

## SAN ANTONIO TALK

The Bible (Judges 6:12) contains one of the earliest accounts of people using pronunciation for identification purposes. The Ephraimites could not pronounce the [SHI] sound in the word *shibboleth*, saying instead [SI]. Therefore, the Ammonites chopped off their heads. Today English speakers use that word *shibboleth* as a reference to any sound or any word that identifies a particular group.

As I have written before, the pronunciation of the name of this city, *San Antonio*, serves as a quick and easy reference--at least in casual speech. (In formal speech, you see, we all conform to a more-or-less standardized set of rules.)

In casual speech, San Antonio delta southern speakers (think *shibboleth*; think aristocrat; think Alamo Heights) like that New Orleans sound: [*sanTONEyuh*]. Contrast this pronunciation with highlands southern speakers (think *shibboleth*; think cowboy and rodeo; think *kicker*), who like that [*sanTONE*] stuff. The rest of the folk use plain ol' lowlands southern [*sanTONEee-oh*].

That's for native speakers. We non-native speakers like to add a female name, *Ann*; you know, as in [*san-ann-TONE-yuh*], [*san-ann-TONE*], or [*san-ann-TONE-ee-oh*].

Language, of course, offers much more precise and abundant identification clues, rather than single shibboleths. Linguists can identify clusters of words, grammatical items, and pronunciation features that collectively identify particular groups. For example, in this column, I have previously mentioned other pronunciation

features that reinforce the uniqueness of the delta southern speakers, the [sanTONEyuh] folk.

In particular, these San Antonians also like to play baseball on a [filled] instead of a [feeld] *field*; they like to buy their clothes at a [sell] instead of a [sail] *sale*; they send their kids to [skull] instead of to [skool] *school*; and they pay their bills when [deeyuu] not when they are [duu] *due*.

Auburn University sociolinguist Cynthia Bernstein used linguistic data collected from an A&M University telephone poll in 1989 to help identify this cluster. In addition to the *filled*, *sell*, *skull*, *deeyuu*, pronunciation, she noted that these [sanTONEyuh] speakers also like to visit [YUUstuhn] instead of [HYUUstuhn] *Houston*. That's [yuu], as in the word *you*, instead of [hyuu], as in the name *Hugh*.

Got it? Certain native speakers of English here in San Antonio, in casual, unguarded conversation with each other, will say "I drove *due* east from *San Antonio* to a *field sale*, at a *school* in *Houston*" something like "Ah drove *dee-you* east from *San Toneya* to a *filled sell*, at a *skull* in *Youston*."

Just what kind of native speakers of San Antonio English am I talking about? Well according to Cynthia, these over-forties, Anglo and African-American men and women share their pronunciation features with other mostly rural men and women all the way from Austin to Houston, include all education levels, and--are you ready for this?--are all quite wealthy.

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05/06/96