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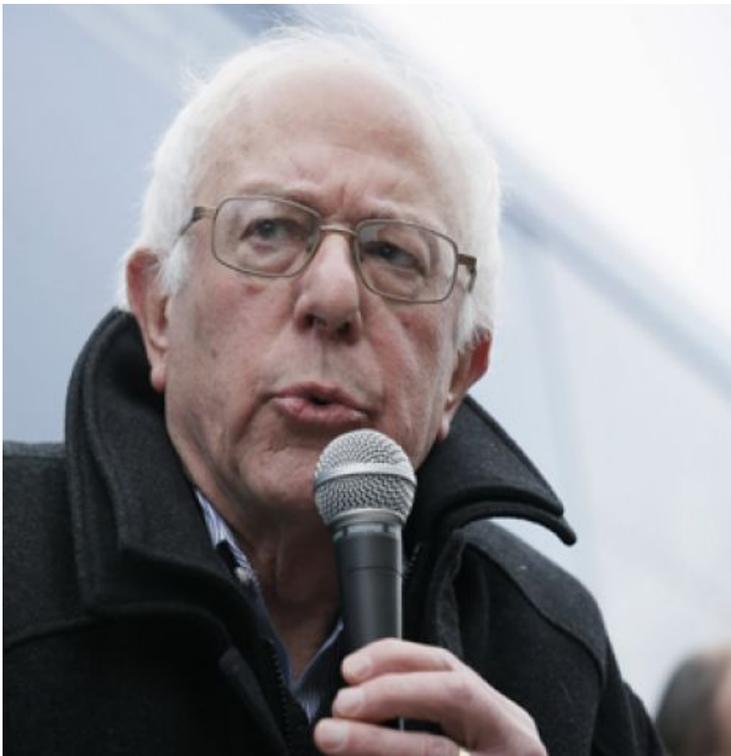
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# Bernie and the Donald tawk the tawk

**The candidates' New York accents make them seem yoman**

By **Kyrie O'Connor** | February 15, 2016 | Updated: February 15, 2016 3:39pm



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If you've been baffled by the verbal styles of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, it's probably because you don't understand New York, the city where both of them were born.

'We're real, no niceties,' says Jake Dell, owner of the famous Katz's Deli in Manhattan. "There's no 'bless your heart'," he says. "We prefer 'eff you'." Except he didn't say "eff."

Dell, whose deli is on East Houston Street — and that's Houston with a house in it — and is not related to the eponymous Montrose deli, says the distinctive New York accent is the product of "years of generational training."

Sanders, Dell says, sounds like his grandfather, "hardcore Brooklyn," while Trump, who is from the borough of Queens, speaks with a moneyed edge.

That's a pretty accurate assessment, says William Labov, a professor of linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania who has studied New York speech.

"They're both New Yorkers," he says, "But Trump went to private schools and a military academy. He's a member of the upper class, and that's the way he relates to the New York dialect."

Sanders is different. "Sanders went to public schools, and he was part of the upwardly mobile middle class."



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Cawfee. (Photo by [Banjo D](#), via [Flickr](#). CC by 2.0.)

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One of the much-parodied speech elements common to both presidential candidates is the dropping of the initial h in words such as "huge" and "human," which come out as "yooj" and "yooman."

"It's one of the special features of New York English," says Jennifer Nycz, an assistant professor of linguistics at Georgetown University.

One place where they differ significantly, she says, is in pronouncing the r's in words like fear and future. Sanders' come out as "feah," a pattern that Nycz says is termed "non-rhotic."

Labov has monitored this particular feature, and he says Trump pronounces about 95 percent of those r's, while Sanders says only about 20 percent. "Trump avoids the extreme patterns for New York," he says.



Photo: Jason DeCrow, Associated Press



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The Lawn Guyland Expressway.

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All over the country, including the South, those lost r's are being pronounced far more than in the past. The change is slow in New York and Boston, but fast everywhere else.

Before the 1930's, Labov says, non-rhotic speech was common in the upper class — think Franklin Roosevelt — because the rich were imitating the British, but that tumbled rapidly.

Another place to look, say Nycz and Labov, is the so-called "cot/caught" pairing. About half the country pronounces each of the pair differently, and half say them the same way. (The trend line point to sameness.) Classic New Yorkers say them differently, with the hardcore, says Nycz, adding a little mustard, so "caught" comes out not just as "kawt" but as "kwawt."

That's dying, though.

Both men, and all politicians, walk a thin line. They must, says Labov, retain enough of their birth accent to seem down-to-earth, but elevate it enough to seem as if they are capable of taking on complex problems. (For Trump, Nycz says, the accent helps him seem "straightforward and tough.")

"Most have retained their earlier speech patterns, but they are torn between two goals," he says. Both Presidents Johnson and Kennedy managed to work within that framework and, Labov says, Bill Clinton was exceptionally well-balanced.

Southern and New York accents tend to be seen in surveys as "the worst type of American English," Nycz says.

In any case, says Labov, both men have to fight the perception of New York-speakers across the country. "People see New York speech as belonging to either comedians or gangsters."

Even though Sanders has lived in Vermont for decades and Trump travels all over, it's not surprising that they haven't dropped their accents. Ways of speaking, Labov says, tend to firm up in high school.

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Nycz, who is from New Jersey, sometimes finds herself using her best Jersey. When something is big, she says it's huge. When it's really big, "it's yooj."

Without making a political judgment, Labov can tell one thing from Sanders' and Trump's speech: "Put very simply, Sanders is more of a New Yorker than Trump."

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**Kyrie O'Connor**

Sr. Editor / Columnist,  
Houston Chronicle