

Da Chicago Accent Becomes a Local Myth Among Younger Generations

By ALYSSA SUAREZ



The front room of a house or a “frunchroom,” (above) is the beloved example of a typical Chicagoan accent. (Photo by Alyssa Suarez)

Chicago, Illinois, or the “Windy City,” is the hometown of “da Bears,” deep-dish pizza, “da first Ferris wheel,” and many other landmarks and historic cuisines. Its location in the center of the Midwest allows for custom and accent influence by neighboring states like Minnesota and Wisconsin, however, do Chicagoans also have an accent of their own?

Cities like New York City, Los Angeles, and Houston have accents that most Americans can imitate, with “caw-fee,” “y’all,” and “dude” being most notable. In cities like Chicago,

however, most Americans are speechless and struggle to imitate an accent. This is because Chicagoans don't have a prominent accent — at least, not as noticeably as before.

The accent, or the Northern Cities Vowel Shift, originates from upstate New York during the construction of the Erie Canal in the early 1800s, becoming a staple of the Chicago white working class. Vowels elongate, and words like “the” and “front room” become “da” and “frunchroom,” hence the iconic, “Da Bears!” The black Chicago accent, however, originates from The Great Migration of the 1900s, where segregation isolated black residents to Chicago's South and West sides and the two distinct accents flourished.

One major difference between the two accents is the pronunciation of Chicago. The Irish Chicagoans pronounce the word as “Chi-caw-go,” while the black Chicagoans say “Chi-cah-go.” Dubbed “Chicagoese” by Pulitzer Prize winner, Mike Royko, “Chicagoese is one of the world's most beautiful languages.” Despite the distinct pronunciation of words, the Chicagoan accent did not gain as much popularity until NBC's *Saturday Night Live*'s “1990s-era Super Fans” sketches.

The idea originated after New York actor and producer, Robert Smigel, moved to Chicago to begin his comedy career. He met an improv classmate, Bob Odenkirk, to whom he told his idea of a sketch depicting hardcore Chicago fans. After Smigel and Odenkirk joined the writing team at *Saturday Night Live*, they pitched the idea to the show, which became a hit worldwide.

The depiction of Chicago fans with exaggerated accents comforting each other about “da Bears” future had many Americans imitate the regional accent. “The little hiss at the end [of words ending in “s”],” Smigel said. “You have to be from Chicago to know that.”

Popularity comes with a price and Chicagoans dealt with mockery of their accents, marking the start of the “Chicagoan accent insecurity.” When people want to hide their origins and social class, they change their accents. Award-winning journalist, Edward McClelland, says, “Strong local accents lead to pressure to change the way you speak.”

A 1970s study of Chicago steelmaker families found that white working-class housewives who dealt with doctors, lawyers, teachers, and other professionals, were less likely to talk in their Chicago accent, specifically say “dese” and “dose,” as opposed to their husbands. The diversification of Chicago is a main cause for the decline of the Chicago accent because the white working class is less abundant and influential than it was in the 20th century.

With the rise of social media, TV programs, influencers, and celebrities influence the younger generations’ — starting from millennials to current generations — speech patterns and accents.

The slow termination of white and black accents in Chicago is a positive step in the right direction says Dr. Jill Hallett, a visiting lecturer at the University of Chicago in Illinois (UIC), “If the Classic Chicago Accent is associated with blue-collar work, folks who have it but take a white-collar job might try to soften its edges to avoid sounding working class.”

The accent is still rampant in blue-collar suburbs, as well as in predominantly white South Side, with some North Side, neighborhoods. “Among baby boomers — people like Dennis Farina —

you were more likely to find [the Chicago accent] among both middle-class and working-class speakers, says Erica Durian, an English professor at DuPage and Northern Illinois University, “but now you're seeing it less in speakers under 40 or 45, and what's happened among that generation group is that it's become defined more as just exclusively a working-class accent.”

New generations come with new changes. The decline of the classic Chicago accent does not solely define a Chicagoan, rather, the culture, the food, and the conversations made with other residents bring the city’s story to life. “da” Chicago accent is unique and a form of expression. If Chicagoans’ confidence in “da Bears” doesn’t falter, then “da” accent will continue to live on.