becker, 2009).

- In conversation about local issues speakers use more *r*-lessness.

- It enhances the message that speakers are trying to convey and reinforces the “good old” view of the local neighborhood.
- Language change is used to reinforce certain ideas and evoke images in the conversation partner.

5 Questions

- From your experience, do you agree with the claim that boroughs do not have distinct accent?
- Think about the difference between the speech of your male friends and female friends. Do you notice any differences? Who speaks more standardly? Who uses more stigmatized features?
- Which predictions can you make about the speech of people from different ethnic groups in NYC? Who would be speaking more standardly, White, African-American, Hispanic, or Asian New Yorkers? Why?
- Do you or your friends change the way they speak depending on a topic? Can you think of some examples?

References

- Becker, Kara. 2009. /r/ and the construction of place identity on New York City's Lower East Side. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 13:634–658.
- Labov, William. 1966. *The social stratification of English in New York City*. Center for Applied Linguistics.