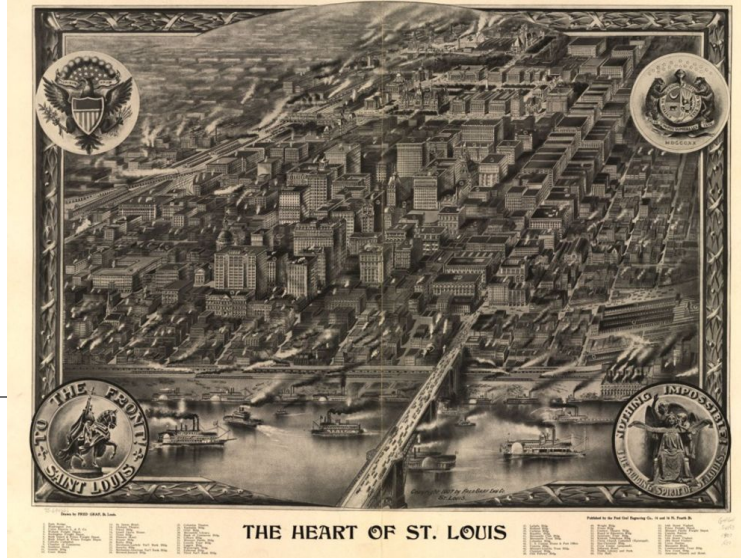


The St. Louis Accent: An Explainer

So many dialects intersect in this one Midwestern city.

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The following is an excerpt from How to Speak Midwestern, available now from [Belt Publishing](#).

Given where it lies on the map, St. Louis should be a Midland-speaking city. After Pittsburgh, Columbus, and Indianapolis, it's the next major city on Interstate 70, and it's directly west of Cincinnati. However, because it was a major industrial city, and because it sits on a highway that connects it with Chicago, St. Louis has been seceding from the Midland dialect region, and joining the Inland North.

The most stereotypical St. Louis pronunciation is “farty” for “forty.” St. Louisans swap an “ar” for an “or” sound, so they eat “carn on the cob” and wish each other “good marning.” This is unique to St. Louis, but the city has other features in common with the Midlands. Older St. Louisans say “worsh” for “wash,” “wants off” for “wants to get off,” and “I waited on him” instead of “I waited for him.”

Founded by the French in 1764 as a sanctuary after the loss of the French and Indian War, St. Louis is older than any other Midland city but Pittsburgh. At the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers, it was a hub of the nineteenth-century river trade. In 1904, the year it hosted the World's Fair and the Olympics, St. Louis was the nation's fourth-largest city, behind New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago. It was a center of brewing, milling, and meat packing, and a magnet for Irish and Italian immigrants. That gave St. Louis, and its dialect, a more urban character than most other Midland cities. For example, older St. Louisans still say “youse” and substitute ‘d’ for ‘th.’

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It was a highway, though, that cemented St. Louis's linguistic allegiance. In 1926, Route 66 was completed, linking St. Louis 41 and Chicago. The National Road, a major migration route for Midlanders, hadn't quite made it to St. Louis, stopping at Vandalia, Illinois. Route 66 became an avenue for the southwesterly spread of the Northern Cities Vowel Shift, planting it in the mouths of speakers in Bloomington, Springfield, and St. Louis. When Interstate 55 bypassed the Illinois cities, Northern speech receded there. But St. Louis, a destination city, became more firmly allied with

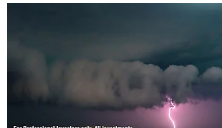
Inland North. According to the *Atlas of North American English*, "St. Louis is losing its traditional dialect, with a merger of are and or, in favor of the Northern Cities Shift of the Chicago area, and the corridor along Route I-55 shows the direction of influence." Lauren A. Friedman calls this a "dialect breach," and observes that the Northern Cities shift did not spread to Central Illinois communities on either side of the highway.

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Shift."**

It's important to note here that when we talk about regional accents in the Midwest, we're talking about the speech of the white populace. Blacks did not settle in Midwestern cities in large numbers until World War I, when they were recruited to address the sudden shortage of workers in the munitions industries. Once they arrived, they were isolated geographically by restrictive covenants, socially by taboos against intermarriage, and economically by relegation to the dirtiest, lowest-paying jobs, preventing social or professional interaction with whites. As a result, blacks maintained the speech patterns they brought with them from the South, while developing their own distinctive vernacular. When I asked a rapper named C-Sharp about stereotypically St. Louis pronunciations such as "farty"

(“forty”) and “worsh” (“wash”), he responded, “That’s the white folks. We understand what they’re saying, but we don’t talk that way ourselves. Like, we’ll say ‘y’all.’”

Since four of the five most segregated cities in the U.S. are in the Midwest, the region—in particular the heavily industrialized Inland North zone—has a wider divergence between white and black speech than anywhere in the country. However, while African American English was once consistent throughout the country, later generations have adopted some local pronunciations to form distinct “blaccents.” For example, the Chicago rapper Common mixes the Southern tendency to drop the r in “liar” and “award” with the strongly fronted Inland North o in his stage name and “Oscar.”



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St. Louis feels more connected to Chicago than it does to the rest of Missouri, which it regards as a hillbilly backwater. A St. Louisan is far more likely to visit Chicago than Kansas City—or Branson, for Pete’s sake. The baseball rivalry between the Cubs and the Cardinals unites the cities, rather than dividing them, as fans travel back and forth along I-55 to cheer in enemy territory.

“St. Louis is the only city outside the Great Lakes that participates in the Northern Cities Vowel Shift,” says Randy Vines, who studies the St. Louis language as owner of StL Style, a boutique that sells T-shirts with such local sayings as “Highway Midland Farty” and “Where’d You Go to High School?”

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“St. Louis has more in common with the northern and eastern cities than the rest of Missouri,” says Vines. “You go 35 miles out, and there’s a major difference.”

St. Louis’s transformation from Midland to Inland North can be heard by listening to two prominent natives born on either side of World War II: Mike Shannon, a Cardinals outfielder and broadcaster born in 1939, and the actor John Goodman, born in 1952. Shannon is a Southern-tinged Midland speaker. The Cardinals’ National League rivals are the “Worshington Nationals,” while a pitcher throws a

“ninety-six mahl an ahr fastball.” However, Shannon occasionally raises an ‘a’—the first stirring of the Northern Cities Shift. As exurban Chicago working stiff Dan Conner on the sitcom *Roseanne*, Goodman delivered a completely authentic Inland North accent, calling his wife “Rose-ayen,” and his sister-in-law “Jaya-ckie.” It wasn’t an act. In interviews, he says “hay-end” for “hand” and “shahht” for “shot.” Goodman sounds far more like a Chicagoan than does a speaker from Vandalia, Illinois, a town 70 miles to the northeast where the Midland accent is beginning to take on southern characteristics.

From a generational and class perspective, neither man’s speech is surprising. Shannon is a prewar baby whose father was a police officer. He never graduated from college and has spent his career in the all-male world of baseball. Goodman also came from a working-class background—his widowed mother worked as a waitress and took in laundry—but he attended college and then went to New York to pursue acting. Thomas E. Murray, the leading expert on St. Louis speech, found that [some] modern St. Louisans have consciously rejected speech that sounds “country” or unsophisticated in favor of urban, northern locutions. The “farty” pronunciation has been relegated to the same linguistic ash heap as “dahntahn” and “yinz” have in Pittsburgh, and for the same reason: it sounds “working class.” (I didn’t spend a lot of time in St. Louis while researching this book, but the only person I heard say “farty” was a waitress in a diner, who took an order by asking a couple, “What can I get youse?”) In his essay “The Language of St. Louis,” Murray wrote that “members of the upper class, females, and young informants tend to use Northern and North Midland speech; members of the lower class, males, and elderly informants, however, tend to use Southern and South Midland forms.”

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In no other Midwestern city have so many dialects intersected, but it’s clear which one is winning.