

Teen girls defining a California dialect

By Lisa M. Krieger
Mercury News

Listen to the sounds of Northern California girls, and you hear the future of the state.

“In robotics, I always double-check what I *dew*, so people don't think I got it wrong 'cause I'm a girl,” said 17-year-old Kendal Sager, a senior at Los Altos High School, her “u” sound tilting slightly so it sounds like the “ew” in “pew.” A friend agreed, saying “It gets me *seh-oh may-ud*,” shifting and stretching the sound of “o” and “a” in “so mad.”

A growing body of linguistic research shows that teenage girls are crafting subtle changes in pronunciation that, over time, are being adopted by their elders.

Stanford University-based linguists call it the Northern California Vowel Shift. But Southern California scholars say they can hear it there, as well. First observed in the late 1980s, the subject has attracted serious study since the late 1990s.

It's not so much what girls say, but how they say it. Because vowels are linked to each other acoustically, language is always in motion. Some vowels edge toward one another, so they begin to sound alike; others slide away.

“Girls are the innovators,” said Carmen Fought, a professor of linguistics at Pitzer College in Claremont who studies California speech. “They hear small variations in pronunciation out there, then decide which changes to seize on and then take forward.”

New wrinkles in Los Altos

The shift can be heard in places like Los Altos High, at a recent meeting of a club called Girls for a Change, where girls gather at lunchtime to discuss ways to fix cultural ills.

They proposed social action as “something important to *dew*.” Among different approaches, they considered “*tew-toring*.”

And they discussed their passions. “I am *teh-oh-tally* obsessed with color guard,” Kendal said. Natasha Temple, 15, confided that “I got to talk to this *hawt* guy.”

Stanford University linguist Penelope Eckert has studied the emergence of certain sounds in students of Bay Area schools and concludes: “In the way we speak, we create a sense of place -- and define who we are, as a region, and in relation to each other.”

California used to sound like a mixture of sundry Eastern dialects, mingled with foreign influences. This is explained, say linguists, by the fact that New Yorkers were the largest immigrant element in California after the Gold Rush.

, , In the past, there was so much migration, it was hard to hear what the native population sounded like," said Lauren Hall-Lew, a graduate student in linguistics at Stanford.

Then California's native birth rate began to outstrip its immigration rate. The 2000 census showed, for the first time in the state's history , that growth in the state's population was due to births rather than immigration.

Youths are beginning to speak more like each other, and less like their elders. Linguists have proved that even when different generations share the same house, they don't sound alike.

There is evidence that young men and some older women are beginning to adopt some of the sounds started by teenage girls. As new ways of saying things find their way in the general language, a regional

--
or even statewide --dialect emerges.

..Now that the Western U.S. has more of an established history, we see distinct dialect patterns emerging," Hall-Lew said.

Linguists haven't done enough research to know whether any of these changes are specific to Northern or Southern California. Some stretched and shifting vowels are characteristic to the speech of. .valley girls," those icons of San Fernando Valley shallow materialism. They appear in Northern California, among people of different ages and income brackets, as well.

., It is not limited to. valley girl' stylization, because it is used by men and women and by people of all ages," said Stanford's Hall-Lew.

., As it gets used more and more, the vowels will mark a regional dialect area, just as they do in the northern cities or the South," she said.

Visible change

To document the shift, Stanford's Eckert took an aural snapshot in the classrooms and playgrounds of Bay

Area middle schools, although she did not want to identify which ones. Using a spectrograph, she translated

the youthful sounds into a visual image, which could then be mapped to contrast and compare.

., Girls are the movers and shakers in linguistic change," said Eckert, whose most recent paper, titled , , Language and Adolescent Peer Groups," is pending publication in the Journal of Language and Social Psychology. ' , Girls create ways of saying things, advancing certain changes in the language. ...They take sound changes and accelerate them."

Different shifts can be found elsewhere, say linguists. There is the Northern Cities Vowel Shift, for instance, in places like Chicago, Detroit and Rochester, N.Y.

..Language changes constantly ," Eckert said. ' , We need to find new ways to be emphatic. We need to find distinctive ways to set ourselves off from other groups.

..We're crafting ourselves --and providing signposts for our peers," she said.

--.,~,--,~--~.~..~ , , ~

Contact Lisa ,,,. Krieger at Ikrieger@mercurynews.com or (408) 920-5565.