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Pe-can or Pe-can’t: The Pecan-troversy

One of the great Thanksgiving controversies is how to pronounce “pecan”. A pecan tree is “a large hickory…that has roughish bark and hard but brittle wood and is widely grown in the warmer parts of the U.S. and in Mexico for its edible nut” (“Pecan”). The pecan nut is commonly used to make pies and a candied treat, but also has many health benefits including preventing hair loss, lowers blood pressure, reduces chance of stroke, has anti-aging properties, and much more (Nichols). The big controversy comes from how to pronounce it: pi-ˈkän or pē-ˌkan. It should be pronounced pi-ˈkän.

Dialect varies in different geographical areas – whether a person is from the South, the East Coast, the West Coast, the North, the Midwest, or the Southwest. According to James Lantolf, a Penn State professor of Spanish and linguistics and the director of the Center for Language Acquisition, “’First of all, the patterns of settlement when the area was first discovered and developed have a huge impact’" (Etter). Furthermore, Lantolf says, “’A region's geographic location also has a direct influence on the development of a local tongue…[however,] where there is no contact between regions, entire words, languages and vernaculars can grow and evolve independently’” (Etter). In addition, Lantolf goes on to say that dialect can vary between class structure and education (Etter). The word pecan is one of the words that is pronounced differently based on geographical location. However, according to Joshua Katz, a doctoral student at NC State, the vast majority of the United States pronounces pecan “pi-ˈkän” (Yancey).

Additionally, there can be emotional attachments to pronunciation. Hearing a word or its pronunciation can make a person feel closer to home. My sister, for example, when living in Chicago, would feel a connection to a stranger when she overhead them say “y’all” because we are from Texas and y’all is a commonly-used word in Texas.

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