Is Kentucky Midwestern? Two Mergers Reveal Marginality
Jennifer Cramer, University of Kentucky

The Midwestern portion of the United States has long been a seemingly indeterminable entity, whose boundaries are complex and whose speech has fallen victim to the myth of linguistic homogeneity. On the other hand, the Southern states have been the focus of research on dialectal variation. One way in which each of these regions can be defined is by the lack of one of two mergers. In the Midwest, speakers are less likely to exhibit the pre-nasal front-lax merger (i.e. pin/pen), which is characteristic of Southern speech. In the South, speakers are resistant to the low-back vowel merger (i.e. cot/caught), which is widespread in the rest of the country, including the Midwest.

So, where is the boundary between these mergers? As has been suggested elsewhere (e.g. Boberg and Strassel 2000, Hazen 2005, Labov, Ash, and Boberg 2006, Irons 2007), Kentucky represents a transition area where these two mergers collide. In this presentation, I argue that Louisville, Kentucky in particular is located at more than just the state and geographic border between Kentucky and Indiana (cf. Cramer 2010); it is also at a cultural and linguistic border between the two regions represented by these mergers.

The data for this presentation consists of more than seven hours of broadly transcribed video from a reality television show, Southern Belles: Louisville, which follows the lives of five young Louisville women, detailing their experiences as friends, professionals, and bachelorettes. The show constructs Louisville as Southern, using stereotypical notions of warmth and family values, yet somehow non-Southern, depicting the city as art-centric and progressive, with the implication that these characteristics are not associated with the South, further situating Louisville as a border city.

Tokens of these vowels were extracted from the speech of these women for spectral analysis using PRAAT. The acoustic analysis provides evidence of merger through visualization of the vowel space as well as through statistical analysis of formant values. Preliminary results reveal that these Louisvillians have these two mergers to varying degrees. Thus, although Louisvillians index Midwesternness through participation in the low-back vowel merger, they mitigate this identification by also participating in the pre-nasal front-lax merger. Participation in both mergers simultaneously marks Louisvillians as both Southern and Midwestern, despite the presence of patterns unexpected in each region.