Media representations of non-standard dialects are not widely studied by sociolinguists, but are central to the language-society interface insofar as “the media have become core systems for the distribution of ideology” (Gitlin 1980). In addition, psychological and sociological studies indicate that media can impact consumer attitudes about topics spanning from body image (Wang 2010; Mahler, Beckerley, & Vogel 2010) to sentencing of criminals (Rosenberger and Callanan 2011). In the past decade, a number of studies have begun to examine dialect in the media through discourse analysis methodologies (Pavlou 2004; Castello 2007; Trix 2010; Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005; Popp 2006; Heyd 2010). A few have taken impressionistic approaches to phonetic analysis (Lippi-Green 1997). However, there have been no studies utilizing acoustic methods. The present study takes a step towards filling this gap through an acoustic analysis of the vowels of Southern U.S. characters in television shows.

In order to begin setting a foundation for future research, this study asks three questions. Which elements of the Southern Vowel Shift are used to portray Southern characters? Are phonetic constraints followed? Do genre of show, type of character and era of show make a difference in the features used? Ten fictional television shows were sampled, five older and five newer. From those ten shows, eighteen characters were analyzed. Characters had main or recurring status. Actors portraying the characters must have been born and raised outside of the South. Audio samples were obtained from DVDs through Praat and F1 and F2 measures were taken for four front vowels (/I/, /e/, /Ɛ/, and /æ/). These measures were graphed using the statistical program R. Observations were made within subject since formant measures were not normalized. Vowel positions were compared in relation to the speakers’ other vowels to determine if the Southern Vowel Shift was present.

Results indicate that the best signs of an attempt to use Southern dialect are inconsistencies and variability in phonemes rather than uniform shifting if vowel position. Inconsistencies and variability were demonstrated through wide formant ranges and within-phoneme splits. /e/ and /Ɛ/ were the most commonly manipulated phonemes while /I/ and /æ/ were manipulated, but not as frequently. Characters that had few or no indications of Southern vowels tended to utilize other features associated with Southern speech, such as slower rate and lexical items. No phonetic constraints (preceding and following environment) were discernible when the tokens representing one phoneme for a given speaker were split. In era, genre, and character type, early era shows appear to be more dependent upon morphosyntactic and lexical features than more recent shows. Comedies have more features per character than dramas. Only two antagonists were sampled, thus no definitive conclusions can be drawn about them, however, usage of Southern features by antagonists may be more dependent upon era and/or genre than being antagonists. Results suggest that media representations are highly variable, yet sensitive to the most frequently used dialect features (as in the case of /e/ and /Ɛ/).