



Linguistic Society of America

NEWS RELEASE

For immediate release: March 08, 2022

Contact: Alyson Reed, LSA Executive Director
areed@lsadc.org; 202-835-1714

Anticipation and Accents: Talking like a southerner even if you're not

Have you ever found yourself unintentionally imitating how a friend, television character, or media personality talks after listening to them for a while? This is a well-established phenomenon that linguists call *linguistic convergence*, which refers to temporary (and often subtle) shifts in speech to sound more similar to those around us. A new study in the March 2022 issue of the journal *Language*, authored by Lacey Wade (University of Pennsylvania) shows that even our *expectations* about how other people might speak (rather than the speech itself) is enough to shape our own speech patterns. A copy of the article, “Experimental Evidence For Expectation-Driven Linguistic Convergence,” is available here: <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/sites/default/files/Wade%20Lg%20article.pdf>.

The study reports the results of two experiments testing how participants’ pronunciations of certain words changed after hearing somebody with a strong southern US accent. Participants playing a word-guessing game started pronouncing the vowel in words like *ride* and *dine* with a southern-like pronunciation—more like *rod* and *don*—after hearing a southern-accented talker. But here’s the interesting part: participants never actually heard how the southern talker produced this particular vowel. They simply inferred the talker’s pronunciation based on their other accent features and imitated what they expected. Even participants who had never lived in the U.S. south converged, suggesting that people can make these inferences about—and unintentionally imitate—accents that are not their own. The author suggests that a key reason participants were able to generate expectations in the first place was because this vowel is a particularly noteworthy feature that is stereotypically associated with the south. It is ubiquitous in media portrayals and caricatures of southern speech and people likely have strong associations between this feature and “southernness”.

These findings show that there are even more pressures shaping how we speak at any given time than we may have thought. Nobody has a single, static way of speaking—we do not speak precisely the same way when giving a presentation to our colleagues as we do when we are chatting on the phone with a childhood friend—and this new study suggests that yet another pressure may be at play: our expectations about others’ speech. Not only do we imitate what we *observe* from others, but we also actively *predict* what others will do and shift our own speech to match. This means that our expectations about others, even those that reflect stereotyped associations between accent features and the people who use them, influence not just the way we listen, but also the way we talk.

###

The Linguistic Society of America (LSA) publishes the peer-reviewed journal, Language, four times per year. The LSA is the largest national professional society representing the field of linguistics. Its mission is to advance the scientific study of language and its applications.