

The Distance Between Acadiana and Cape May

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Accent can arguably be thought of as an acoustic fingerprint. It can immediately trigger preconceptions in listeners about not only where one is from but also where one has been. It is not a perfect measure in this regard, though, as different people seem to take on phonetic features in different ways but perhaps with a more exact science of phonetics this limitation can be overcome. It is with this in mind, along with some personal interest, that this paper aims to determine what the phonetic influences are on Edmae McNeill's personal idiolect—who, for convenience's sake, will be referred to by her lifelong nickname, Chick, from this point on.

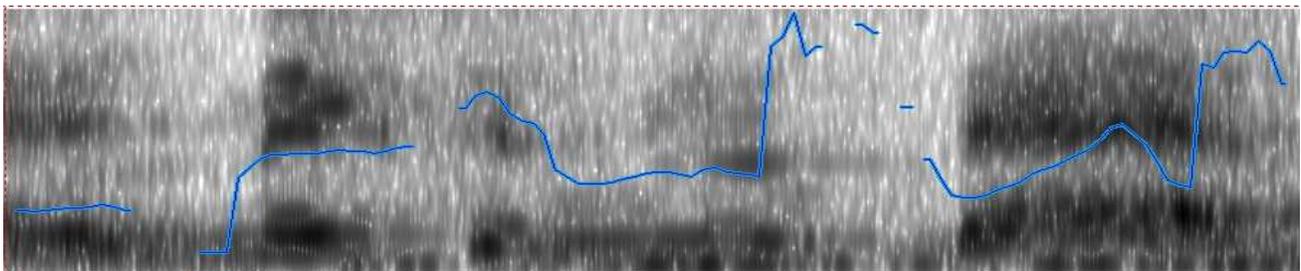
Chick was born in Rapides Parish, somewhere just east of Alexandria, 85 years ago. While not normally considered a part of the Acadiana region of Louisiana, where most Cajun people live, it is bordered on two sides by parishes that are considered part of Acadiana. It is reasonable to assume that Chick is herself Cajun due to this fact as well as the descriptions of what the area was like in the 1950s by her son, Donnie McNeill. Donnie was born in 1948 and spent the first 11 years of his life living with Chick in Rapides Parish and claims that his grade school teachers spoke mostly French and that his older sister spoke only French up until grade school (McNeill). This also implies that Chick used French herself quite a bit. Because of the remoteness of any French Creole communities anywhere near Rapides Parish, one can conclude fairly safely that Chick is Cajun and hence spent the first portion of her life speaking Cajun English.

Chick subsequently left Louisiana in 1959 and has resided ever since in Cape May County, New Jersey, which lies at the southern tip of the state. While making regular visits back to Louisiana for a number of years, she stopped leaving Cape May County all together after roughly 1982 (McNeill). This isolation from the community that shares her dialect could lead one to believe that Chick should have little of her original speech patterns left but, when listening to her, it is immediately made clear that her speech does not resemble that of anyone in New Jersey in the slightest.

A voice recorder was used to record a private conversation with Chick in May of 2012 which is here being used to analyze how many of the most prominent phonetic features of each location that she has lived in can be found in her speech. The source material is roughly an hour and a half long but most of the data is taken from only the first 15 minutes except where examples of a feature are sparse. She was unaware of the recording so every utterance can safely be said to represent her normal speech while among family members. Each data point was analyzed in Praat, recorded, and calculated to come up with a percentage representing how often each particular phonetic feature was used.

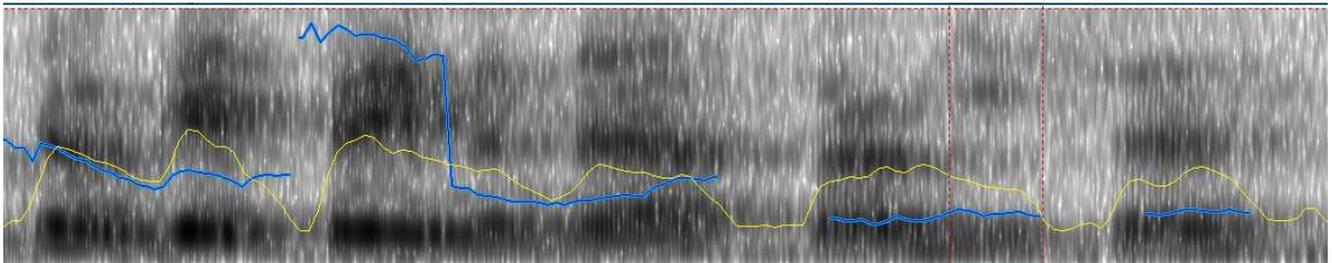
Cajun English was easily the most clearly evident influence on Chick's speech even though not all of the the salient features associated with the dialect were used regularly or even at all. To begin with, studies on the phonetic qualities of the dialect are sparse. Those that do exist sometimes are, at times, absent of any IPA transcriptions, resulting in a lack of clarity. For instance, Melançon describes Cajun English as having “no drawl” and “clipped vowels” (240). Even among these descriptions, some concrete qualities can be ascertained, though.

Stress, in Cajun English, should come at the end of phrases due to the influence of Cajun French on the dialect (Melançon 241). Even though Chick spoke Cajun French, this feature was not prominent in her speech, occurring only 26% of the time. This rate is actually generous as some phrases with final stress contained more than one stress as in, “It makes him look bad,” which contained a peak at the beginning of *look* which fell only to be stressed again at *bad*.



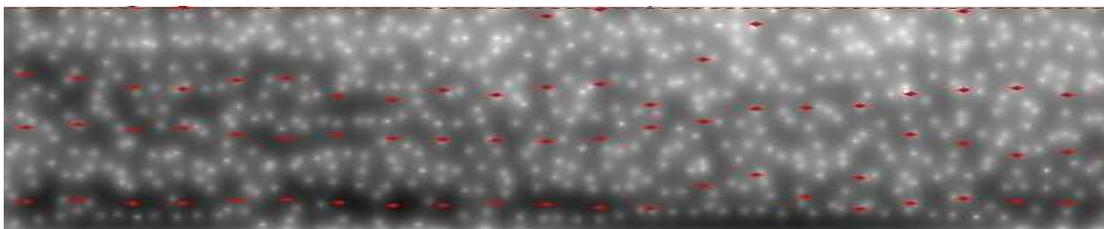
It makes him look bad."

Also a Cajun English feature lacking in Chick's speech is the deletion of /h/ when at the beginning of words. This is another quality thought to be due to the influence of French on the dialect (Dubois and Horvath, "When the Music Changes" 292). Chick only did this 25% of the time. In fact, it is again not clear if the instances where it did occur were a feature of her speech or simply a phonological constraint due to short, unstressed words such as *he* being used in the middle of rapidly spoken phrases.



He don't get paid enough though he said. The /h/ is deleted in the *he* in the red box but the intensity (yellow) and pitch (blue) show that this word was not stressed at all.

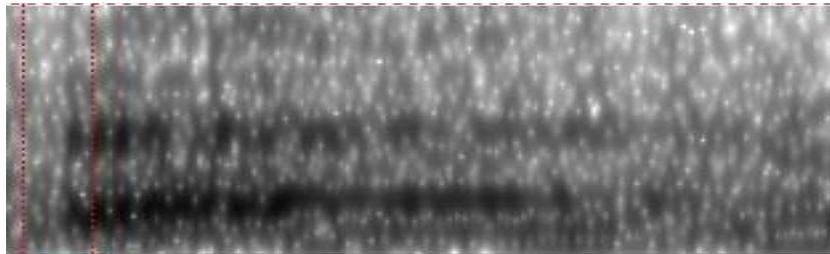
A less clearly described feature is that of the tensing of lax vowels. Melançon makes this claim but only uses the example of *hill* being a homophone of *heel* as opposed to an IPA transcription (240). Nonetheless, it is safe to assume that she means to say /ɪ/ becomes [i] due to the standard American English broad transcription of *hill* (Dictionary.com). Chick did not use this feature at all. She did, in general, change lax vowels to tense 31% of the time, however. In fact, her lax vowels would often become other lax vowels altogether instead.



It's . . . The F1 and F2 are very near 550hz and 1770hz, respectively, making this an [ɛ] instead of the expected [ɪ].

While the last three qualities of Cajun English were not very marked in Chick's speech, some were. Dental fricatives, /θ/ and /ð/, become the alveolar stops [t] and [d], respectively, in Cajun English

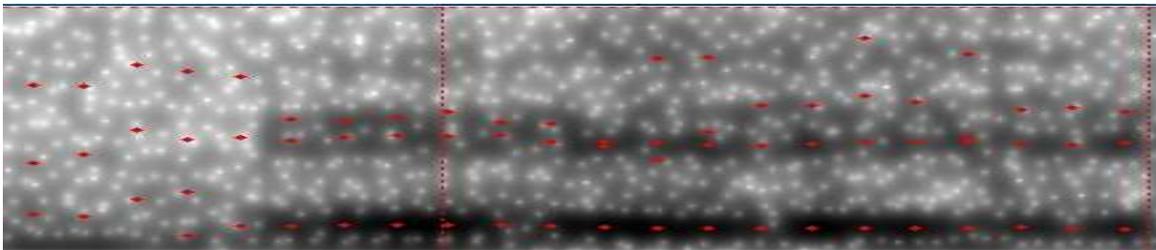
(Melançon 241; Dubois and Horvath, “When the Music Changes” 292). Of particular note is the fact that this feature has been found to occur 95% of the time in “old” speakers of Cajun English, defined as being born before 1940, who have spent their whole lives in Acadiana (Dubois and Horvath, “Creoles and Cajuns” 198-199). This would include Chick, who used this feature 65% of the time. It would not include her son Donnie, who was not analyzed but does not appear to use this feature at all and who was part of the “middle-aged” generation of Cajuns who disavowed the dialect due to its low prestige. Because of this generation, the feature was only used 47% of the time among all generations of Cajuns (Dubois and Horvath, “Creoles and Cajuns” 198-199). This was the most regularly employed Cajun English quality used by Chick but the fact that she is out of sync with the rate of her peers in Louisiana implies that her relocation has affected this aspect of her accent, although it is impossible to tell how regularly she spoke this way before relocating.



“ . . . that . . . ” The red box shows a clear lack any upper frequency noise that would be apparent in a fricative.

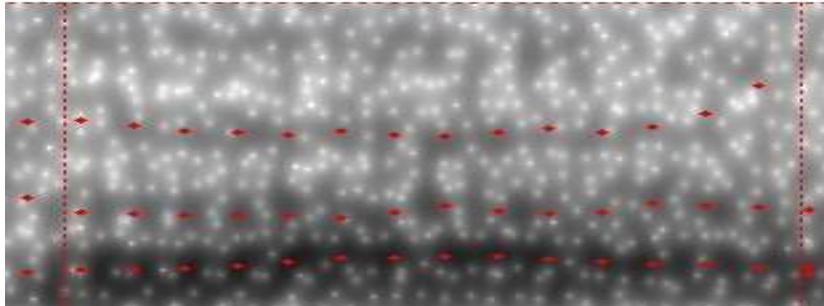
Contrary to Melançon's assertion that lax vowels become tense in Cajun English, she also claims that the diphthong /ei/ becomes [ɛ] (240). For the purposes of this analysis, and to explain a possible inconsistency, this paper assumes that this diphthong is not treated the same way as a monophthong tense vowel in the dialect. Nevertheless, Chick only uses this feature 26% of the time. What is noteworthy, though, is that she makes /ei/ into [e:] 47% of the time. According to Ladefoged, [ɛ] has an F2 of 1770hz (193) while other sources tend to give [e] an F2 around 2300hz, a significant fronting and the only particularly salient difference in the formants of these two vowels. It is quite possible that this latter phonetic realization is still evidence of the influence of Cajun English on

Chick's speech.



"... way ... " The F2 in the vowel (in the red box) remains at 2250hz for the full duration of the word.

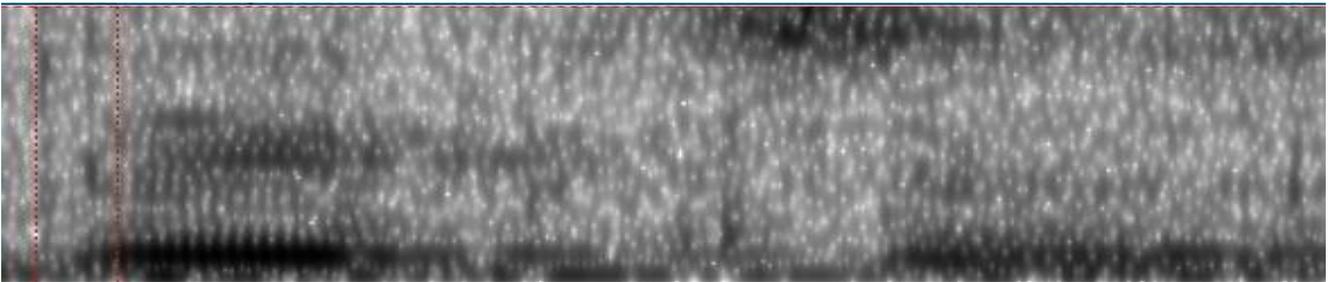
Closely related to the previous quality of Cajun English is the realization of /a/ as a monophthong (Melançon 240; Dubois and Horvath, "When the Music Changes" 292). Dubois and Horvath found this feature to be expressed 70% of the time among Cajuns ("Creoles and Cajuns" 197). For Chick, this feature was documented 41% of the time, varying between the fronted [a:] and the backed [ɑ:]. While not as prominent as her representation of dental fricatives as alveolar stops, neither was this as prominent in Cajuns in general.



"... I ... "Expressed as [a:], with an F2 of 1575hz, showing this is forwarded.

Syllable initial voiceless stops (/p/, /t/, and /k/) regularly lack aspiration in Cajun English (Melançon 240). It is suggested that this is due to the interference of French on the dialect (Melançon 241; Dubois and Horvath, "When the Music Changes" 292). It is no surprise, then, that Chick displays this feature 43% of the time—weighted more towards consonants in the front of the mouth than the back with /p/ being unaspirated 60% of the time and /k/ being unaspirated only 25% of the time. What makes this feature particularly interesting, and telling of her roots, is that Dubois and Horvath found this feature prominent among "old" Cajuns, rare among "middle-aged" Cajuns, and non-existent among

“young” Cajuns (“When the Music Changes” 292-293), defined as those born after 1960 (“When the Music Changes” 305). As was previously mentioned, the “middle-aged” Cajuns disavowed the dialect due to a lack of prestige but “young” Cajuns reinvigorated the dialect in a show of pride but aspiration was the only feature that they did not bring back (“When the Music Changes” 292-293). The reasons are not laid out but perhaps due to the decline of Cajun French and the fact that aspiration is not phonemic in English, this was quality was easy to overlook among young speakers.



... pictures . . . With a voice onset time of 23ms in the red box.

The salient features of the English spoken in Cape May County do not appear to have been studied at all. In fact, studies of the dialects throughout New Jersey have been looked at on a lexical level much more so than on a phonetic level. This does draw dialect boundaries, though. South Jersey, which includes Cape May County, has been described as part of the Delaware Valley subdivision of the Midlands section of the state, along with Philadelphia (Coye 415). Despite the fact that these locations are roughly 100 miles apart, there is ample reason to believe that this division is accurate. Cape May County has a winter population of 97,265 which swells to 763,940 during the summer months (Facts), which includes many Philadelphia locals either on vacation or staying at their summer homes. For this reason, Chick's speech has been compared to the features of English in Philadelphia.

The features of English in Philadelphia have been compared to those of the author of this paper as well as a friend of the author, who were born and raised in Cape May County and Atlantic County, respectively. The sentence, “Something very huge passed me this coffee that I caught while I was stripping near that cot with the box of crayons below it,” was recorded by both individuals and analyzed for comparison as it would elicit all the features of English in Philadelphia. This small

convenience sample is not ideal but at least gives context to the dialects.

Many phonetic qualities of Philadelphia English were not found in the comparison but it is notable that this mirrored the existence of these qualities in Chick's speech as well. This synchronicity at least displays similarities between Chick's speech and that of Cape May County locals, even if these features can not be said to be prominent for that area.

Among the features of Philadelphia English not found in the comparison subjects is the deletion of /h/ in word initial position, like Cajun English, but only when followed by the glide /j/ (Salvucci 90). Despite an hour and a half of conversation, unfortunately, words like *huge* and *hue* were not uttered by Chick so no conclusions could be drawn on this quality. There were, however, instances where she used words ending in /θɪŋ/ such as *something*. In these instances, Philadelphians would express the /θ/ as [ʔ] (Salvucci 90) but this feature was completely absent in her speech. The lax vowel /ɛ/ is also supposed to be backed to other lax vowels before either /ɪ/ or /ɪ/ (Salvucci 90). This only occurred 10% of the time and, in fact, occasionally this vowel was fronted instead of backed. The raising of /ɔ/ to [o], of *coffee* ([kofi]) fame, is another Philadelphia feature (Salvucci 90) not found in the local speakers—in fact, the author's friend fronted and lowered this vowel instead. It was, likewise, only seen 37% of the time in Chick's speech. Salvucci also found a separation of the vowels in *caught* and *cot* in Philadelphia (90) which was interestingly not found in the local speakers of Cape May County but was found 46% of the time in Chick's speech, a bit of an anomaly in the data so far.

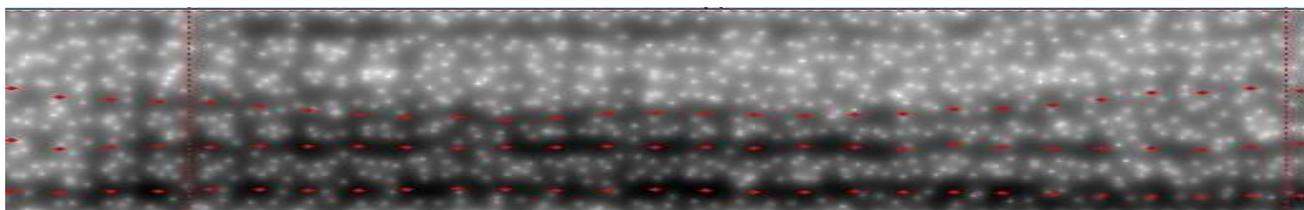
Less of an anomaly is the Philadelphia feature of turning dental fricatives into alveolar stops in Philadelphia English (Salvucci 90) also being prominent in Chick's speech. This was also a prominent feature of Cajun English and so speaks to the limitations of such an analysis: unless a phonetic feature of a dialect exists in no other dialect of the language, one can never be absolutely certain what the source is. Adding confusion to the fire, so to speak, is the fact that both of the locals recorded, in their limited samples, displayed this feature 20% of the time. This could arguably be ascribed to the phonological influence of neighboring sounds and/or the word's location in the phrase, but the same

could be said of Chick's samples without a more meticulous and in depth look at this particular feature by itself.

The one explicit phonetic feature of the dialect of Cape May County also, unfortunately, yielded inconclusive results. The word *crayon* is pronounced [ˈkɹaʊn] in Cape May County as opposed to the standard /kɹeɪˈɑn/ (Coye 424). Not only was this feature only found in the author and not in his friend's speech—who grew up closer to the dialect boundary in the north—but there were no instances of this word throughout Chick's recording. Furthermore, because of the huge amount of changes occurring, no other word could be discovered that would yield the same phonological changes.

A similar problem was found in the Philadelphia English feature that realizes the word initial consonant cluster /str/ as [ʃtr] (Salvucci 90): this was found to be true in the local speakers but only two data points were available for Chick's speech. Neither of these samples show a post alveolar fricative but it is not clear whether these were outliers or the normal expression of the cluster because the sample size was so small. This situation was not found, however, in the rhoticity feature of English in Philadelphia, which means every /ɹ/ is pronounced (Salvucci 90). This was, in fact the case in the local speakers as well as with Chick who used this feature 90% of the time throughout many samples.

Chick was found to front the diphthong /ou/ 82% of the time, making this the most prominent example of her sharing a feature that is likely to be a more exclusive of English in Philadelphia (Salvucci 90)—as opposed to rhoticity which is standard in American English. What makes this feature strange in Chick's case, though, is that the tense vowel of the diphthong is often expressed as a lax front vowel. Not only does the combination of two lax vowels seem strange, but the fronting is fairly extreme. In some cases, the F2 of these vowels actually rises instead of falling back to where it would need to be to reach the [ʊ] sound.



... though . . . "The vowel in the red box has an F1 of 660 and F2 of 1650, making it [æ] and arguably drops at the end but never as far as [ʊ]."

Dubois and Horvath state that “sociolinguistic researchers have been of the opinion that women are more sensitive than men to the social evaluation of speech and use more of the positively evaluated variants and less of the negatively evaluated variants than do men” (“When the Music Changes” 288). While it is unclear whether this applies to dialect change over generations or the changes of one's idelect alone over time, assuming the latter still does very little to explain Chick's case. She is a southerner with a distinct manner of speech living in a northern area and yet has clearly maintained her original dialect more than she has assimilated to the supposed new dialect. What this analysis does not say is how much she has changed her speech but what it does say is that any changes or lack of changes have had little to nothing to do with attempting to mimic the standard dialect of her current home. If it can be assumed that the standard is also the dialect of prestige, this says quite a lot about the attitude of this speaker.

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