

Generational Change in Media Representation of
Southern Dialect in the United States

by
(Student Name)

A thesis proposal presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee State
University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation
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Thesis Committee:

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Introduction

Language is the performative way we indicate our belonging to sociocultural groups. Group identity is produced by contrast. There is only an “us” if it is distinguishable from “them.” In a monolingual environment like the United States, dialect is at the heart of this “othering.” Dialects including white Southern speech are often stigmatized in contrast to a mythical “standard” or “neutral” accent (Preston, 2007, p. 164, p. 167). Historically, film and TV have shaped and reinforced dialect-based stereotypes that perpetuate stigma.

This project aims to understand the social, cultural, and political motivations of periodic changes in the representation of white Southern speech in film and TV and their influence on white Southerners' perception of their dialectal and cultural identity. I will connect my analysis to the modern generation's sociolinguistic dilemma: having an accent is choosing a “side.”

Background & Purpose

Historically, the South, and by extension, its dialect, was stereotyped as lacking intelligence and refinement due to its agricultural social structure, minimal education, and low literacy rates (Ferriss, 2007, p. 141). After the Civil War, ridiculing language played a part in the North's attempt to alienate the former Confederate States socially and economically, as if by doing so, the nation could exonerate itself from its sins. Conversely, the South pushed its internal conflicts aside to unite in defense of the “Southern way of life,” creating a homogenous, collective identity in contrast to the North during and after the war (Watts, 2010).

Today, speakers of Southern dialects inherit a myriad of historical, cultural, and political connotations to their speech, reinforced by film and TV representation. As a result, embracing the dialect can equate socially to “choosing a side” in a racialized culture war dating back centuries.

Group identity is at the heart of current tension in America's increasingly polarized

political and cultural arena, and language plays a fundamental role in those conflicting identities. My analysis will add to my field by connecting the last decade of changes in both American film and politics to the existing literature, painting an updated picture of the sociolinguistic identity inherited by my generation of white Southerners.

Methods

In this project, I will research a narrow selection of films, each of which reflects a larger cultural and political shift that occurred over the 20th century into the present. First, I will conduct a literature review of existing research on the performative nature of dialect as an integral part of white Southern identity, and how the films I select have represented and even dictated what that performance looks like over time. Next, I will conduct a comparative analysis using the political and historical context to trace the social motivations and cultural impact of dialectal film representation through the present day.

Collaboration with Faculty Mentor

Since my topic is interdisciplinary, I will lean on Dr. Albakry for the sociolinguistic elements and Dr. Pettit for the American history elements. As this is my first project of this scale, I will collaborate extensively with my mentors to achieve the highest quality research I can. I will meet twice a month with each faculty mentor to evaluate my findings, expand on ideas, and ask questions. They will also guide me with every step of the writing process, reviewing and critiquing each draft.

Timeline

- December 2023: Preliminary research, refine research question
- Jan.-Feb. 2024: Meet with Dr. Albakry and Dr. Pettit, draft thesis proposal,
continue background research
- February 12th: Submit proposal to Honors College
- February 21st: Thesis tutorial meeting
- April 4th: Submit URECA summer application
- April 8th: Submit revised proposal and paperwork
- April: Begin comparative analysis and literature review, develop thesis outline,
meet regularly with Dr. Albakry and Dr. Pettit
- May: Continue comparative analysis and literature review, begin thesis draft,
meet regularly with Dr. Albakry and Dr. Pettit
- June-Start of Term: Finalize comparative analysis, draft thesis, meet regularly with Dr.
Albakry and Dr. Pettit
- August-September: Polish thesis draft, meet regularly with Dr. Albakry and Dr. Pettit
- October 28th: Submit completed thesis draft
- Between Oct. 28th and Nov. 18th: Thesis defense
- December 4th: Submit final thesis and forms
- March 2025: Present thesis project at MTSU Scholars Week

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