Researchers put accent on diversity in speech project

By Stephanie Anderson

The Australian accent has been subjected to global ridicule for many years but researchers are beginning to take it seriously.

Universities across Australia are taking part in the national AusTalk initiative, which will record and document the diversity of the Australian accent by collecting voice samples of everyday citizens.

University of Canberra researcher Yuko Kinoshita said the project would allow researchers to examine the different dialects throughout the country and define the characteristics of the Australian accent.

“We talk about the Australian accent but we don’t have enough data to really define what it means or how Australians speak,” she said.

Researchers from UC, the The Australian National University and nine other institutions will spend six months gathering voice recordings of 1000 Australians from urban, regional and rural areas of the nation.

Each participant will contribute on three separate occasions by reading words and sentences, having a conversation and playing a game with another participant.

The project will also help deliver technological advances in speech recognition and speaker identification, affecting everything from banking services to ordering pizza over the phone.

Dr Kinoshita said it would also boost development for forensic voice comparison by giving researchers access to spontaneous speech recorded on a number of occasions.

The project will also contribute facial expressions to the database, which Dr Kinoshita said would enable researchers to develop a means of gauging the age, gender and mood of a caller.

“One of the projects that this can be used for is recognising people’s emotions from facial expressions which could be applied for many things like depression detection,” she said.

“If it could detect depression from vocal expression remotely, we could provide better support for those people.”

Speakers with foreign accents will also be recorded for the project. Canberra residents are invited to contribute their voice to the AusTalk initiative, which is supported by the Australian Research Council.

For more details visit http://austalk.edu.au/