

New study finds that Miami English is its own unique dialect

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Many in Miami first come to realize they speak 'Miami English' when they, well, leave Miami.

In the U.S., there are hundreds of different dialects across different regions, cities and communities. The way English is spoken is as diverse as the country itself. While some dialects are more noticeable than others—like in the Midwest or Southern California—every place has a unique way of speaking English. Miami is no exception.

English in the 305 has an unmistakable rhythm and vibrancy. However, it's never been researched enough to be recognized as its own dialect—until now.

In 2013, Florida International University (FIU) sociolinguist Phillip Carter set out on an ambitious project to spearhead the first-ever study of the Miami dialect. He'd previously conducted research on Latino-English dialects in Texas and North Carolina. What he was hearing in Miami, though, was unique. He came to call it Miami English—and defined it as a variety of English with subtle structural influence from Spanish, mostly spoken by native English speakers who are second-, third- or fourth-generation Latinos.

One of the reasons he can call Miami English its own [dialect](#) is because of the vowel system.

Vowels are one of the first places linguists look—or rather listen—to understand whether one language has influenced another. Since Miami is such a diverse, multilingual city, Carter wanted to determine if Spanish vowel sounds had worked their way into English words—helping create the sound of Miami English.

Finding proof the vowel sounds were different involves more than just comparing speech samples. It also takes a little science. Physics, to be exact.

All speech is a soundwave. Soundwaves come from vocal cords, but those waves are shaped into specific sounds by movements of the tongue. Speakers of different languages move their tongues differently. Carter and his team wanted to pinpoint the "shape" of the vowels or what movement the tongue made to produce different vowel sounds.

The team interviewed 20 Miami-born participants from Latino or Hispanic descent, along with five Anglo white residents, for nearly an hour. Recordings of those conversations were then analyzed using a special phonetics software, which pulled thousands of data points on the vowel sounds. This allowed the group to not only measure the vowel sounds, but use the data to map tongue movements.

"With this study, we were able to say 'For this group of people, the sound is produced with tongue down and forward,'" Carter said.

Spanish has five [vowel](#) sounds. Most dialects of English have about 11. Carter found that the Spanish vowels influence the pronunciation of English words in Miami, primarily among the Latino speakers.

"There are many instances throughout history where two languages 'live together' or next to one another and influence one another," Carter said. "That is one way that dialects are born—through language contact."

In a city as diverse as Miami, it's almost inevitable that Spanish would influence English. Carter traces the origins of Miami English back to 1959. The end of the Cuban Revolution brought the first Cubans to South Florida. Throughout the end of the 20th century, Miami would become home to many more Cubans, as well immigrants from South and Central America, and the Caribbean.

It's this diversity that makes Miami's population different from anywhere else in the country. For Carter, it also poses many new questions about Miami English.

"One of the questions we hope to answer in future studies is if Miami English has features that belong to the Cuban people and their heritage," Carter said. "Is Miami English really Cuban American English or is it something that has been shaped by other Latinx groups that live here?"

Carter, who is also director of FIU's Center for the Humanities in an Urban Environment, points out that the Miami English project is for the people born in this region. It's about bypassing stereotypes or sensationalized stories about Miami. Language is tied to identity. For Carter, this work is about identity.

"This is not just a linguistics issue; this is a people issue. Because your language is a part of who you are. Miami English belongs to this place and the people who live here. It reflects their histories and identities," Carter said. "That's something to be proud of. That's something to celebrate."

The findings were recently published in *American Speech*.

Provided by Florida International University

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