

Concerning the different pronunciations of “our,” how does the pronunciation affect people of generational and foreign language background differences?

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ABSTRACT

The younger generation’s dialect has changed rapidly due to the increased consumption of media from different backgrounds. Changing dialect affects the way we communicate with each other. The research question I curated concerned the different pronunciations of “our,” and how the difference in pronunciation affects people of generational and foreign language backgrounds. The methods of the study included a short sequence of questionnaires to provide interest, statistical information, as well as availability information for myself (the interviewer) to find a time at which I may interview the participant. The takeaway from the research was originally to research more on the topic of the generational differences of dialects. However, upon further inspection of my participant pool, another observation of the variables was needed to encompass the entire population. Thus, it can be concluded that dialect changes among people with the competing dialects of the older and younger generations affect the non-native population. The hypothesis suggests there is a relationship between dialect used by both younger and older generations, which impacts L2 English speakers and their pronunciation of “our.” The results were calculated by hand from data collected on Google Sheets. It can be assumed that the [‘aʊə] to [‘ar] pronunciation dialect change affected most of the older and younger populations. 42.86% of the total participants used the pronunciation of “our” as [‘aʊə], meaning that less than half of the population used the “proper” pronunciation of “our.” The following results are deemed inconclusive due to the number of variables that were present.

Pronunciation and Dialect

Pronunciation of a word and dialect has changed throughout time in every community. Dialect changes can be found in different regions of a country where the language is widely spoken - for example, cities like Cockney to London, to countries like Canada to the United States. Even among age differences, according to a documentary from PBS, “Do you speak American?”, the younger generations have a change in dialect. The documentary saw an increase in shortening words whose pronunciation no longer has phonetic value: like the changing of “the” to “da” and “For real?” into what sounds like “For rah?”. These dialect changes and differences in pronunciation can be complex for foreign speakers to grasp since the differences in pronunciation of a word can entirely change the meaning.

Pronunciation and Location

Diverse dialects of various areas affect how a non-native speaker can communicate and understand the changes in language, especially in English. Words with the same pronunciation (homophones) jeopardize the understanding of a non-native speaker learning English as their second language (also called L2). In Schmalz X. et al. (2020), the re-

researcher took a group of non-native and native English and German-speaking children and had them pronounce different words. They found that different pronunciations were interchangeable for other words when focusing on a specific sound. Narrowing their research allowed a better focus on their research variables.

The interchangeability of the pronunciations significantly changes because of the area, language, dialect, and age. Age is a crucial element because the native generation and the foreign understanding change as the language changes. Other claims, such as that from Barbieri (2008), point to the idea that pronunciation is also dependent on sex, race factors, and socioeconomic status due to the difference in vernacular and areas in which these minorities are in high density.

According to May (2011), who wrote a book on sociolinguistics and the spread of a language through globalization, most language-based conflicts “lie with the nation-state and its preoccupation with establishing a ‘common’ language and culture. Via mass education.” The study is essential to help our understanding in the analysis and comprehension of social and cultural pressures. The study establishes a basis in a foreign language in the context of outside influences and the complexities therein.

Literature Review

L2 English Speakers

May (2011) found that competing non-native languages in a foreign country can compete with the local language due to education and the conversion of local languages to the nationalized foreign language. May found this conclusion due to the globalization of dominating powers. The finding relates to understanding how culture and nationalism affect language and the attitudes toward non-native speakers. The discovery also helps explain the cognitive biases of these foreign speakers and how they relate to culture and the culture of the country in which they currently reside. The differences affect the feeling of unity within a country, especially relating to culture and the sense of unity from the language.

Concerning the study regarding L2 English speakers and the way they speak, according to Tahta et al. (1981), the age at which the L2 English speakers learned their L2 (English) affects how the participants speak. According to Tahta and other contributors, as a child gets older, the harder it is for that individual not to learn and retain that language. As a person gets older, it is harder for them to maintain and hold a language than a person who knew the language when they were a child.

Adolescent Subjects and Dialect Changes

Schmalz et al. (2020) used a similar method with children as Odisho (2016), in which they took a variety of ages and used a set of words to study their pronunciation of different terms. They also used kids with three different language backgrounds: bilingual in English and German and monolingual in both languages. Schmalz et al. (2020) found that the lack of predictability between the different pronunciations decreased. So as the age group fell, researchers found that different accents were unpredictable. Narrowing the research to one word instead of multiple adds more control and predictability, thus allowing a clearer understanding of the study’s success.

Boji Pak-Wing Lam et al. (2016) used more children across different backgrounds in the same country and state of study (Texas, US). They used 42 bilingual Mandarin-English speakers, 30 bilingual Spanish English speakers, and 27 monolingual English speakers ranging in ages 4-to 7, put into groups of 4 to 5-year-olds and 6-7-year-olds. They found an error in the phonetic and pronunciation features of the participants. Boji Pak-Wing Lam et al. (2016) then did an error analysis that suggested the influence of cross-linguistic features may have skewed data. Understanding skewed data will affect the study and the research of the information found.

Both studies are similar in that they focused on age and differences in language. While Boji Pak-Wing Lam.

et al. studied a larger quantity of variables and a lower amount of age variability, Schmalz et al. used a lower quantity of variables and a more significant amount of age variability. However, the reasoning behind each study is different. Boji Pak-Wing Lam. et al. studied morphological awareness (awareness of the movements and shape of the mouth) and the development of the formation of vowels and consonants within the mouth. In comparison, Schmalz et al. studied the differences in age and pronunciation variability across age and linguistic ability. Both contrasts in variables are complementary, allowing for a better understanding of how to work with young adults and teenagers and the variability one might get in their research.

Effect of Technology on Adolescents' Dialect

Cran et al. (2005) stated that the younger generation had a significant increase in language and slang differences compared to the older generations due to the widespread use of technology, media's influence, and "improper" English among young adults. Cran et al. found that the African American population, especially in the Rap scene, affected most of the teen population since the adaptation of African American slang and Rap corresponded directly to the influence of teen dialect changes.

In contrast, Cran et al.'s study showed that generational differences among the younger generation vary among participants of a non-native background and an older generation. Informal English is detrimental to understanding "our" pronunciation since other mispronunciations and shortened variants, acronyms, and deviations from the actual pronunciation seem to be a common theme among the generational dialect.

Adult Subjects and Dialect Changes

Tahta et al. (1981) stated that as the study was conducted on older subjects, the finding of intonation was nowhere to be heard, but the opposite for younger subjects. The older generation could produce a lilt, or a slight accent, more than the younger subjects. This result was to find when a person should learn a second language (L2), how fast you could catch on, and what proficiency. Understanding these roadblocks in learning a language, we cannot find the obstacles for older individuals who want to learn a second language. These results showed the relationship between language, pronunciation, syntax, and intonation and how each age group is affected by these variables, supporting the claim that "our" and the two pronunciations are different. The repetition of a word will become inconstant the younger we go in terms of high school students.

Odiso (2016) found a comparison and priority on how we need more than just auditory learning to learn a language and how phonetics and pronunciation forgo a long way in learning a language because a simple mispronunciation could entirely change the meaning of a word. The author wrote this paper to find the extent to which this is true and to see the impacts these changes would have if they were implemented. The relevance to the research question is the second topic in which mispronunciation affects the meaning of the word and sentence and how that affects the cognitive mind. Like "hour" [ˈaʊə] and "are" [ˈɑː], each pronunciation can mean different things, but only one is correct.

Language Anomalies That Impact Research

Clark's (2018) study implies the significance of the participant understanding the importance of keeping the participant unaware of the actual experiment. The researchers tried to figure out if the psychological phenomenon called "priming" exists. The phenomenon of priming is while we are speaking and writing, we repeat sentence structures of what we had just seen or heard. Priming helps us memorize and gain control over our speech and allows it to be more of a practiced dialogue than a genuine response. Therefore, priming is vital because participant awareness of the study can skew data.

Restrepo (1998) studied the effects of language impairment where they studied 31 Spanish-speaking children and 31 Spanish-speaking “Language Impaired” children (LI). The reasoning behind the study was to identify language impairment in a linguistically diverse environment and its factors. They found that a family history of speech impairment and family speaking habits caused a lack of diagnostic accuracy when diagnosing speech and language impairments.

Barbieri (2008) found that age, slang, sex, race, and socioeconomic class affect language. As time goes on, language changes into a new normal for every new generation. Although the changes may not be substantial, they may cause further changes down the line in comparison. The author wrote this paper to explain previous studies and fill a gap that has not been researched. The purpose was to showcase gaps within this study area to other researchers.

These three sources help with occurring phenomena that will not be studied outside of the research, understanding other gaps within the research. However, understanding these anomalies found among all data sets can help understand how specific numbers and data sets came to be within the current research. These possible skews also help narrow the variables and how I conduct the study in terms of the methodology.

Gaps in Research

The gap I found is the differences in age between teachers and students at an art school. Age, although studied, is not fully expanded upon, which causes a vast misconception and misinterpretation of data on students during the development stage into adulthood and transitioning into independence in terms of language. This misconception may be due to children having difficulty being consistent with their language, especially younger children. To have research based on children and language alone will cause many ranges in fluency even as the child reaches adolescence and adulthood. Even though children can have a variety of fluency in their native language, it is crucial to understand how foreign children interact with their culture. I will be studying the age and effects of non-native speakers and their dialect changes on the impact of pronunciation, “our.” These areas of the study put an added layer of explanation to the sources and additional support. They also may affect understanding of cultural differences between bilingual speakers and children.

Methodology

Methods vary within the sources; however, the sources from my lit review often mixed standard methods found within the linguistic analysis information types, including qualitative and quantitative. The methodology to gather this information required a medium, a subject, and an interviewer. These methods also included “survey type” methods, ethnographic, true experimental research, and experimental research, but all require a person and a medium like a computer, a set of words, and a language. The sources above used survey-type methods to convey participants’ thought processes and their understanding of the materials and knowledge of the study. Ethnographic studies were used to study people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The sources within the literature review also used true experimental and experimental research to analyze data sets entirely. When there was a skew or mistake in data, it was recorded; however, some did not fix said errors. In contrast, others took the skew and researched that instead of their preliminary topic or data set. Nevertheless, like these research methods, I will use similar mediums like sets of words and language to start the research; the method used will be the descriptive method due to studying the phenomena of the different pronunciations of “our.”

These sources raise the question, to what extent does generational dialect change the effect of the pronunciation of “our” ['aʊə] in younger generations and the effects on native English speakers? The symbols in brackets are symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet, which is the proper spelling of “our.” I had to narrow the study’s variables to follow ethical research’s integrity and have enough time with the number of time restraints given on the research opportunities. To follow an honest survey, I decided not to include race, gender, and socio-economic status

in the study initially to ensure there would be no triggers for the participants, even if these topics are critical for a better understanding of pronunciation, lilt, and dialect. However, I discovered later that race and linguistics are in a close relationship when including the identity of a language.

I have three sections of the interview; the first is a list of ten words, all similar to [‘aʊə] and [‘ar]. The second task is a paragraph that uses [‘aʊə] and [aʊr ‘selvz] “ourselves,” which is a variant of [‘aʊə]. The third and final test was a freestyle section with a prompt, “Describe something you like using these words.” A total of six words were used: “Keep, Our, My, The, At, Are.”

I will use a mixed set data sample and a quasi-experimental method. This method will allow me to interact with other people through these mediums. Because the research asks for age and whether or not they are native English speakers, I will need to ask a few questions before starting the experiment. During the study, the recipient can say “no” or “stop” at any point, allowing the recipient to be safe and the researcher to ensure protocol is followed for an ethical and safe research study. I would then record the recipient (with their consent and a signed form from their parent or guardian). I want the study to be thorough yet timely, to let the research go into my hands diligently and efficiently.

Discussion and Analysis

The results found are in fractal form. The fractal structure is the most accurate way of recording the data rather than converting it into decimals. The denominator will be the participants, the numerator being the variables. I found the following results by calculating the data by hand and documenting it on Google Sheets. If an answer from the participant was unclear to me, I had multiple people who were unrelated to the study listen to the recording. I would have them listen to a clip and repeat what the participant said in the recording. Whether or not the participant said two factors determined [‘aʊə] or [‘ar]. The first factor was how many syllables were stated: [‘aʊə] having two and [‘ar] having one syllable. The pronunciation of the beginning vowel determined the second factor, so if the participant had a long A sound with the mouth completely open with the accent at the front of the mouth like in “Apple,” then it would be considered an [‘aʊə] type variant. If it were in the middle of the mouth like in “Art,” it would be regarded as an [‘ar] type variant.

The following results are deemed inconclusive due to the number of variables that were unable to be studied. However, we can assume with the information given that generational age differences are not affected by dialect changes. It can also be assumed that the [‘aʊə] to [‘ar] pronunciation dialect change has affected the majority of the older and younger population. The dialect change can be considered in both participant groups. Older and younger generations 6/14 (3/7 among teachers and students) pronounced most of the given testing words as [‘aʊə]. This result is less than half of the entire study group. However, there were some very close calls in terms of determining this “minority” since the average pronunciation of [‘aʊə] was much higher overall in the study, with 55 total usages of [‘aʊə] and 39 total usages of [‘ar]. It is important to note that some participants used the word “our” in the freestyle task more than others which may cause a skew in data. It is important to note that most participants knew the correct pronunciation of “our,” with 13/14 (92.86%). Participant #11 at the time understood the other pronunciation but used the most common pronunciation or the incorrect pronunciation, but stated, “Number eight ‘ar... ‘ar, or ‘aʊə...” understanding of the other pronunciation. As found in my literature discussion, location and place of growing up may affect these variables, but I could not research this variable due to time constraints. However, it was possible since almost all participants stated the location of where they grew up willingly at the end of the study survey.

Differences in Foreign Language Speakers

The participants who spoke a different language accompanied by English growing up were all student participants. 1/2 of these participants were most likely to use [‘aʊə] in the second task. Overall it is found that 1/2 also had an

overall majority of [ˈaʊə] being the most used instead of [ˈar]. Even if they do not currently speak that language, these participants are included due to growing up in a different environment and other outside factors.

“Our” Variations

With the word “our,” we can also use variations of the word such as “ourselves” to further explore the pronunciation possibilities. The proper pronunciation is [aʊrˈselvz] or “hour-selves,” but people most commonly use [ˈarˈselvz]. “ourselves” was used twice in the second task; only 2/14 people used both pronunciations, 4/14 used the proper pronunciation ([ˈaʊə] variation), and 8/14 used the [ˈar] variation. These findings helped me conclude that the dialect change in the pronunciation of “our” may already be on the east coast of the United States due to the participant's likeness using the form that they are most likely to pronounce the non-variation type. Research suggests that if the participant had a 2/2 pronunciation of the variation as [ˈaʊə], the participant most likely used [ˈaʊə] singular as their majority overall.

Limitations

During my study, I encountered many limitations, so I consider my research inconclusive, despite giving enough information for a clear answer. There are too many limitations for me to make a decision comfortably. To begin, doing linguistics study during a pandemic is extremely difficult. Masks block the mouth from viewing the formation of phonetics. Still, it adds a stressor to the participant and interviewer since the transmission of Covid-19 is through air particulates from breathing, according to the CDC. The uncertainty encouraged me to use a video camera during the interview to go back and listen to pronunciations. But despite having a form of reviewing the interviews, I still had difficulty hearing some participants due to the muffling of the mask, as well as the obstruction from outside influences, including other students, other teachers, traffic that is near the school, announcements from the school intercom, and electronic disturbances.

The interview room was not consistent due to circumstances that had happened to my study prior. Another limitation includes the background of the participants; some participants included English teachers, theater teachers, librarians, English enthusiasts, vocal music majors, and theater majors. All of these passions and professions include linguistics, and through the interview process, I was able to discern who had a background in linguistics and focus on how a person spoke. Honesty could be a limiting factor since many of my questionnaires relied on the honesty of the participant, especially in the following questionnaire. Due to stress being a concern in my study, I decided to form a Likert scale from 1 to 5, with one being nervous, three being neutral, and five being excited. I had participants state how they felt before, during, and after the interview. Each participant answered two days to two weeks after the interview.

However, skews in data could be stressful since 5/14 participants had a score of two before, during, or after the study. 7/14 (including the five participants who had a score of two) had a score of 3 in one or more responses. Nervousness can affect speech patterns by making a person speak too quickly or too slowly, causing a slip into different word pronunciations from what they would typically say. Nervousness also affects the speed at which a participant speaks as well. I would ask them to speed up or slow down depending on the situation. This lack of consistency in cadence could also affect the results, especially if the participant got nervous or flustered after the encounter, afraid that they might do something wrong. According to the participants, distractions within my study were vital in why some pronunciations were least expected. After the survey, I had them reflect and see if they noticed how they would have pronounced it differently, as well as if they noticed. I also had the participants state at the end of the questionnaire either “yes,” “no,” or “I wish not to answer this question” to “Were you distracted at all during the study?” These feelings could include outside factors, including factors within the study room. Four of the participants said yes. The reasoning could be many factors; many disturbances could have been due to other people inside the room or traffic

near the building. It may also include stress factors that may distract the participant or even mental factors such as focusing problems since I asked for a wide range of participants from many backgrounds, including ethnic backgrounds and those of all abilities. However, this is not fully confirmed because I wished not to trigger or cause my participants any mental or emotional distress. Therefore, I did not record their race or ethnicity, nor did I ask if they had any mental health issues or disabilities.

The Participant and Interviewer Relationship

My goal as an interviewer and a researcher was to ensure that the participants were comfortable being interviewed with me and being “alone” in a one-on-one setting. At any point, the participant was able to tell me that they wanted to stop or that they wanted a silent viewer in the study. However, it was found that with clear communication with the participants, they were least likely to ask for a silent viewer for the survey. All participants asked if they could do one on one instead of with a silent viewer. This can be accredited to the open line of communication that I had with my participants and the active role I took as interviewer and head researcher. Stating my intentions to ensure the participants' safety, comfort, and confidentiality, made the participants feel more at ease. The participants did not say that they were uncomfortable with me (the interviewer) but stated that they felt nervous since they were being put on the spot for the last task (to tell me something that they liked using six specific words in their sentences.) According to the participants, stress was due to pressure and caring for the study itself. Care means the participants' investment in this study, ultimately causing them to be more involved and invested in the study.

Importance of Background Information on the Participant

I have found that the background of one participant may be unique if found that this participant has an experience in linguistics, studying languages, or English. The participant was more likely to use the [‘aʊə] pronunciation. This phenomenon was especially evident in the teachers who had a profession in English or Theater. Teachers or students interested in Linguistics and English were most likely to have prior knowledge of dialect changes, proper pronunciation, and the overall study itself. After the participant completed the interview, the participants were told of the research topic rather than having a vague understanding. Some informed me that they had heard of this linguistic phenomenon before. However, they did not know the subject until after the interview allowing the interview to be free of cognitive bias. But I still found that these participants had a higher [‘aʊə] to [‘ar] ratio than others.

Future Applications

Language, as seen in my study, is used in everyday life. A standard answer in response to the question “How do you use English in your daily life?” was among the lines of “I use English in my everyday life and to communicate with everyone I see.” Whether my participants realized this, language, specifically English, connected them as a group of people. The idea of a language is to unify or separate a group of people. According to May (2011), they state the majority of language-based conflicts “lie with the nation-state and its preoccupation with establishing a 'common' language and culture via mass education.” In other words, the preoccupation with another power plus the added idea of nationalism, especially in those native to the country that the non-native power dominates, can cause conflicts among local and foreign authorities. But the unification and “to rethink nation-states in more culturally and linguistically plural ways while avoiding, at the same time, essentializing the language-identity link.” Or have the people gain their sense of identity rather than the “education” of another identity or language.

Language is a considerable part of a person's identity, especially in the modern-day United States. The majority of participants who spoke a different language (L1) prior can no longer talk to the extent they used to before. I had a phone call conversation with one of my participants, and they shared their experience of being introduced to a

different culture after growing up in a foreign country. My participants stated that they felt pressured by the culture and society around them to hide their foreign identity to an extent, especially when this involved racial or cultural prejudice. They even stated that, although not explicitly telling their parental figures not to speak Turkish, they still felt pressured to talk to their parents in English. The only time they ever said it in Turkish was in domestic settings around the house, which significantly affects a person's vocabulary, especially in keeping a language retained.

The exclusion of a person's identity, especially to "fit in" to the culture around them, significantly affects the person, their attitudes, and their identity. The importance of this study is to see the changes in the English language overall and find the gaps which do not unify all of us as English speakers and students finding an identity. This conclusion is true in my participant's case, in which they are trying to find their identity within the culture around them and the culture they are native to. But the difficulties of "fitting in" to a culture or group can be complicated when your identity has cultural conflicts, which ultimately conflict with language.

This study aims to find the differences between the English language and the diversity of just a simple word such as "our," which is in every English speaker's basic English vocabulary. Even more so, how unique the English language is to everyone and how easily a simple change can adapt to every conversation and be unrecognizable to other native speakers. But it is more difficult for non-native speakers to pick up if a native speaker were to talk fast. Languages are changing every day, but how we speak makes us unique, makes our identity unique, and who we are as human beings.

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