

Phonological markers of neighborhood identity in Anchorage, Alaska

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Residents of Anchorage, Alaska are both aware of and comfortable with their local variety.
So: Is there a connection between attitudes toward local institutions and the production of this local variety?

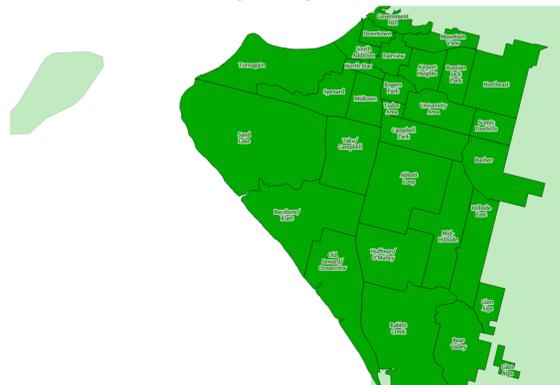
Alaska and Anchorage



Alaska is the most northwestern of the United States (the darker area in the map above left), and is the largest of the states, but has the lowest population density (2010 population 710,231). It shares a land border with Canada (British Columbia and Yukon), but not with any other US states. Alaska's geography is largely rural, and about one-third of the state's population lives in areas inaccessible by road.

41.1% of the state's population lives in the Municipality of Anchorage, which is unified with the 1,961 square mile county-equivalent Borough of Anchorage (the darker area on the map of Alaska, above right), in the state's southcentral region. Since the municipality is so geographically large, we follow local custom and use *Anchorage* to refer to the urban core of the municipality (home to more than 80% of the municipality's inhabitants), which juts into the terminus of the Cook Inlet.

Anchorage neighborhoods



Precise definitions of neighborhood boundaries are tricky, since different people can place the borders at different points. However, as a rough stand-in, we show Anchorage's community councils, which are administrative levels below the municipality with their own elected councils that have a degree of authority over zoning and business practices within their council area. Community council boundaries were set in 1976 based on considerations such as historical municipal boundaries (e.g., Spenard was a separate city until 1975), transportation services and networks, and neighborhood cohesiveness. These boundaries are still artificial and don't always match residents' realities (e.g., Sand Lake Community Council residents are likely to say it contains the neighborhoods of Sand Lake and Jewel Lake), but they provide a useful starting point.

Anchorage, a patchwork city

Anchorage was founded as a tent city in 1914, and from early on the tent city began to grow into small, independent townships that had discrete governing structures. These townships remained independent until the 1960s, when the City of Anchorage began to annex the smaller towns into the larger municipality. This history of local (sometimes hyperlocal) sovereignty coupled with the existence of locally salient markers of neighborhood-based indexes of local identity within Anchorage suggests the potential for qualitative and quantitative linguistic variation between neighborhoods. So, for example, initial work on (t,d) deletion correlates with locally recognized indexes of community affiliation. (More detailed information on the emerging work on this variation can be found at by using the QR code to the right, or at <http://cjdannenberg.commonswa.alaska.edu>.)



English in Anchorage

Alaska is a multilingual state, with nineteen surviving indigenous languages and several immigrant languages (there are 99 home languages spoken by children in the Anchorage School District alone) spoken alongside the colonial languages of Russian and English. However, the vast majority of Alaskans (84.6%) speak only English at home, and only a small proportion (5.8%) reported themselves as speaking English less than very well.

Permanent English-speaking settlers arrived in Sitka in 1867, but didn't arrive at all in what is now Anchorage until 1911 or so. Widespread English-language settlement of the area began in 1914, and began to rise rapidly in the 1970s.

Despite English having more than a century of history in Alaska, relatively little work has been done on English in the state (and most of that work has focused exclusively on the local lexicon). Part of this gap is certainly due to its relative remoteness and the expense of reaching some parts of it, but even more accessible areas (such as the city of Anchorage) haven't been studied in much depth at all.

The Talking Anchorage project

Data for this analysis is drawn from the larger ongoing *Talking Anchorage* project, which is investigating the negotiation of identity in urban Alaska. *Talking Anchorage* has, so far, collected more than 70 interviews from over 100 long-term Anchorage residents. Interviews for the project have been conducted in "StoryCorps" style—that is, where participants are invited to talk on specific topics with limited interruption from the interviewer, with all interviews conducted by trained interviewers and recorded as uncompressed audio. Participants are invited to speak about topics including gardening, marriage, urban development, and the like, but the topics covered yield to participant interest to ensure natural conversation. In addition, when only one participant contributed to an interview, the interview also included items resembling a much more classic sociolinguistic protocol.

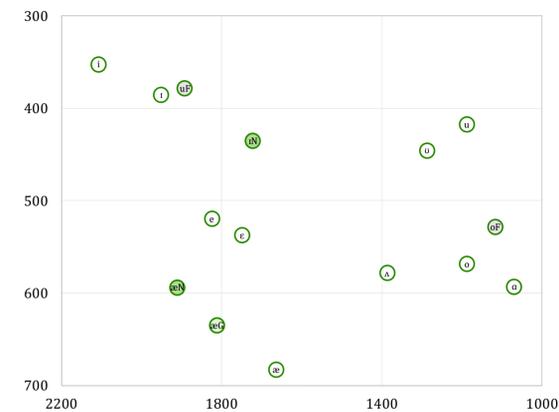
This smaller study focuses on 19 participants in the larger project who were asked to perform specific tasks to gain more controlled data, including a reading of a modified version of "Arthur the Rat".

Vowel shifts in Anchorage

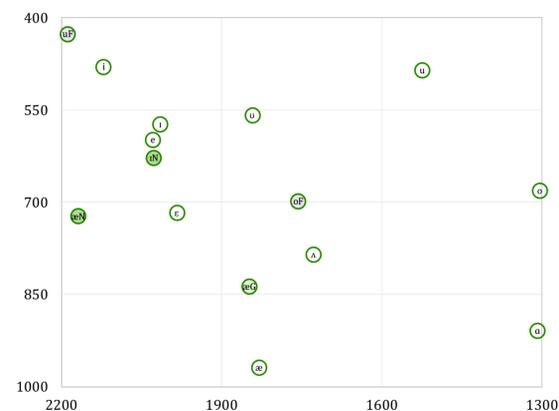
Earlier pilot work found some evidence that residents of the Anchorage area exhibit the vowel shift that has variously been called the Canadian Shift, (Northern) California Shift, Western Shift, and Third Dialect Shift; in an attempt to unify all of the geographic disparities in these terms, we call it the Northwestern Shift.

In brief, the Northwestern Shift is characterized by a lowering of the front lax *KID* and *KEPT* vowels, and lowering and retraction of the *CAD* vowel (except before nasals, where it is raised). Further, the low back merger of *COE* and *CAWED* is present (with the resulting vowel produced quite back and perhaps a bit raised), while the other back vowels (*COOED*, *COULD*, *CODE*, and *CUD*) are often fronted, including syllable-internally.

In the first of the vowel charts, you see someone (male, born 1970, Hillside neighborhood) with little evidence of the Northwestern Shift. His front lax vowels are not lowered relative to *KEYED* and *CAPE*, and his back vowels remain back (except, very slightly, *CUD*).



The second chart, on the other hand, shows an individual (female, born 1996, Northeast neighborhood) who exhibits several Northwestern Shift features: fronting of syllable-internal *COULD* and *CUD* (but not *CODE* and only slight fronting of *COOED*), retraction of merged *COE/CAWED*, and lowering of *KID* and *KEPT* (though not to the extreme seen in some other speakers) and *CAD*, with a pre-nasal split of *CAD*.



Local affiliation

Local affiliation was measured through answers to three prompts:

- What sports teams do you cheer for?
- Where do you like to go for vacations?
- Where do you want to live in the future?

Answers to these questions were assigned a rating based on distance from Anchorage, and the results from all answers were averaged (with items the speaker volunteered as stronger given more weight) to give a composite locality score.

Findings

The sample size in this study was small, and so our findings are a bit tentative—but still, some patterns are apparent in the data.

- Adoption of the Northwestern Shift is progressing over apparent time in Anchorage, with younger speakers consistently displaying it more strongly than older speakers.
- No differences were found between neighborhoods in terms of adoption of the Northwestern Shift. However, the sample from any given neighborhood was very small, and there were potential confounds, meaning that this needs to be investigated further.
- Local orientation did show correlations with some Northwestern Shift features; for example, lowering of *KID* and *KEPT* were associated with lower local orientation, but retraction of *CAD* with higher.

Next steps

Previous studies of Anchorage English found a correlation between indexes of neighborhood and morphophonemic variation—specifically, (t,d) deletion—while this study finds what appears to be more general adoption of the Northwestern Shift across the neighborhoods of Anchorage. This points our way to the next steps for the *Talking Anchorage* project, which include (among others):

- continuing ethnographic work on indexes of locality, particularly characterizing how participants determine both hard and soft geographic spaces, and investigating correlates with both morphosyntactic and phonological variation;
- examining the correlation of indexes of locality and uses of social deixis in relation to discourse topics that amplify local identities (e.g., the 1964 earthquake) vs. extra-local identities (e.g., 9/11); and
- determining the scope of participants' language perception within the context of Anchorage and Alaska using mapping techniques.

Selected bibliography and acknowledgments

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