The View from the Western Edge: Sound Change in Kansas City
Matthew Gordon and Christopher Strelluf, University of Missouri

St. Louis has long billed itself as the “Gateway to the West,” but on dialectological grounds, Kansas City has a much stronger claim to that title. Labov and his collaborators on the Atlas of North American English (ANAE) place the boundary between their Midland and Western dialect regions just a hundred miles or so outside Kansas City. In fact, they show the isogloss for one of the defining features of their West, the low-back vowel merger, cutting through the western edge of metropolitan Kansas City. Still, ANAE classifies the city itself as Midland based on criteria including the degree of fronting heard for the back vowels GOOSE and GOAT. At the same time, Labov et al. also identify Kansas Citians as fronting the diphthong of MOUTH, a feature traditionally found to be more common in the South. Thus, as we might expect from its geographical position near the borders of several dialect regions, Kansas City shows an intriguing mix of speech features.

This paper reports on an on-going study of Kansas City speech with an emphasis on changes in progress. Ours is the first large-scale study to be conducted on this community since Lusk’s (1976) dissertation. Lusk examined speech patterns across three generations of Kansas Citians using a system of auditory coding. We frame our analysis as a real-time follow-up to that earlier work by examining the speech of young adults (c. 15-25 years), an age group whose parents are contemporaries of Lusk’s youngest generation. A sample of some 25 speakers from various parts of the Kansas City metropolitan area were recorded in sociolinguistic interviews. We draw on our acoustic and auditory analyses of these recordings to paint a picture of how Kansas City speech has developed in the last few decades.

Among the results to be discussed is the progress of the low-back vowel merger (of LOT and THOUGHT). While Lusk’s apparent-time comparison suggested this change was active though incomplete, we find the merger to be almost categorical among speakers under 25 today. Lusk also reported fronting of GOAT as change in progress. While our acoustic results are difficult to compare directly with her impressionistic analysis, it’s clear that young Kansas Citians continue to front this vowel today. We also report on a variable that received much less attention in previous work: the fronting of the STRUT vowel. Contrary to Lusk's analysis of this as one of only two stable vowels in the Kansas City system, our preliminary results suggest that the fronting of this vowel is a new and vigorous change with important implications for Kansas City's variety of the Midland dialect. By examining a range of pronunciation features we sketch the complex regional character of Kansas City speech, a finding that we suggest fits well with local conceptions of the city’s cultural identity.