

Linguists looking for a Pacific Northwest dialect

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Linguists generally believe the West is too young to have evolved separate identifiable accent features or words, as has happened in other areas of the United States, and they usually lump together everyone living west of the Missouri River as speaking a similar-sounding type of English.

However, there are hints that this isn't necessarily true and that's why researchers from the University of Washington are beginning a two-year study to examine the features of the English spoken in the Pacific Northwest in a pilot project funded by the National Science Foundation.

The researchers, headed by Alicia Wassink, a UW associate professor of linguistics, are looking for 24 speakers of American English living in the greater Seattle area. They must have been born and raised in the Pacific Northwest between 1900 and 1985 and have no speech or hearing disorders.

People who are accepted into the study will participate in a one-hour audio-recorded interview, ideally with a family member or friend who also meets the qualifications as a volunteer. Individuals will be asked to take part in a brief conversation, read a list of words and a short story and then answer questions about their family history and demographics. Participants will be paid \$15.

"We have families living in the Northwest since the states were territories," said Wassink. "We'd love to get a random sample of people

from places like Ballard, Queen Anne, the Central Area and Yesler Terrace, as well family members from different generations so we can examine if and how dialects are changing over time. We are looking for a temporal snapshot of dialect evolution."

She said Washington is unique because it has had inter-ethnic contact that is as old as when the state was first settled and immigrant groups such as the Chinese, Irish, blacks, Japanese and Filipinos quickly diffused into the population.

What prompted the study were claims Wassink heard when she first moved to Seattle.

"When I arrived here many people said, 'I can identify people who live east of the Cascades by the way they talk.' A woman from Whatcom County said she was asked if she was Canadian because of her speech. If people can tell Eastern Washington and Whatcom County residents by their speech, this throws into doubt that the West is homogenous."

During the last four years of unfunded research, UW linguists also have found interesting pronunciation differences in the metropolitan Seattle area

If Wassink finds evidence of a Pacific Northwest dialect she hopes to conduct a larger follow-up study that will include hundreds of residents from across Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Utah, states that linguists group together.

People interested in volunteering for the pilot study or who want new information may do so by sending an e-mail to pnweng (at) u.washington.edu

Source: University of Washington

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