

Northern accents are becoming more similar, suggests new research

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The accents of educated city dwellers across the North of England are becoming more similar, according to new research from The University of Manchester.

Linguistics expert Dr. Patrycja Strycharczuk and her colleagues wanted to discover whether there is any evidence for the existence of 'General Northern English' - an accent believed to be spoken by many typically middle-class people across Northern England.

"I often hear statements like "I'm from Liverpool / Manchester / Sheffield, but I don't have the accent"—however, there is very little systematic evidence that General Northern English really is a coherent variety, so that's the question we asked ourselves," said Dr. Strycharczuk.

Using [machine learning](#), they analysed the speech patterns of people from major cities across the North of England. They found that machine learners typically struggled to distinguish between the accents of people from Manchester, Leeds and Sheffield—this suggests that such speakers may indeed speak in a very similar way. However, accents from Liverpool and Newcastle were a lot more distinct.

The researchers also analysed individual [vowel](#) sounds, and compared them to traditional descriptions of different northern dialects. Typically, they found that some traditional dialect features are no longer present, but most speakers still sound distinctly northern—for example, using short vowels in words like 'glass', and pronouncing 'crux' the same as

'crooks'.

While this could be seen as evidence that regional accents are disappearing, that's not quite the case. The research did find some subtle differences between vowels in different cities that were previously unknown—individual cities still sound a little different, but the way they differ has changed.

The data confirms that many highly educated urban speakers in the North keep at least some northern vowels in their speech.

"It may seem as though local accents are dying out, but we believe we're actually seeing a new variety becoming established—educated, urban and northern. I think its prestige has increased, and people are now less tempted to lose their accent if they've been to university or they do a lot of public speaking," says Dr. Patrycja Strycharczuk.

"The question is whether General Northern English also has the same status for those who don't speak it—can a speaker be perceived as standard in London? I don't think we're there yet, but the shifting attitudes in the North are a first step."

Provided by University of Manchester

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