

'Coffee Talk' Disappearing In Native New Yorkers

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The Manhattan skyline at night. Credit: Michael Mase

In the early 1990s, comedian Mike Myers regularly dressed up in a giant wig, gaudy fake nails and gigantic sunglasses to become Linda Richman -- a stereotypical New Yorker who had fits of feeling "verklemt" and thought that Barbara Streisand's voice was "like buttah."

"Welcome to Coffee Talk," Myers said at the beginning of his Saturday Night Live sketch, twisting the vowels with an exaggerated New York accent.

This unique accent -- which has set New Yorkers apart for decades -- may now be disappearing among some of Gotham's natives, according to a Jan. 9 presentation at the Linguistic Society of America in Baltimore.

In 1966, linguist William Labov noticed that New York City residents had a peculiar way of saying words like "bought" and "daughter" that pushed the vowels up and into the back of the throat. He included this linguistic quirk, the "raised bought", in his "Atlas of North American English," a definitive text for scientists who study language.

"The longer your family's residence in New York, the more likely you are to raise bought," said Kara Becker, a graduate student at New York University in Manhattan.

Becker revisited the way people talk on Manhattan's Lower East Side for the first time in 40 years. Working with local community activist groups, she interviewed 64 [native speakers](#) over the course of two years and analyzed thousands of vowel sounds in their speech.

Older residents like Michael, born in 1933, still sound like New Yorkers when describing their mother's "sauce." But younger residents of Manhattan's Lower East Side, like 25-year-old Sam, did not pronounce "talk" and "cause" like their older neighbors, even though their families have lived in the neighborhood for several generations.

"The 'raised bought' of older speakers is not produced by those younger," said Becker.

This change in vowel [pronunciation](#) was not seen in the Lower East Side's African American population, which has grown steadily in past decades. Gale and Linda, a mother and daughter who have lived in New York City for generations, continue to pronounce "bought" like the older white population.

Becker said that this finding is important outside of the five boroughs and the surrounding Tri-State area because it contradicts a common belief among linguists that urban African Americans across the country

tend to speak more like each other than like the other racial groups in their regions.

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