

Language change at the intersections of movement, economy, and orientation

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MSU Linguistics Colloquium Series
October 17, 2025



lap3.libs.uga.edu/u/jstanle

GSV

GAZETTEER OF SOUTHERN VOWELS

This site was created to allow you to interact with data extracted from the Digital Archive of Southern Speech. Please report bugs, suggestions, or comments to Joey Stanley at joeystan@uga.edu.

WHERE DO THE DATA COME FROM?

The Digital Archive of the Southern Speech (DASS) is an audio corpus of semi-spontaneous linguistic atlas interviews (Kretzschmar *et al.* 2013) derived from the Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States (Pederson *et al.* 1986). It contains speech from 64 natives (34 men and 30 women, born 1886–1965) of 8 Southern US states. This sample contains a mixture of ethnicities, social classes, education levels, and ages.

As of October 2019, transcription, forced alignment, and acoustic analysis of DASS has been completed. For insight into the methods, see Renwick *et al.* (2017) and Olsen *et al.* (2017). We use the [Montreal Forced Aligner](#) for forced alignment and FAVE for formant extraction. We have removed all filters from FAVE so that *all* vowel tokens, whether they be from unstressed syllables or stopwords, are included here. Currently, this site displays 1,673,205 vowel tokens from 74 speakers.

You may download the audio, transcriptions, TextGrids, speaker bios, and other information at [DASS portion](#) of the Linguistic Atlas Project website (lap.uga.edu).

The corpus can be licensed from the [Linguistic Data Consortium](#), while the [Linguistic Atlas Project hosts it](#) via mp3s, speaker biographies, and more.

A Comparison of Turn-of-the-Century and Turn-of-the-Millennium Speech in Georgia

Joseph A. Stanley

Brigham Young University

Abstract

The Elsewhere Shift, defined here as the lowering and retraction of the front lax vowels, is a now-widespread phenomenon in North American English. However, few studies document its presence in the South. This study analyzes speech from two corpora of Georgians, one representing contemporary speech and another representing language from a century ago, to demonstrate the presence of the Elsewhere Shift in the South. Generalized additive mixed-effects models fit to formant measurements extracted from these corpora suggest a recession of traditional Southern dialect features (glide-weakening in price, the Southern Vowel Shift) and the adoption of the Elsewhere Shift (the low back merger, retracted front lax vowels), both in relative position in the F1–F2 space as well as formant trajectory shape. In addition to providing the first real-time analysis of English in urban Georgia, this study confirms the Elsewhere Shift's status as a pan-North American dialect feature.

Proceedings of the 6th Annual Linguistics Conference at UGA

Published January 19, 2022

Boomer Peak or Gen X Cliff? From SVS to LBMS in Georgia English

Margaret E. L. Renwick¹, Joseph A. Stanley², Jon Forrest¹ and Lelia Glass³

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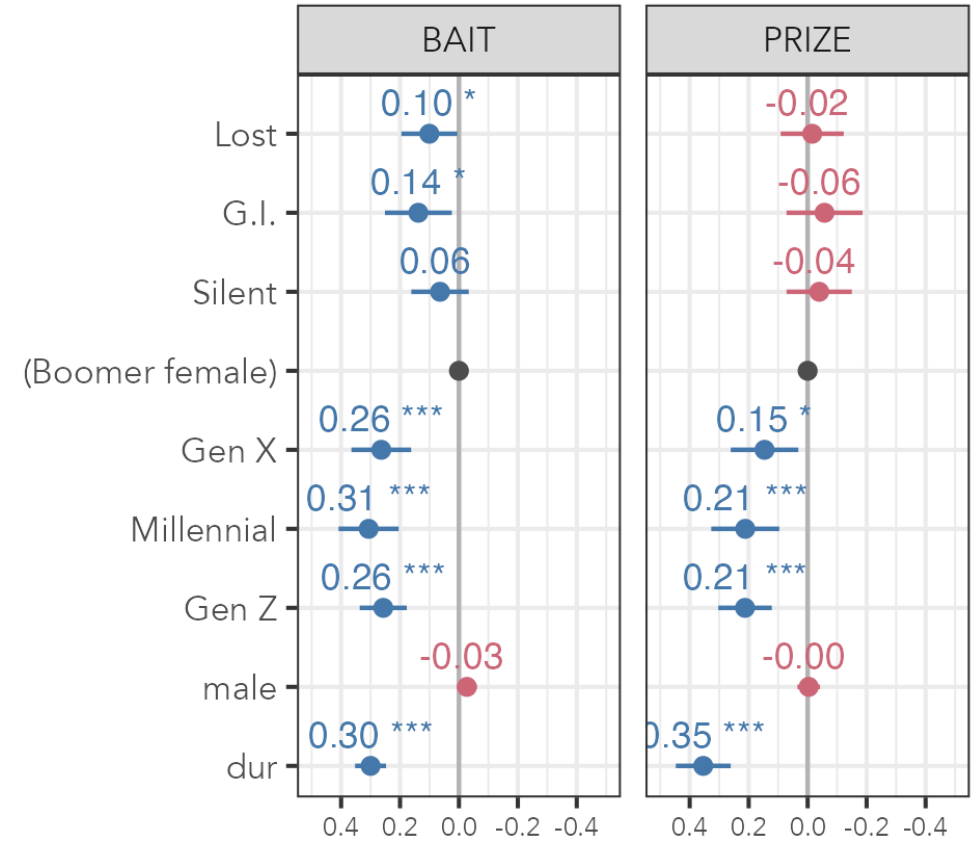
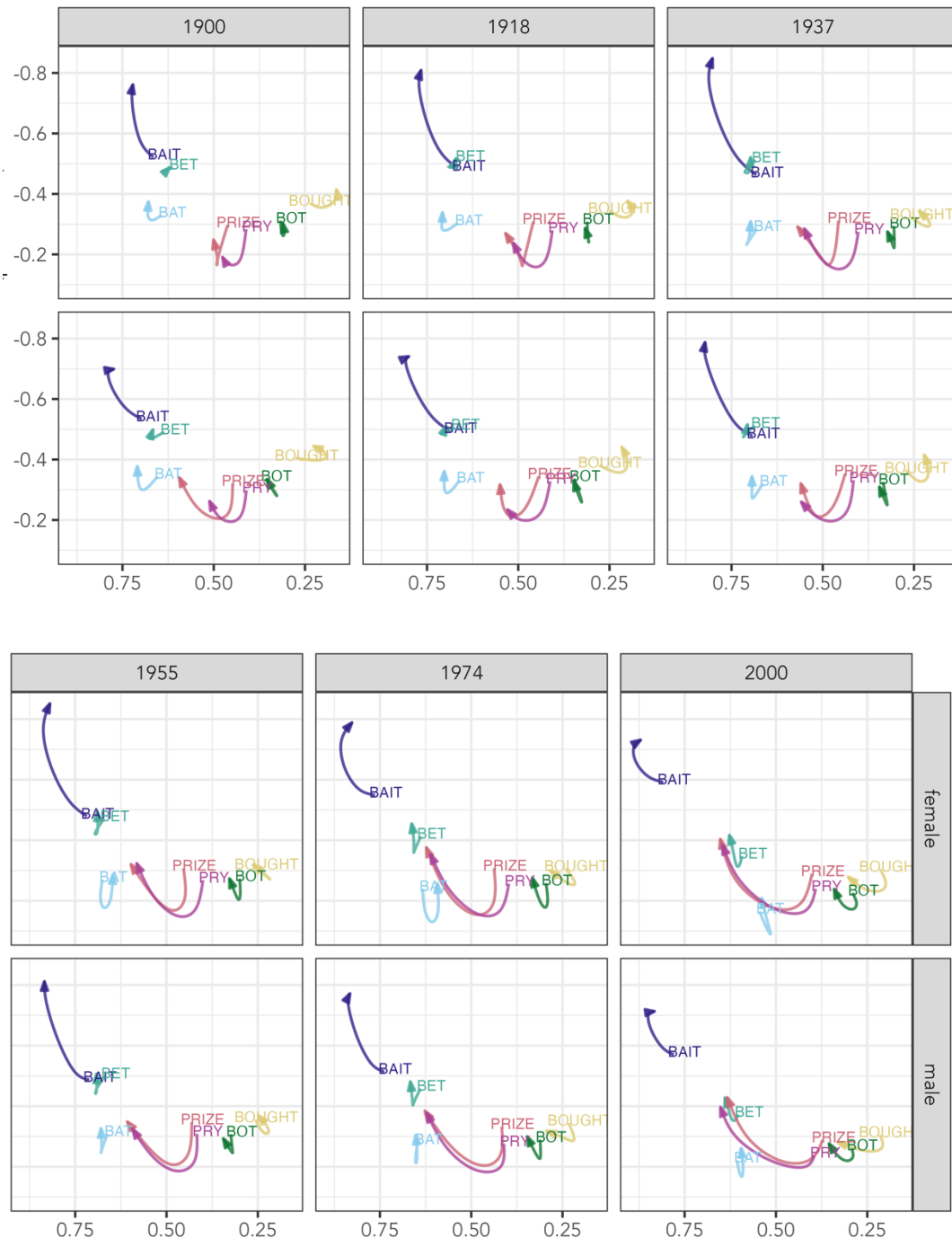
Abstract

The late twentieth century in the United States marks the decline of regional vowel systems like the Northern Cities Shift and the Southern Vowel Shift, replaced by supralocal systems like the Low-Back-Merger Shift. We chart such change in acoustic data from seven generations of White speakers ($n = 135$) in the Southeastern state of Georgia. We analyze front vowels affected by both the SVS and LBMS (DRESS, TRAP), plus PRICE and FACE, known respectively to monophthongize and centralize in the SVS, and LBMS-implicated LOT/THOUGHT. The SVS is most advanced among Georgians born in the mid-twentieth century, particularly in FACE-centralization. In Generation X, retraction of front lax vowels begins, leading toward the LBMS. These results, which hold across genders and education levels, support findings that regional vowel systems declined precipitously following a Gen X “cliff,” raising questions about how such language changes are rooted in demographic transformations of that time period.

Keywords: sociophonetics; US Englishes; regional variation; generational change; GAMMs

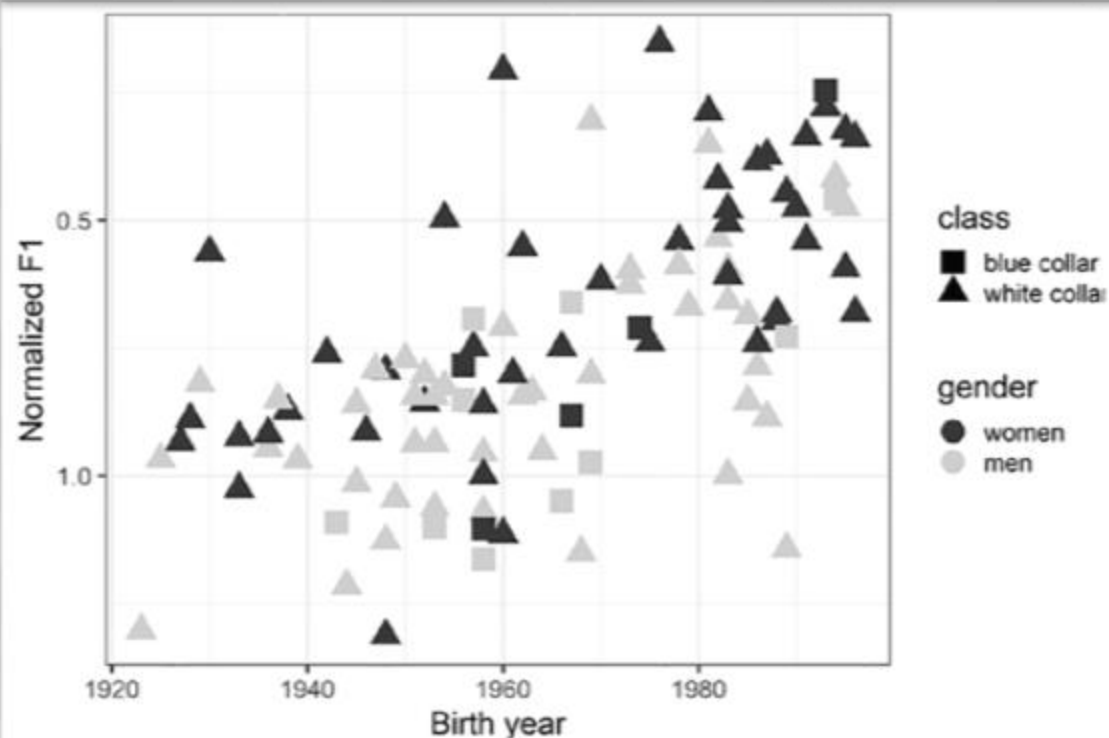
This paper investigates variation in spoken language across seven generations of English speakers in the southern US state of Georgia. As in many areas of the United States, rapid demographic shifts during the late twentieth century have contributed to increased urbanization and diversity, particularly in the Atlanta metropolitan area. These developments are accompanied by linguistic changes, detectable in speakers' vowel systems, characterized most straightforwardly as a preference by younger speakers for supralocal patterns like the Low-Back-Merger Shift (LBMS; Becker, 2019), rather than regionalized configurations. Although young speakers in

All vowels



Placing /aw/ Retraction in the Retreat from the Southern Vowel Shift in Raleigh, North Carolina

Marie Bissell 

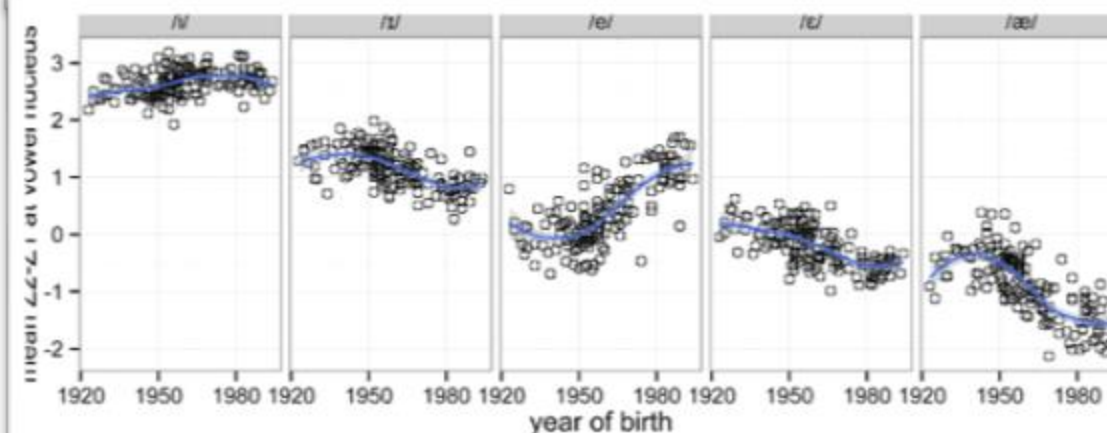


Social network cohesion and the retreat from Southern vowels in Raleigh

Published online by Cambridge University Press: 03 May 2017

Robin Dodsworth and Richard A. Benton

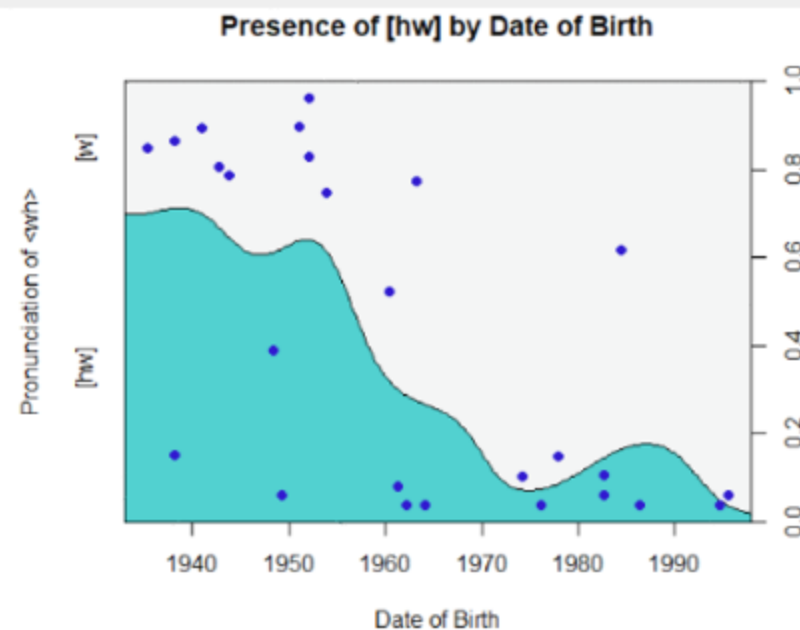
[Show author details](#)



THE DISTRIBUTION OF [ɹ]: AN ACOUSTIC ANALYSIS OF SOCIOPHONETIC FACTORS GOVERNING THE *WINE-WHINE* MERGER IN SOUTHERN AMERICAN ENGLISH

by

Keiko Bridwell



THE RISE AND FALL OF THE NORTHERN CITIES SHIFT: SOCIAL AND LINGUISTIC REORGANIZATION OF *TRAP* IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY LANSING, MICHIGAN

MONICA NESBITT

Indiana University

ABSTRACT: Recent acoustic analyses examining English in the North American Great Lakes region show that the area's characteristic vowel chain shift, the Northern Cities Shift (NCS), is waning. Attitudinal analyses suggest that the NCS has lost prestige in some NCS cities, such that it is no longer regarded as "standard American English." Sociocultural and temporal accounts of capital loss and dialect decline remain unexplored, however. This article examines F1, F2, and diphthongal quality of *TRAP* produced by 36 White speakers (18 women and 18 men) in one NCS city—Lansing, Michigan—over the course of the twentieth century. Results show that *TRAP* realization is conditioned by gender and birth year, such that women led the change toward NCS realizations into the middle of the twentieth century and then away from them thereafter. These findings reflect the backdrop of deindustrialization during this time of linguistic reorganization in Lansing and show that as the regional industry—(auto) manufacturing—loses prestige, so does the regional variant, raised *TRAP*. This article expands our understanding of North American dialectology by adding the importance of deindustrialization and the Baby Boomer to Generation X generational transition to our discussion of regional dialect maintenance.

KEYWORDS: North American English, dialectology, sociophonetics, dialect attrition

RECENT STUDIES SUGGEST that the Northern Cities Shift (NCS) is in decline and that young, middle-class speakers are adopting the Low-Back-Merger Shift (LBMS) in, for example, Lansing, Michigan (Wagner et al. 2016) and Syracuse, New York (Driscoll and Lape 2015). The adoption of the LBMS has had consequences for many of the vowels involved in the NCS, including the focus of the present study: "short-a," /æ/, henceforth *TRAP*.¹ In NCS cities, the regional variant of *TRAP*—raising of the nucleus in all phonological environments—has been replaced with the supraregional nasal system whereby the nucleus of *TRAP* is raised and fronted only before nasal consonants.

American Speech, Vol. 96, No. 3, August 2021 DOI 10.1215/00031283-8791754
Copyright 2021 by the American Dialect Society



“[T]he Baby Boomer—Gen X transition appears to be a pivotal transition throughout the country.”

Nesbitt (2021:359)

Generational Phases: Toward the Low-Back Merger in Cooperstown, New York

Aaron J. Dinkin¹ ●

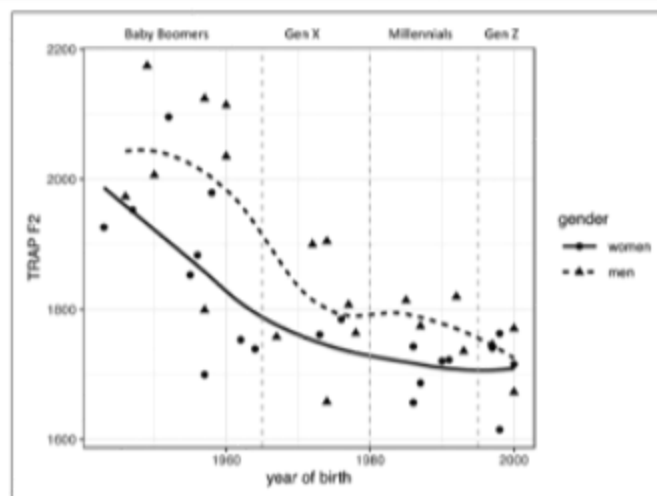


Figure 11. Mean TRAP F2 by Year of Birth and Gender

Contextualizing reversal: Local dynamics of the Northern Cities Shift in a Chicago community

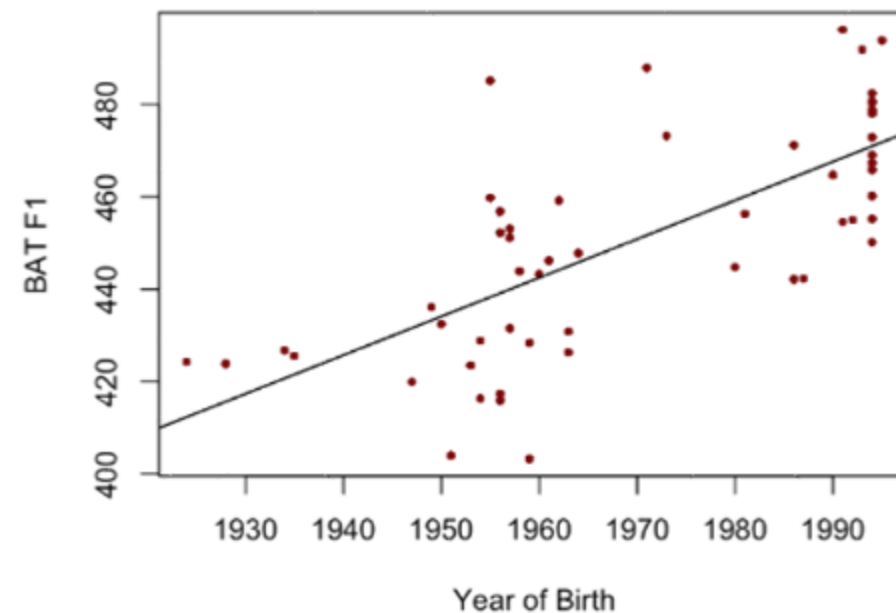
Annette D'Onofrio ✉, Jaime Benheim

First published: 13 December 2019 | <https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12398> | Citations: 31

Reversal of the Northern Cities Shift in Syracuse, New York

Anna Driscoll and Emma Lape^{*}

Birth Year versus BAT F1 means

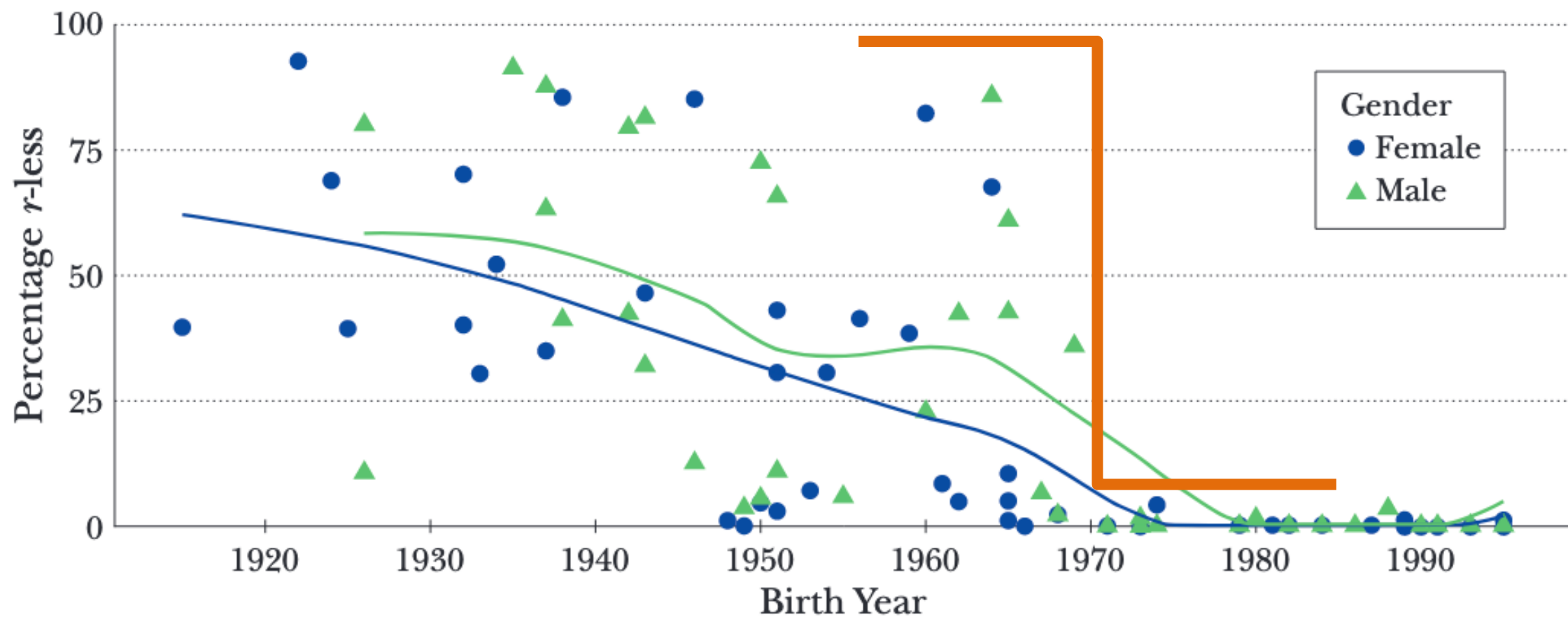


Reversal and Re-Organization of the Northern Cities Shift in Michigan

Suzanne Evans Wagner, Alexander Mason, Monica Nesbitt,
Erin Pevan and Matt Savage^{*}

Eastern New England: Speaker Average r -less by Birth Year and Gender

(based on [Stanford 2019](#), fig. 8.1)



Generations, lifespans, and the zeitgeist

JOSEF FRUEHWALD
University of Edinburgh

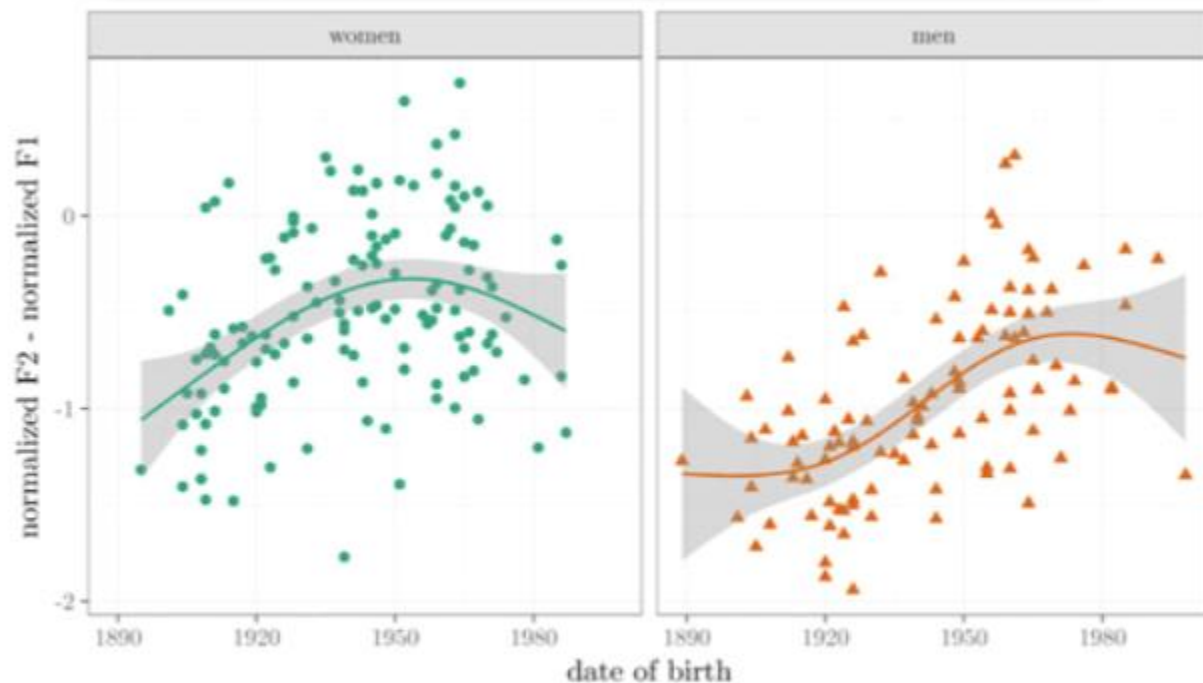


FIGURE 6. Basic pattern for /aw/ in Apparent Time.

It's not just the Valley Girls: A study of California English

Leanne Hinton, Birch Moonwomon, Sue Bremner, Herb Luthin,
Mary Van Clay, Jean Lerner, Hazel Corcoran

University of California, Berkeley

A close-up of Mr. Incredible's face from the Pixar movie 'The Incredibles'. He has a wide-eyed, questioning expression, looking slightly to the right. He is wearing his signature black-rimmed glasses and has a thick brown mustache. The background is a blurred interior of a car, with a side-view mirror visible on the right.

COINCIDENCE?

I THINK NOT!

“As future studies look to the Baby Boomer–Gen X transition as a pivotal moment of linguistic change, we must also consider other **important social changes of the period**, such as the increase in **(geographic and economic) mobility**, the rise of television and mediated speech, and so on.

It is my contention that all of these aspects of lifestyle changes have contributed to the drastic changes to the North American regional map that appear to be unfolding.”

Nesbitt (2021:359), *emphasis added*

MOVEMENT, ECONOMY, ORIENTATION

Twentieth-Century Shifts
in North American Language

Edited by

JOSEPH A. STANLEY
MARGARET E. L. RENWICK
MONICA NESBITT

Publication of the American Dialect Society 109

Supplement to *American Speech*, Volume 99

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The Rest of Today's Outline



Generational Theory

- 7 generations of 20th century America



How these affect language, particularly in mid-century America

- Movement
- Economy
- Orientation



And if there's time...

- Alternative explanations
- Exceptions to the mid-century pivot point

Generational Theory

"A provocative, erudite, and engaging analysis of the rhythms of American life"
—*Newsweek*

GENERATIONS

GENERATIONS

THE
HISTORY
OF AMERICA'S
FUTURE,
1584 to
2069
William
Strauss
& Neil
Howe

◀ "The Crisis of 2020 will be a major turning point in American history and an adrenaline-filled moment of trial. At its climax, Americans will feel that the fate of posterity—for generations to come—hangs in the balance."
(Straus & Howe 1990(!):382)

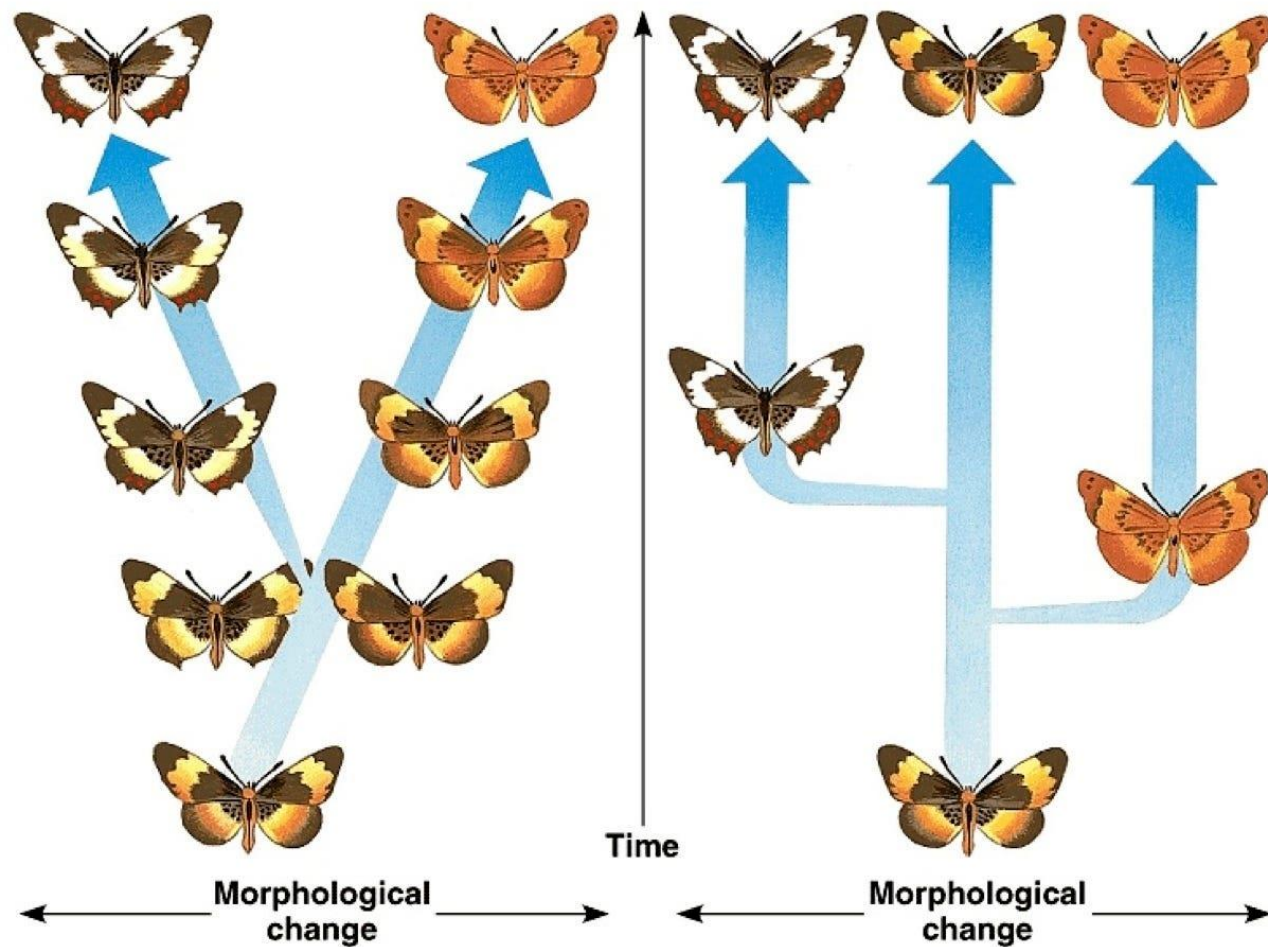
The Real Differences Between
Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X,
Boomers, and Silents –
and What They Mean
for The Future

generations

JEAN M. TWENGE, PhD

author of *iGen*

	Lost	G.I.	Silent	Boomer	Gen X	Millennial	Gen Z
birth years	1883–1899	1900–1924	1925–1945	1946–1964	1965–1982	1983–1996	1997–2012?
childhood	Industrialization, Immigration	WWI, Influenza	Great Depression, WWII	Postwar affluence, desegregation, Korean War	Vietnam War, Civil Rights	Tech boom, Sept 11	Social media, Recession, Covid-19
early adult	WWI, Influenza	Great Depression, WWII	Postwar affluence, desegregation, Korean War	Vietnam War, Civil Rights	Tech boom, Sept 11	Social media, Recession, Covid-19	AI
mid adult	Great Depression, WWII	Postwar affluence, desegregation, Korean War	Vietnam War, Civil Rights	Tech boom, Sept 11	Social media, Recession, Covid-19	AI	
later adult	Postwar affluence, desegregation, Korean War	Vietnam War, Civil Rights	Tech boom, Sept 11	Social media, Recession, Covid-19	AI		



(a) Gradualism model

(b) Punctuated equilibrium model

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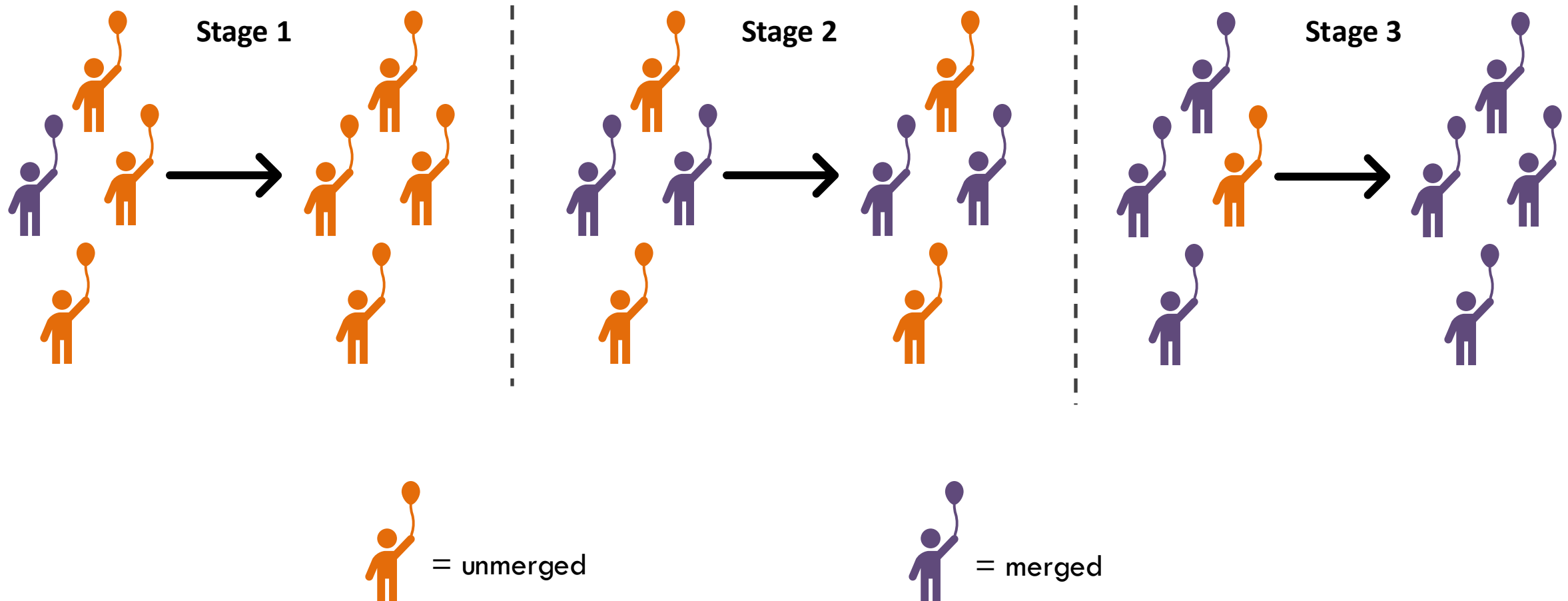
The **rise** and **fall** of **languages**

R.M.W. Dixon

Movement



“[C]hanging community demographics trigger merger, as more children with merged family backgrounds enter the mix combining to form each peer group as it begins school.” (Johnson 2010:177)



20th Century Movements

- Great Migration (x2)
- Drought in Dust Bowl leading to westward migration
- WWII led people to move to urban areas for wartime employment
- Post-WWII led to suburbs and more inter-state movement
- Interstate highway system
- White Flight and defacto segregation; later on, gentrification
- Economic downturns in 1970s–1980s lead to out-migration from Rust Belt
- Reverse Great Migration
- Growth in Sunbelt states

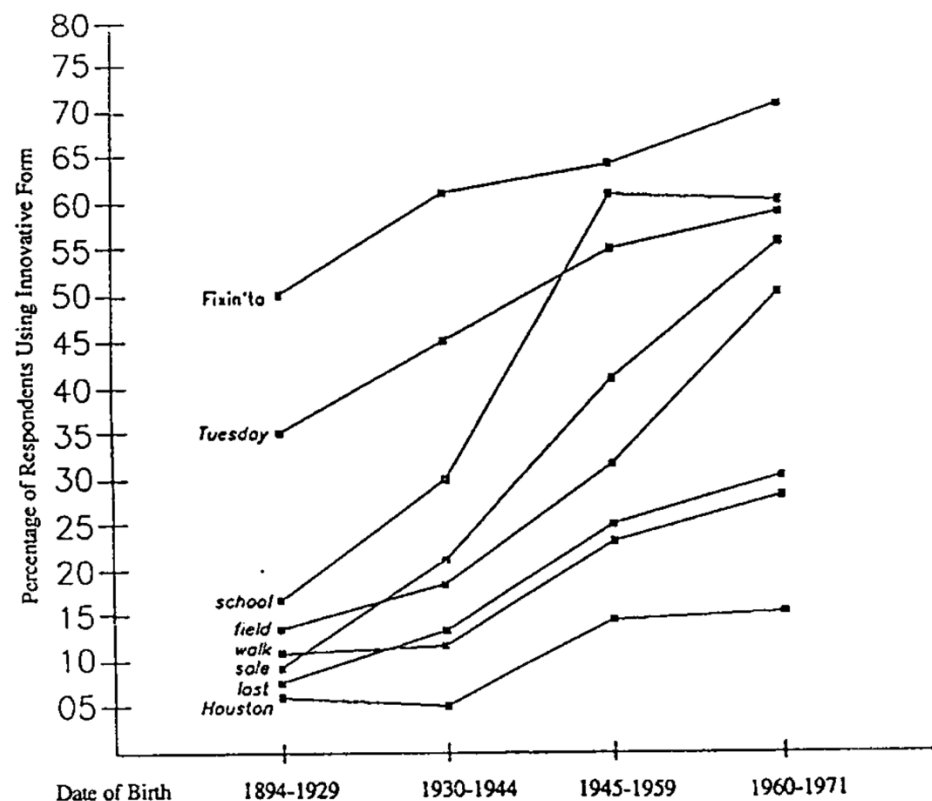


Figure 3. Apparent Time Distributions of Linguistic Innovations in Texas

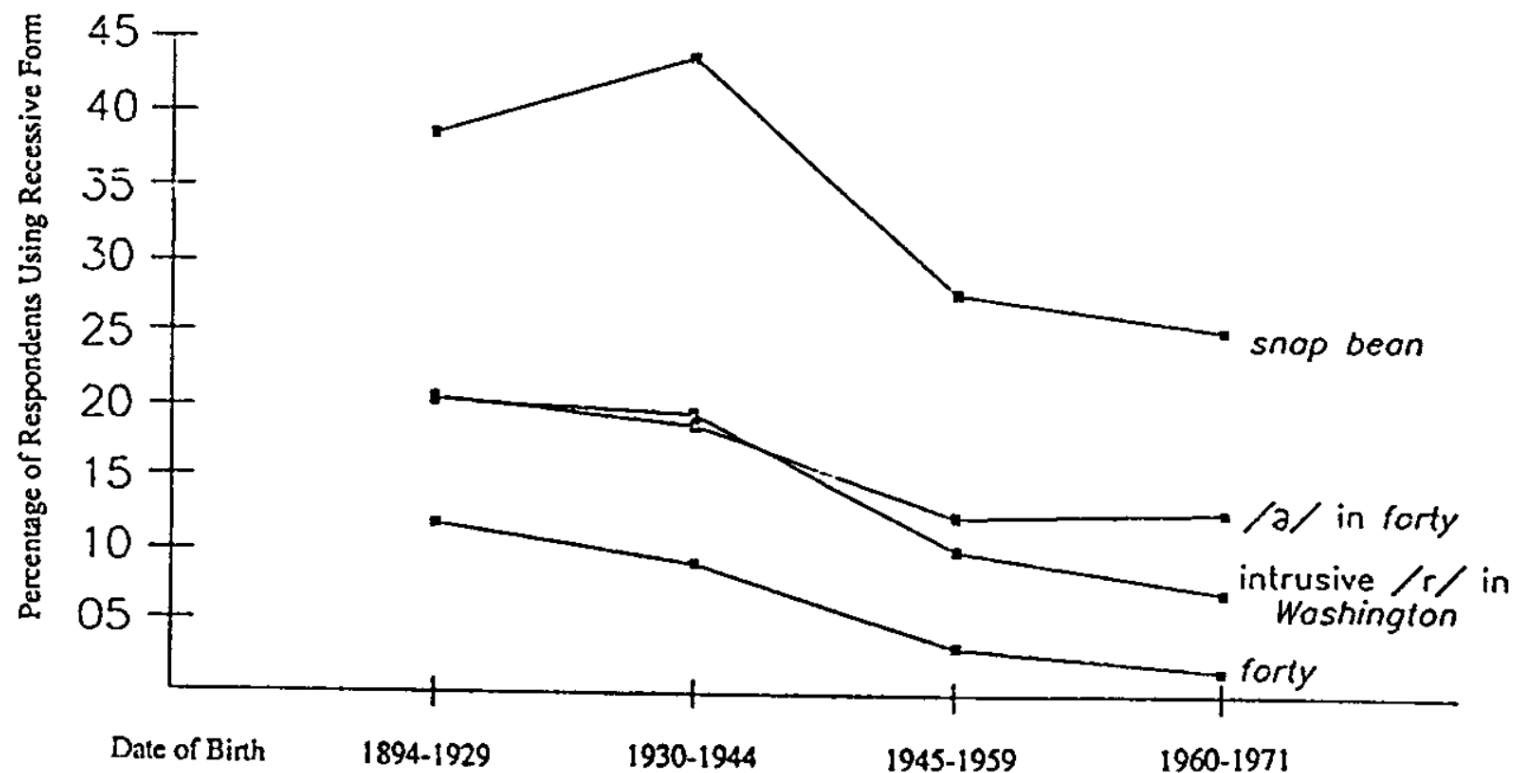


Figure 4. Apparent Time Distribution of Recessive Forms in Texas

“While it would be inaccurate to say that World War II ‘caused’ the changes that have been taking place in Texas and Oklahoma, the apparent time distributions clearly suggest that **the war and its consequent**

demographic and social developments were catalysts for those changes.” (Bailey, Wilke, Tillery, & Sand 1996:440)

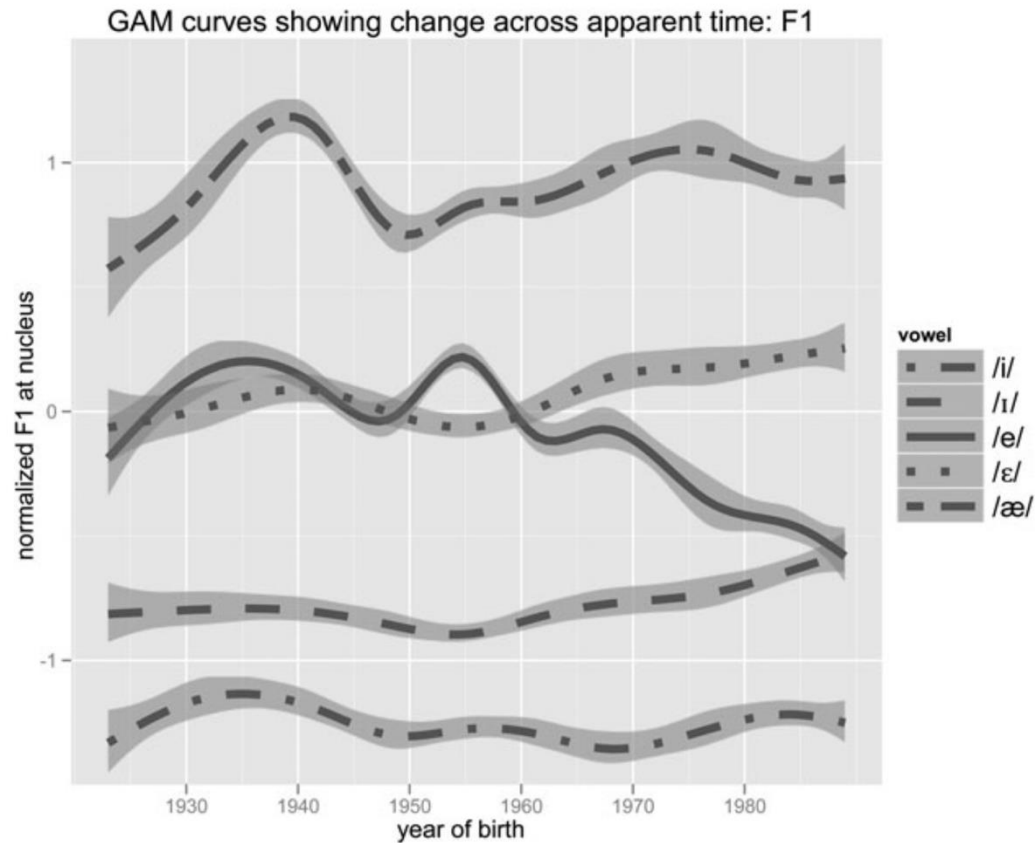


FIGURE 7. Change in F1 across continuous apparent time.

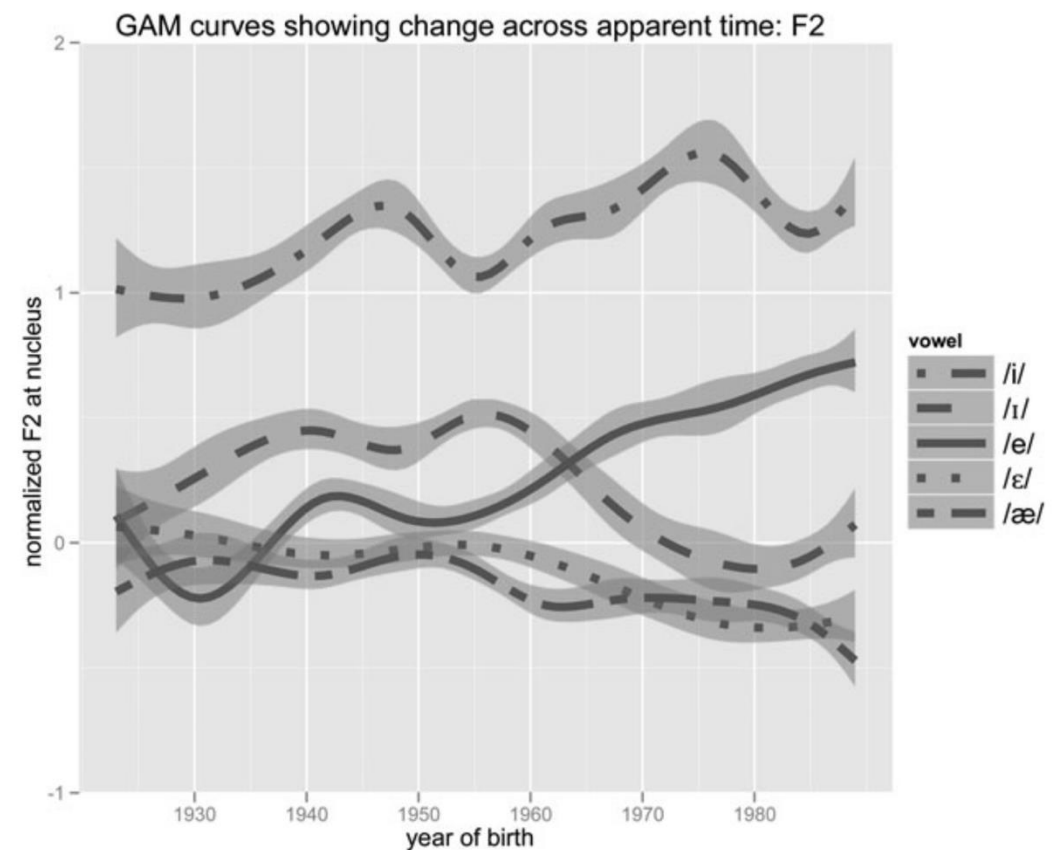
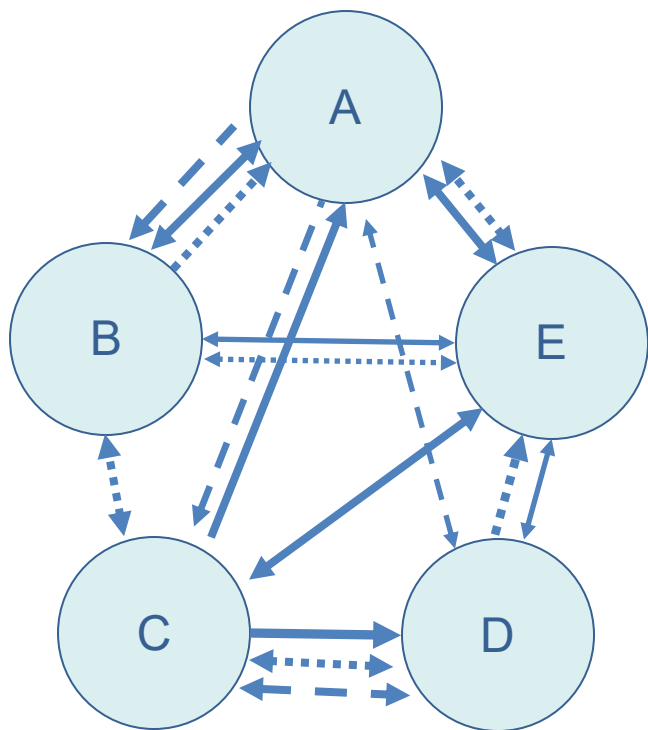
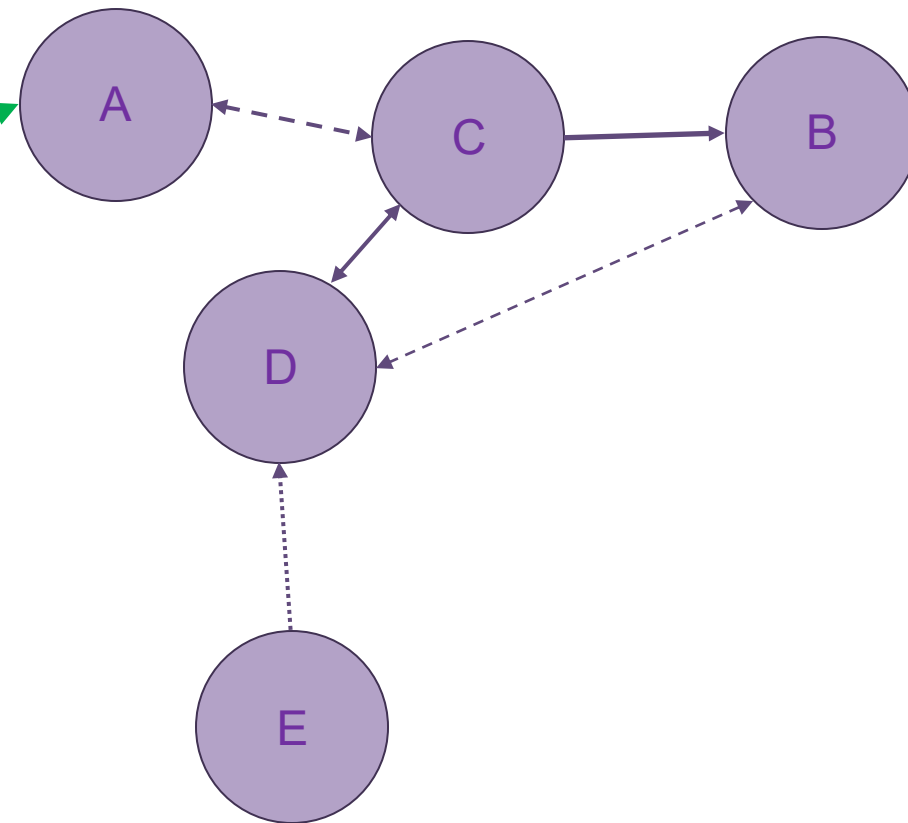


FIGURE 8. Change in F2 across continuous apparent time.

“Leveling began approximately with the speakers born between 1955 and 1960, who were the first to attend elementary school **with children of the non-Southern migrants.**” (Dodsworth & Kohn 2012:233)



Dense, multiplex networks lack many weak ties, so they have little access to linguistic innovations.



Weak ties expose people to new trends from more distant people who have exposure to different information.

~~Movement~~ Social Networks?

Economy

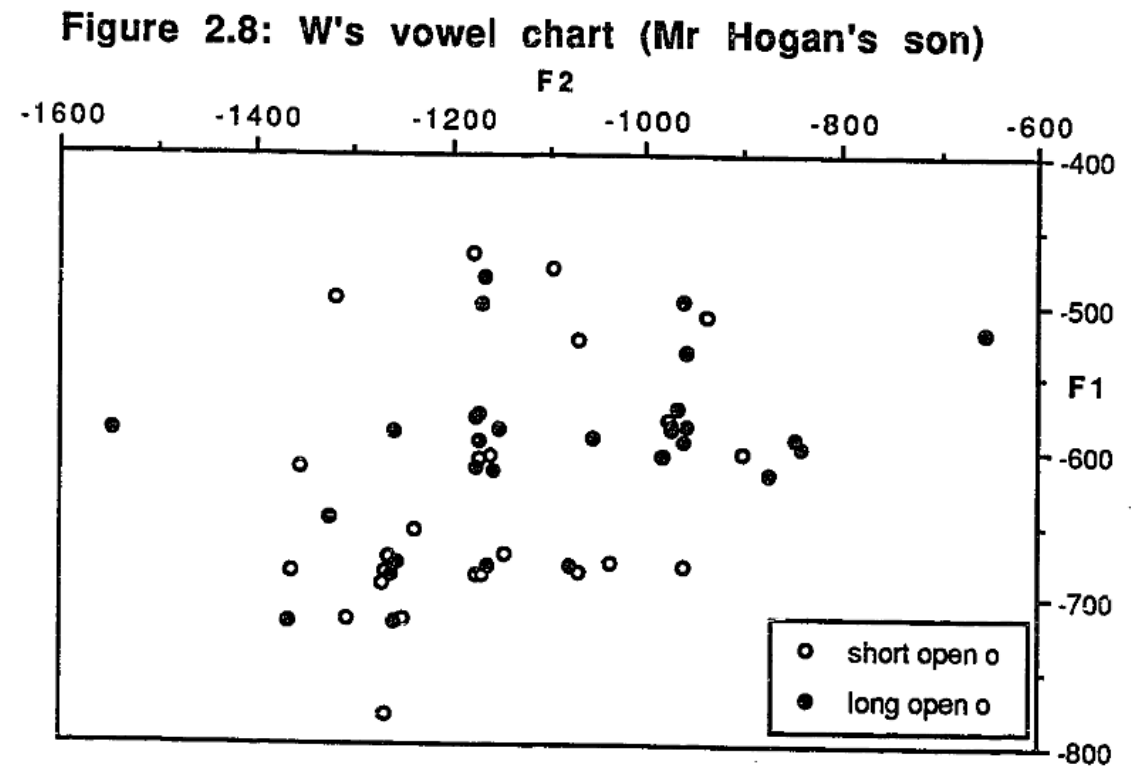
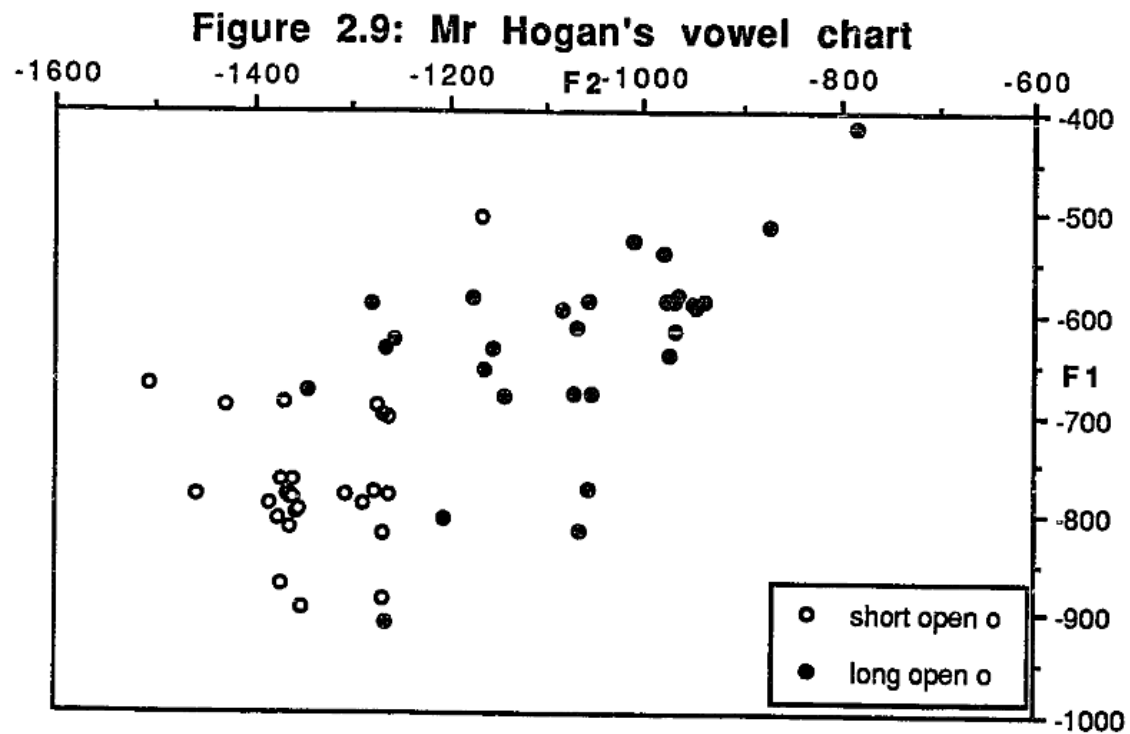
Major 20th Century Economic Shifts

Earlier 20th century:

- Two world wars
- Great Depression
- Automated manufacturing
- Labor laws in response to unions' demands and protests
- Government oversight during WWII
- Post war prosperity
- Increased suburbanization and demand for household products

Later 20th century:

- mergers and buyouts (including in agriculture)
- outsourcing labor
- international relations
- political movements
- recession in the 1980s
- shift from more unionized Rust Belt to less unionized Sun Belt
- increased service, sales, and tourism industries
- technological advances



“[T]he merger of /a/ and /ɔ/ in the mining towns of eastern Pennsylvania was triggered by a large influx of foreign-born immigrants into these towns around the turn of the century. [...] The sudden and complete merger of /a/ and /ɔ/ in Tamaqua may have been **triggered by contact with speakers who lacked the relevant distinction.**” (Herold 1990:148)

FIGURE 9

Average F₂ Values of TRAP by Generational Cohort and Gender in Twentieth-Century Lansing: Lansing Speech Sample plus Millennial Speakers

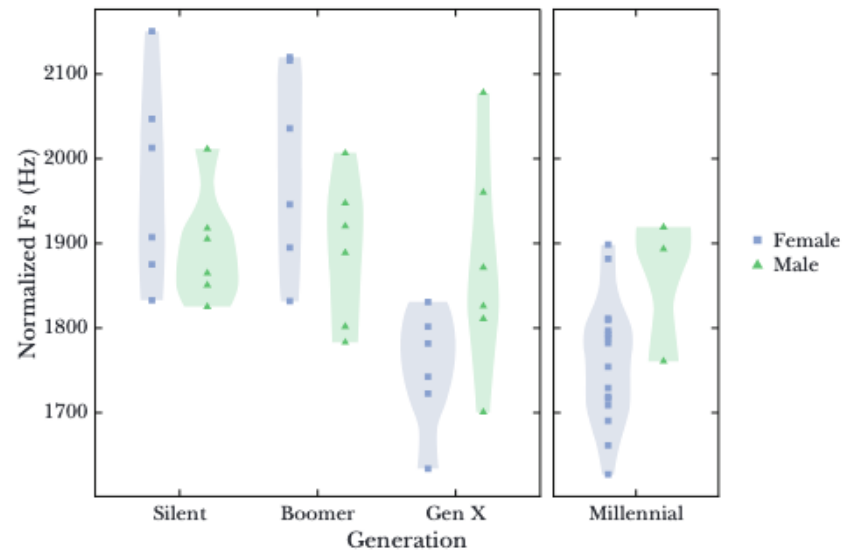
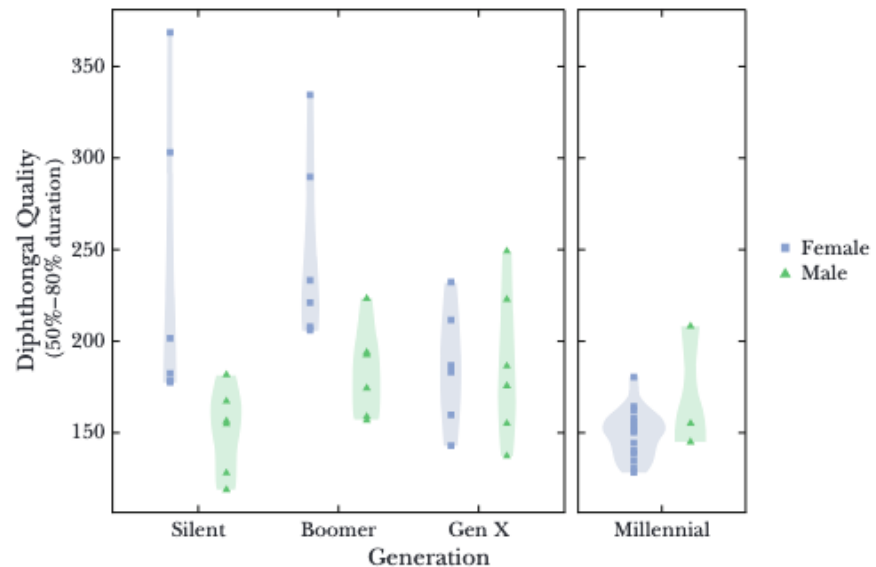
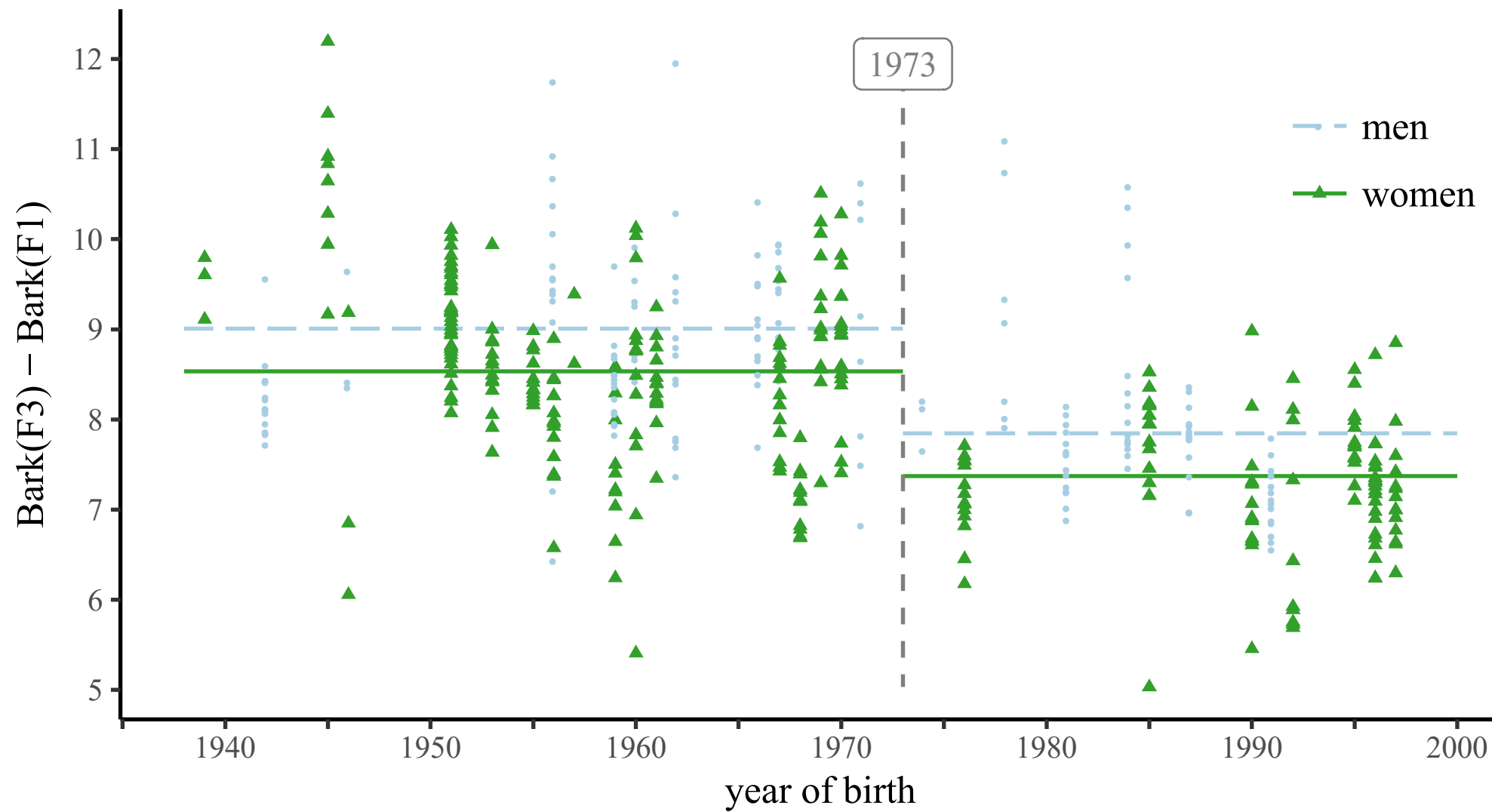


FIGURE 11

Average Diphthongal Quality Values of TRAP by Generational Cohort and Gender in Twentieth-Century Lansing: Lansing Speech Sample plus Millennial Speakers

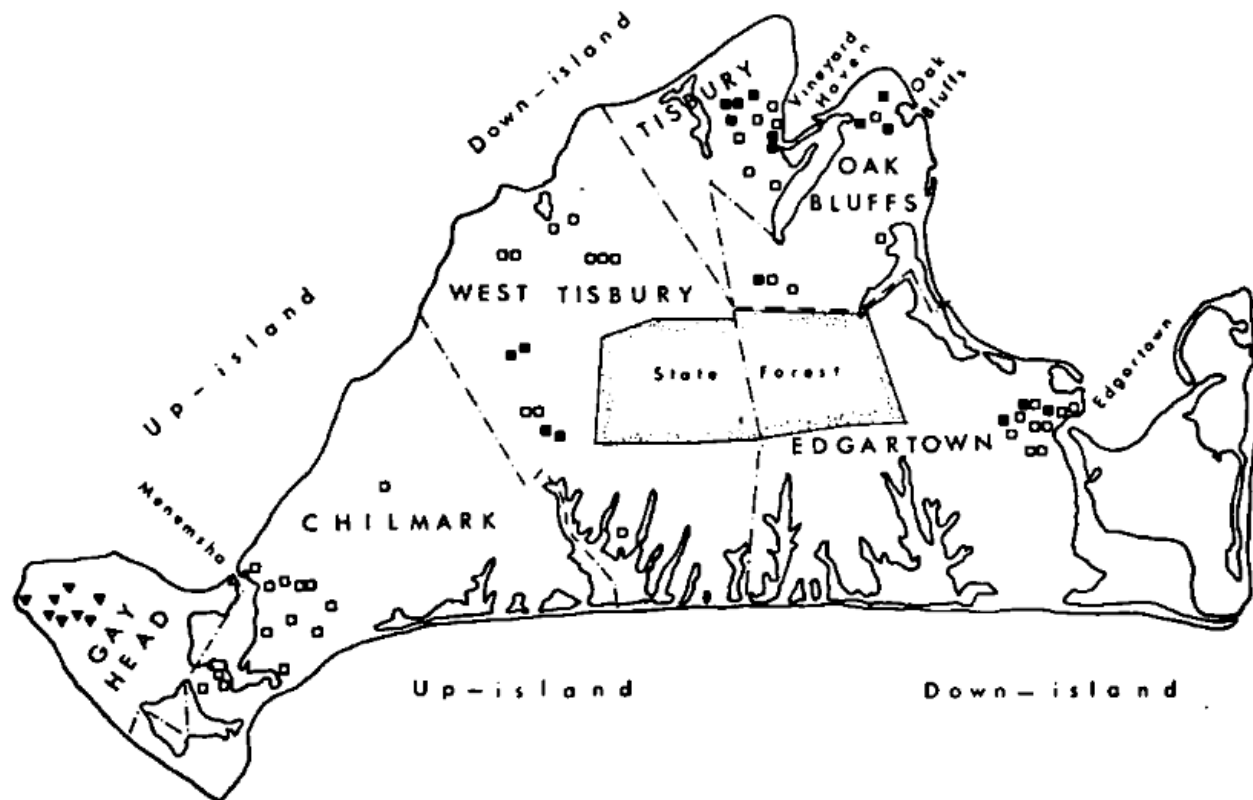


“When manufacturing jobs were abundant and lucrative, the community, women especially, oriented toward regional NCS features. However, when the community began to **shift from manufacturing to a service-centered economy** with more customer-facing jobs, these regionally marked features **no longer garnered as much linguistic capital**, prompting women to retreat from them and middle-class men to follow.” (Nesbitt 2021:358)



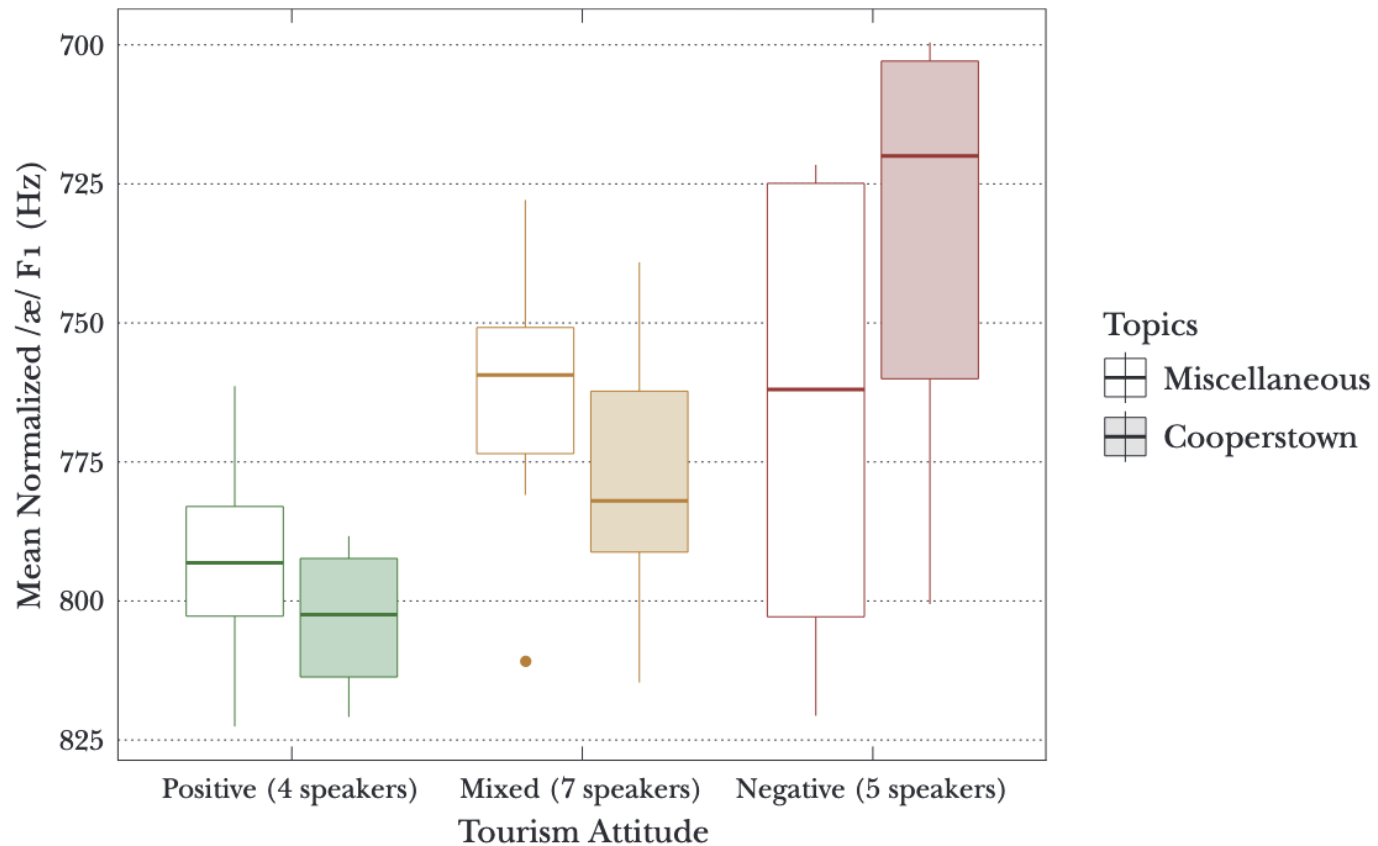
Movement?
~~Economy~~

Orientation

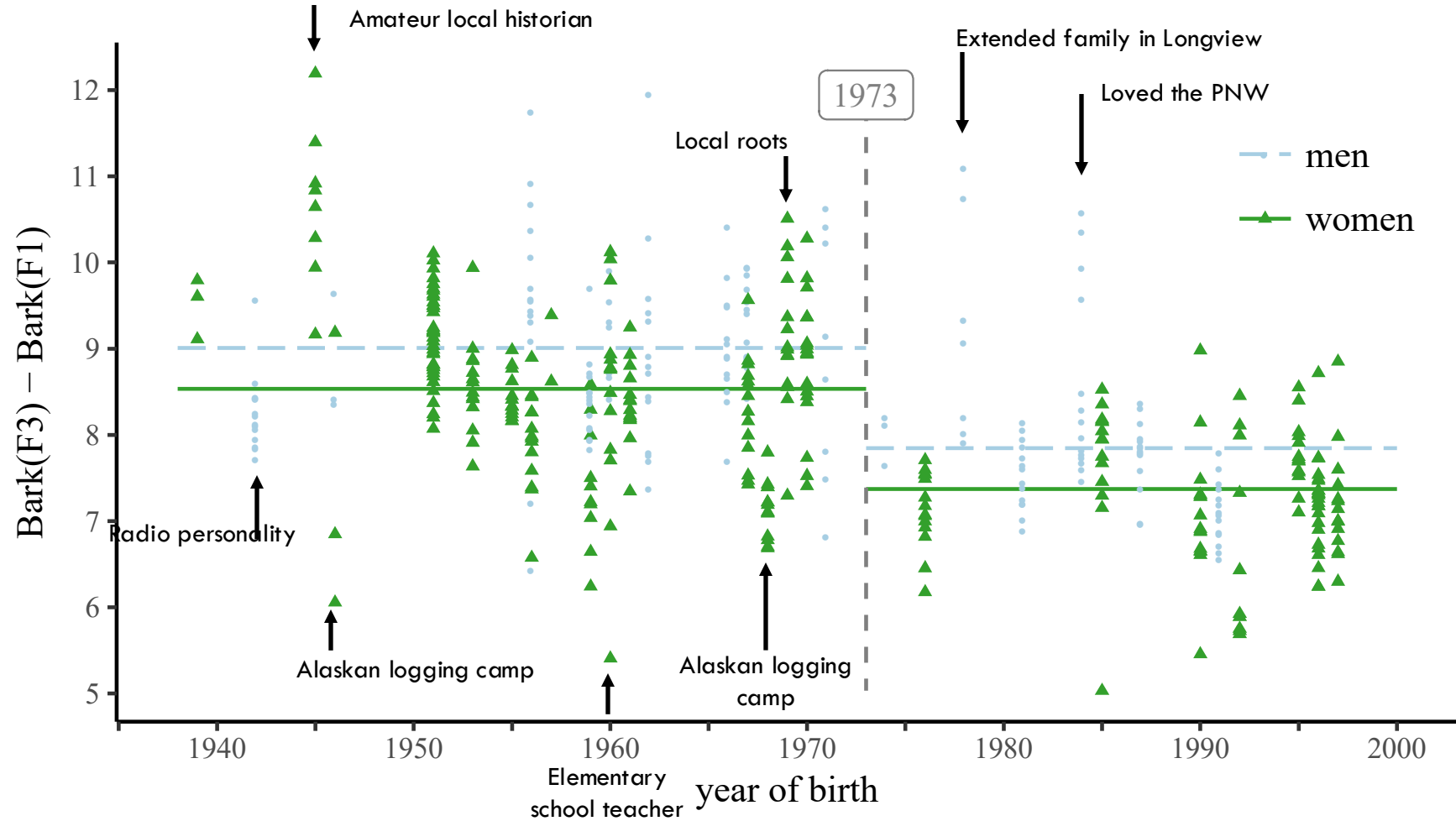


A study of the data shows that high centralization of /ai/ and /au/ is **closely correlated with expressions of strong resistance to the incursions of the summer people.** (Labov 1963:297)

FIGURE 2.9
Effect of Cooperstown Topic on /æ/ F1 for Baby Boomers, by Tourism Attitude



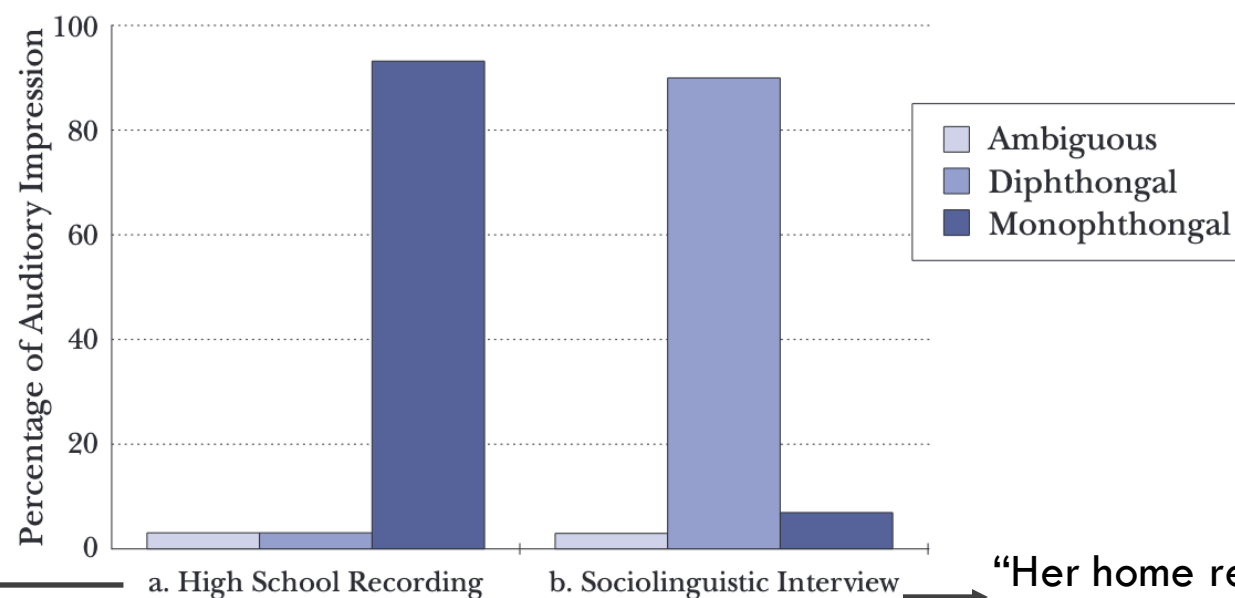
“Tourism-negative Baby Boomers increase their production of the most distinctive feature of the NCS when they are actually focusing on their (negative) attitudes about tourism and their feelings about their hometown, as if the topic itself reminds them to activate the linguistic feature that differentiates them from outsiders.”
(Dinkin 2024:52)



“[T]hose who have the highest degree of BAG-raising within their generation were **those that had positive feelings about the Pacific Northwest and had strong connections to other local people...** [and] speakers without BAG-raising expressed desire to move elsewhere.” (Stanley 2018:8)

“Suzanne’s productions scarcely appear to be from the same person.” (Reed 2020:420)

FIGURE 5
Impressionistic Coding of Suzanne’s /aɪ/ Production at Two Different Times



“At that particular point in her life, her local region played a much larger role and was more central to her personal identity.”
(Reed 2020:420)

“Her home region did not figure that heavily into her conception of self, that is, her identity.” (Reed 2020:420)

Orientation

The Moun[ʔn̩s] in Utah English

Utahns sound Utahn when they avoid sounding Utahn

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@joey_stan

97th Annual Meeting of the Linguistics Society of America

January 6, 2023


Denver, CO

I'm pretty sure that before I moved here I said *moun*[ʔin] and *Lay*[ʔin]. But I have been made aware of them. And so I have said them correctly now.

"Jane", female, b. 1963, White, Logan, Utah

What I've noticed is that there's a swallowing of *t*'s a lot more in younger people these days. That- I don't recall that as much from when I was a kid. Y'know people will say *moun*[ʔn], *Clin*[ʔn], that kinda thing, where the *t* is swallowed.

"Douglas", male, b. 1965, White, West Jordan, Utah

A photograph of a wooden picket fence running diagonally across the frame. To the left of the fence is a brown, dry lawn, and to the right is a vibrant green lawn. The fence is made of light-colored wooden pickets.

moun[ʔn, ~ ʔɪn]

moun[thɪn]



1890s

1960s

today

Movement and Economy

Orientation

The Angel and the Beehive

The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation

Armand L. Mauss

Alternative Explanations?

“In the twenties and thirties, national identity and ethnic purity were prime concerns...

Radio was acting to make Americans more aware of regional pronunciations and to standardize pronunciation as well...

Nationalism, linguistic, cultural, and ethnic purism, radio, prescriptivism, and the standardization of pronunciation are all elements balanced in a large equation—an equation that revolves around the presence of the immigrant.” (Bonfiglio 2002:37)

DE GRUYTER

Thomas Paul Bonfiglio

RACE AND THE RISE OF STANDARD AMERICAN

LANGUAGE, POWER AND SOCIAL PROCESS [LPSP]

William Labov, Malcah Yaeger and Richard Steiner

Volume I

Chapters 1-7

Report on

National Science Foundation

Contract NSF-GS-3287

University of Pennsylvania

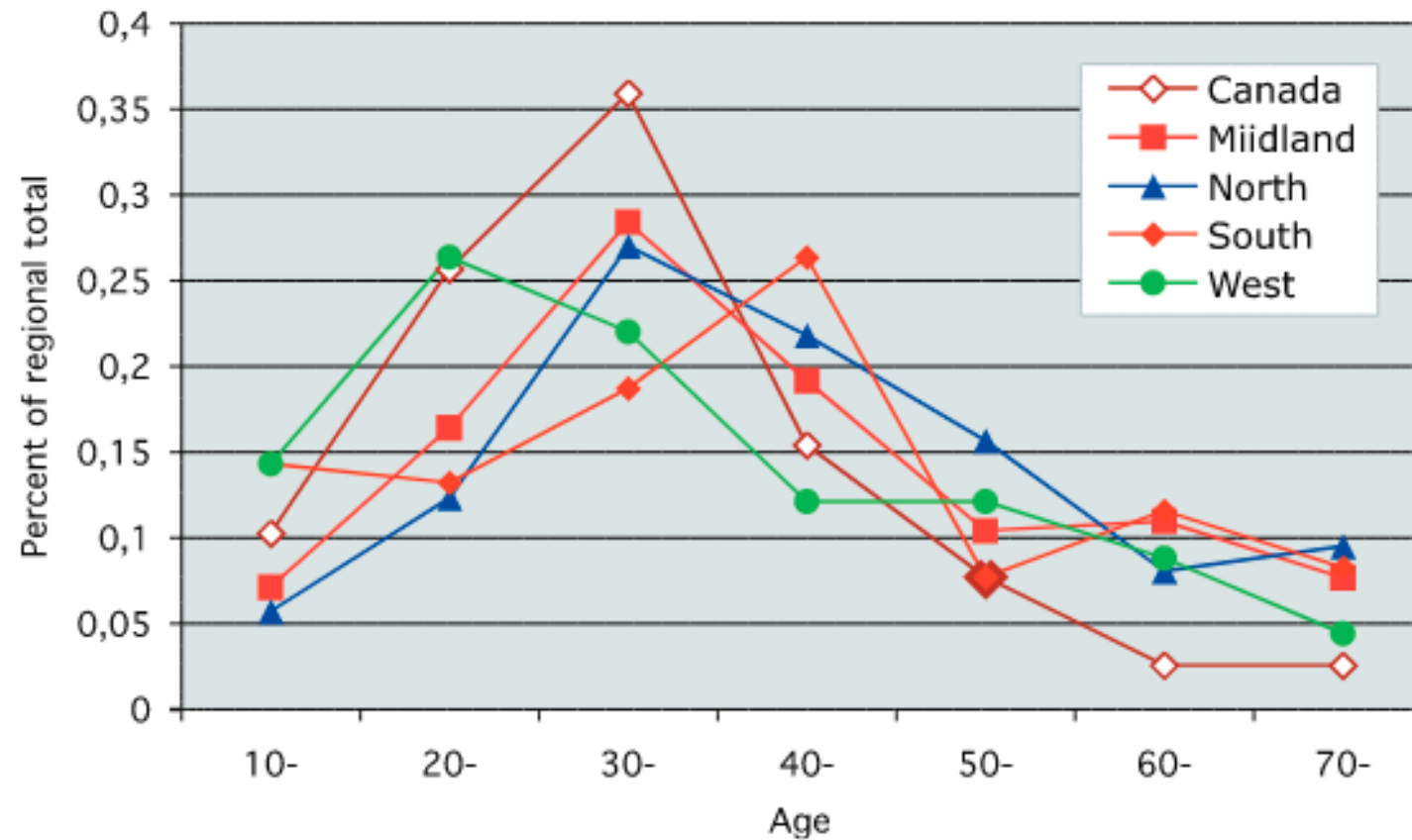
1972

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The U.S. Regional Survey
204 N. 35th Street
Philadelphia, Pa. 19104

However, the home is a valuable site for locating several generations within the same family. In recent field work, a family location paradigm was developed which allows us to complete studies across generations in exploratory work.

1. Young children 8-11 are located playing in a street outside of a residential area, and the children are asked to join in a group session.

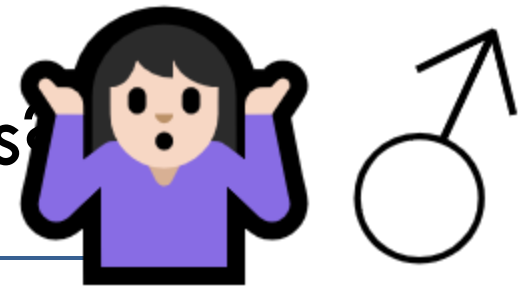
Figure 4.1. Age distribution of Telsur speakers in the five largest regions



birth years ► 1983 1973 1963 1953 1943 1933 1923

Labov, Ash & Boberg (2006:28)

Alternative Explanations?



Conclusions

Summary

1. Movement, economy, and orientation appear to play important roles in language change, regardless of the community or the timing.
2. A convergence of the three seems to have happened around the middle of the 20th century.
3. The general trend is away from local accents and towards a pan-regional variety.

Conclusions

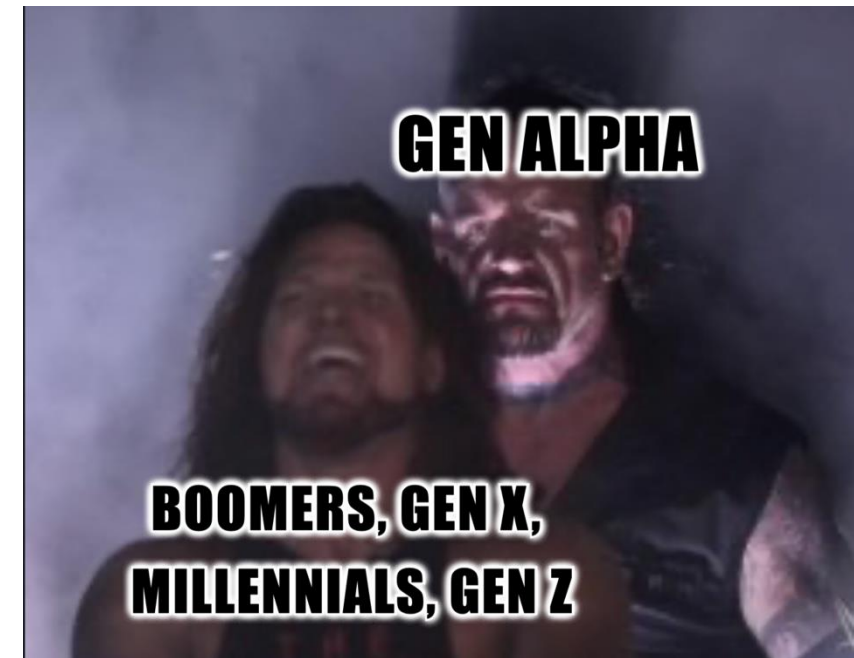
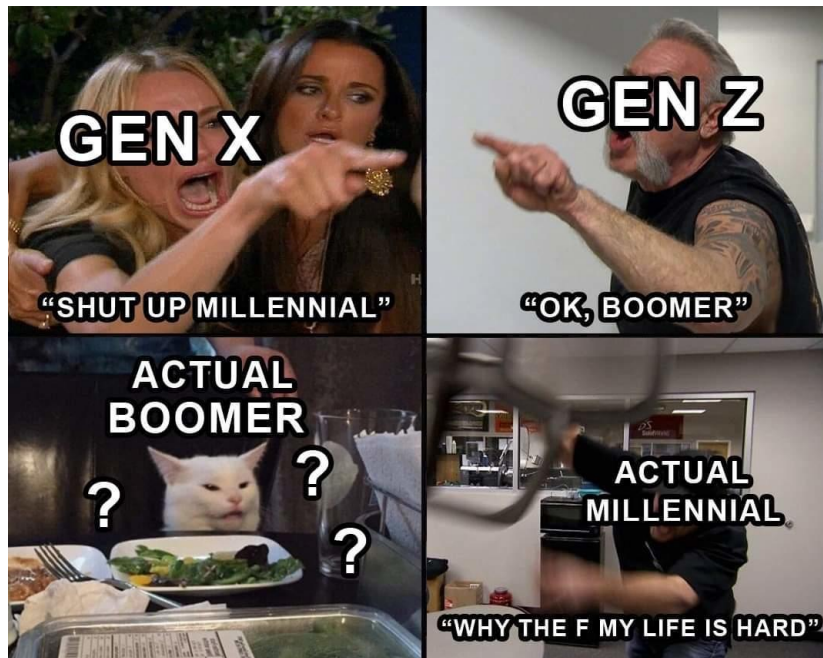
- Are accents going away?
 - No, of course not.
- Are the canonical accents that we're familiar with going away?
 - It seems so.
- What's taking their place?
 - New varieties, possibly defined along different lines (like ethnicity).

So what can we do about it?

- Additional work along these lines:
 - Find additional examples of Boomer–Gen X changes.
 - Find additional potential causes.
 - Find evidence of other pivot points.
 - See how the counterexamples fit in.
- Things to consider generally:
 - Don't assume people from the same region sound the same.
 - Gather more data on orientation towards locally-salient categories.

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Boomers: yelling at millenials for toast
 Millennials: yelling at Boomers for ruining the world
 GenZ: snorts tide pod and yeets into traffic

Gen X:



Millennials: Wow these TikTok trends are so cringey
 Also Millennials in 2011:

