

THE REAL CALIFORNIA¹

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When most Americans think of California English, they might remember the stereotypes made famous by Frank and Moon Unit Zappa in their song "Valley Girl," circa 1982. "Like, totally! Gag me with a spoon!" intoned Moon Unit, instantly cementing a stereotype of California English as being primarily the province of Valley Girls and Surfer Dudes. But California is not just the land of beaches and blonds. While Hollywood images crowd our consciousness, the real California, with a population of nearly 34 million, is only 46.7% white (most of whom are not blond and most of whom don't live close to the beach or in the San Fernando Valley). California has for generations been home to a large Latino population – a population that today accounts for 32.4% of Californians. Also for generations it has been the home of a large Chinese-American and Japanese-American population and in recent years, with the influx of immigrants from other parts of Asia, it now boasts a large and diverse Asian American population (11.2%). Most of the sizeable African-American population (16.4%) in California speak some form of African-American Vernacular English, with few traces of surfer dude or valley girl.

Each of these groups brings a distinctive style, which provides a rich set of linguistic resources for all inhabitants of the state. Ways of speaking are the outcome of stylistic activity – activity that people engage in collaboratively as they carve out a distinctive place for themselves in the social landscape. In fact, linguistic style is inseparable from clothing style, hair style, and life style more generally. No style is made from scratch, but is built on the creative use of elements from other styles, and California's rich diversity makes the state a goldmine of stylistic activity.

In 1941, linguist David De Camp proclaimed that California English was no different from the English of the East Coast. But it is clear that a distinctive accent is developing among much of the population of the state, and that some of the features of this accent were given prominence in Moon Unit's speech. It's important to remember that California

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is a new state. It takes community and time to develop common ways of speaking, and English speakers haven't been settled in California long enough to develop the kind of dialect depth that appears in the East Coast and the Midwest. In a study of three generations of families living in the Sunset neighborhood of San Francisco, linguist Birch Moonwomon discovered that what was a fairly diffuse dialect at the beginning of the twentieth century became quite homogeneous by the end. While the oldest speakers born in the Sunset had a variety of ways of pronouncing their vowels, their grandchildren all pronounced them in a quite uniform way. In other words, California white speech seems to be coming into its own.

So what are these features that constitute the stereotypic California accent? A group of linguists led by Leanne Hinton at the University of California at Berkeley studied the accents of a range of speakers in Northern California. In the speech of whites in California, as in many parts of the west, the vowels of hock and hawk, cot and caught, are pronounced the same – so *awesome* rhymes with *possum*. Also notable is the movement of the vowels in *boot* and *boat* (called *back vowels* because they're pronounced in the back of the mouth). These vowels all have a tendency to become diphthongs and to move forward in the mouth, so that the vowel in *dude* or *spoon* (as in *gag me with a...*) sounds a little like the word *you*, or the vowel in *pure* or *cute*. Also, *boat* and *loan* often sound like *bewt* and *lewn* – or *eeeeuw*. Finally, the vowel in *but* and *cut* is also moving forward so that these words sound more like *bet* and *ket*. These are all part of the commonly imitated California surfer speech. But there are also a few vowel shifts that go by almost unnoticed: the vowel of *black* often sounds more like the vowel in *block*, the vowel of *bet* is moving into the place of *bat*, and the vowel of *bit* is moving into the place of *bet*. Some linguists refer to these coordinated changes as chain shifts – one can think of them as a sort of Musical Chairs played by the vowels in the mouth. And it is different configurations of Musical Chairs, as it were, in progress in different parts of the country, that create regional accents. The chain shift occurring in California, though relatively early in its progress, will have a lasting effect on the system, eventually resulting in significant differences from other dialects.

Of course, the prototypical California white speech variety is not just a matter of vowels. It is never just one feature that makes a style, marking someone as a Californian, since individual features are present in other speech areas (fronting of back vowels, for instance, is common in the American South). Rather it is the coordination of both linguistic and paralinguistic features in time, organized according to topic and differentially highlighted according to audience, that characterizes the speech of any

dialect. The extreme versions of the pronunciations that are described above are primarily found among young white Californians. Innovative developments in the stereotypical California linguistic system may be so new as to be restricted to certain speech settings, with the most extreme pronunciations evident only in peer-group youth interactions. It is precisely these interactions that are the crux of stylistic development, and that is why linguists in California are spending considerable energy studying youth. One of the innovative developments in white English of Californians is the use of the discourse marker "I'm like," or "she's like" to introduce quoted speech. This quotative is particularly useful because it doesn't require the quote to be of actual speech (as "she said" would, for instance). It can be followed by a shrug, a sigh, or any of a number of other expressive sounds as well as speech. Lately in California, "I'm all" or "she's all" has also become a contender for this function. We know from quantitative studies by John Singler at NYU that the quotative "be all" is not common in the speech of young New Yorkers, while "be like" is. This allows us to infer that "be all" might be a newer development and that it may also be native to, or at least most advanced in, California.

With its diverse population, California's communities bring together kids from a wide variety of backgrounds, and their styles play off of each other. Hostility may cause people to differentiate their styles, while curiosity or admiration may cause people to pick up elements from other styles. So the real story of California dialects is a story of influx and contact, evident demographically in migration patterns and evident linguistically in the flux of styles and their accompanying features.

One important group in California is that of Mexican-Americans or Chicanos, with some of them exhibiting a distinctive variety of English, which we will call California Chicano English. It is the result of speakers socializing in networks in which other Mexican-Americans participate, innovating and reinforcing a historically distinctive speech variety. With a large portion of California only ceded from Mexico to the United States in 1848, the Indigenous and Mexican populations of California have had the longest continuous linguistic history. Pervasive Spanish/English bilingualism among Mexican-Americans has had a tremendous impact upon Chicano English. Spanish has influenced the development of Spanish-like vowels among native speakers of English. In Northern California, the vowel in the second syllable of *nothing*, for instance, has come to sound more like *ee* among some subgroups of Chicano English speakers, differentiating them from other minority groups where *nothing* sounds more like *not'n*. In this case, Spanish is drawn on as a distinctive stylistic resource. This does not mean, however, that all innovations in Chicano English necessarily derive from Spanish. Sometimes innovations

develop independently and in the opposite direction from what one would expect if one were to assume Spanish influence. One of the most salient innovations in Los Angeles is the lowering of the vowel in the first syllable of *elevator* so that it rhymes with the first syllable of *alligator* – not Spanish-sounding at all. Carmen Fought has shown that in LA, young Mexican-Americans participate in other changes that are characteristic of whites as well – such as the fronting of *boat* and the backing of *black* mentioned earlier. However, they do so in distinctively patterned ways that mark communities and subcommunities, social networks and personal histories.

The turbulent history of migration and ethnic relations in California is another lens through which we must view past and current developments in California English. If dialects reflect the history and meaningful activity of subpopulations within the body politic, why is it that some groups have ethnic linguistic varieties (such as Chicanos) and some do not? With a historically large population of Japanese-Americans and close proximity to the Pacific Rim, why do we find very little contemporary evidence of an ethnic variety of English among Japanese-Americans in California? Research by Melissa Iwai and Norma Mendoza-Denton into generational differences among Japanese-Americans indicates that the oldest generation of Japanese American native speakers of English, the Nisei, do exhibit a distinct patterning of vocalic and consonantal phenomena, while the Yonsei, or fourth generation (now in their 20s and 30s), are indistinguishable from their white counterparts. Detailed interviews with Nisei consultants revealed that, when the Nisei were detained in internment camps in California and Arizona during the Second World War, torn from their families and subjected to ostracism, they felt it was a distinct disadvantage to sound Japanese-American or be distinguished as being Japanese in any way. Furthermore, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's policy of dispersal in resettlement prevented the reconstitution of the original communities, fatally rupturing established social networks and preventing the entrenchment of their nascent variety of English. In this example of the death of a California dialect we can see how stereotypes and discrimination about people and their language (what linguists call language ideology) can have dramatic effects on a community's linguistic development. For Japanese-Americans, assimilating to the speech of the white majority of the time was a linguistic consequence of the catastrophic events in their community.

California English is a reflection of the politics, history and various intersecting communities in the state. Sixty years after DeCamp's original investigation, we can confidently say that Californians have developed distinctive ways of speaking. As the real California continues to show an even greater degree of linguistic and ethnic contact,

we hope that stereotypical images of California English will be changed to include some of the linguistic realities that we have described above.