Linguistic Variation and Change in Atlanta, Georgia

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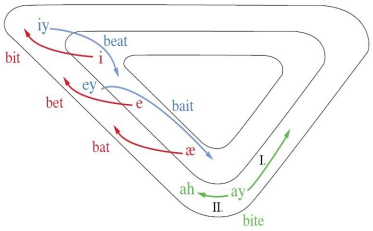
Introduction

In spite of its unique position as a fast-growing urban metropolis in the heart of the South, little research has been conducted to uncover the effects of Atlanta's rapid growth on the speech of its native population. In this poster, I present research undertaken for my senior honors thesis at Emory University, on the status of the Southern Shift in Atlanta, Georgia.

I utilize a variety of sociolinguistic methods to assemble a data set in which both apparent-time changes and current variation can be observed. Comparisons are made between the speech of different demographic groups as well as different neighborhoods in Atlanta.

Background

The Southern Shift was first identified by Labov, Yaeger, and Steiner[1] as a systematic change occurring in the vowel system of southern Americans. It is a chain shift traditionally characterized by the reversal in position of the long front glides /iy/, /ey/ and their corresponding short front vowels /i/, /e/. This shift seems to be triggered by the glide deletion in which /ay/ becomes [a:], thereby moving it out of the system of front upgliding vowels (See figure below[2]).



Other features associated with SAE[2,3]:

1. The merger of /ɪ/ and /ɛ/ before nasals (pin/pen)
2. The fronting of back vowels /u/ and /o/
3. Vowel "breaking" or triphthongization (*man* pronounced [mæjən])
4. Front glide in /juw/ after coronal onsets (*dew*, *tune*)
5. The back upglide shift: fronting of /aw/, upgliding /aw/ in place of /ɔ/

Methodology

1. A rapid and anonymous survey of 59 speakers focused on the pronunciation of /ay/ before voiced consonants (specifically in the word *five*[4]). This table shows the demographic breakdown of the interviewees:

Sex	Number	Percent
Male	30	51%
Female	29	49%
Race		
White	30	51%
Black	27	46%
Other	2	3%
Age		
20-35	30	51%
40-65	29	49%

• These interviews were conducted at 7 grocery stores, located in 5 different neighborhoods. Atlanta is still a highly segregated city, and the demographics of each neighborhood reflect this:

Neighborhood	% using monophthong	Description
Ansley Mall	20%	*Caters to younger urban whites*
Toco Hills	27%	*Predomin. white, large student population*
Sage Hill	50%	*Older, historically white neighborhood*
Edgewood	30%	*Predominantly black residential area*
Ponce de Leon	39%	*Historically black, urban area*

2. A set of long interviews with 5 white native Atlantans. I recorded a body of natural speech for acoustic analysis of Southern Shift features. The data presented here are from the reading passage portion of the interview.

Age / Sex	/ay/ monop.	/e/ fronting	/ey/ lowering	/i/ & /iy/ reversal
82 / F	X	X	X	
80 / F	X	X	X	
56 / M	X	X	X	
22 / M		X		
19 / F		X		

•See reverse for charts demonstrating the difference in /ay/ of my participants (and references).

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank the following people for their advice and support:
Dr. Susan Tamasi, Dr. Marjorie Pak, Dr. Lilia Coropceanu,
honors committee
Dr. Gillian Sankoff, Josef Fruehwald, Meredith Tamminga

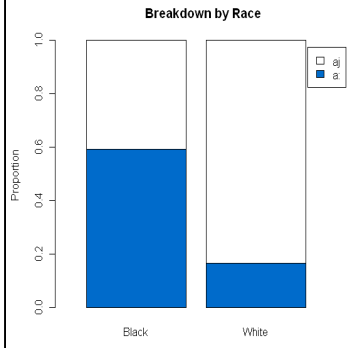
Results & Conclusions

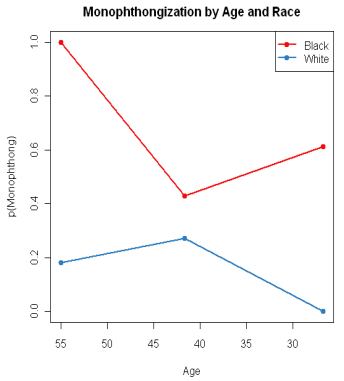
From the r & a data, an image of Atlanta's speech emerges:

Gender: There was no significant gender effect.

Race: This proved to be a key factor, with the black population showing a much higher percentage of /ay/ monophthongization than the white population; this helps to explain why percentages of monophthongizing speakers were higher at Edgewood and Ponce de Leon than at Ansley Mall.

However, this is not necessarily indicative of a higher proportion of Southern American English use among black speakers, since this feature has also been linked to African American English.





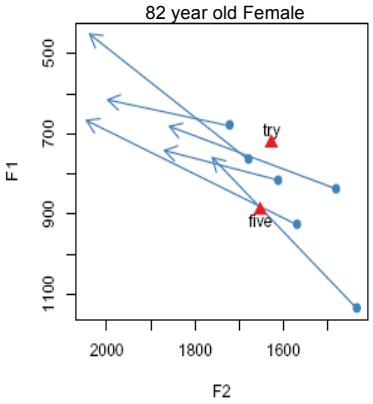
	B	W
Young	18	8
Middle	7	11
Old	2	11

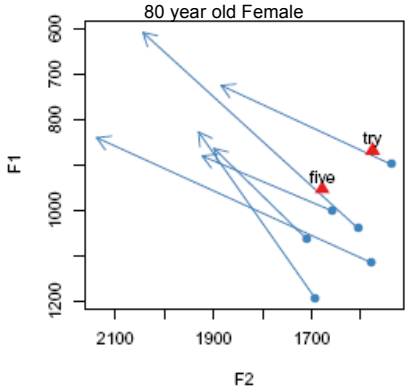
Age: Younger speakers used far fewer monophthongs than older speakers - this likely accounts for the unusually high percentage found at Sage Hill. Note that 100% of the young white speakers interviewed used a diphthong, while about 60% of young black speakers used a monophthong.

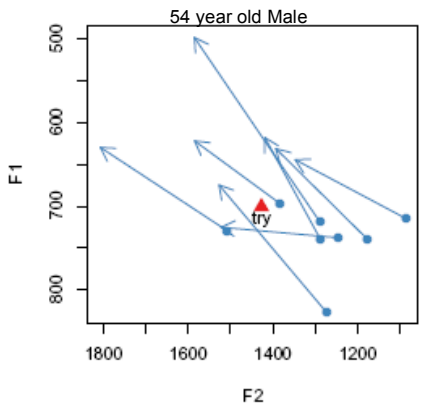
These combined data show that while Atlanta has participated in the Southern Vowel Shift and older white residents still exhibit the /ay/ monophthongization associated with the shift, it has not participated to the same extent as other areas of the South. In fact, rather than participating in the shift, younger white Atlantans show little to no /ay/ monophthongization, and lack the characteristic vowel rotation of the shift.

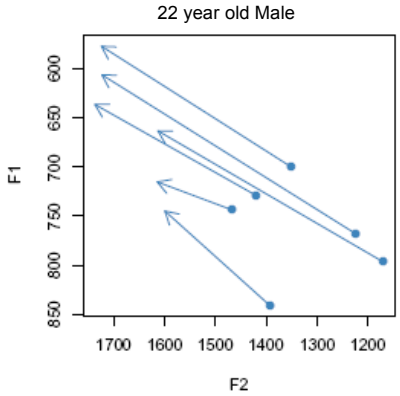
Extra charts, map of Atlanta, references

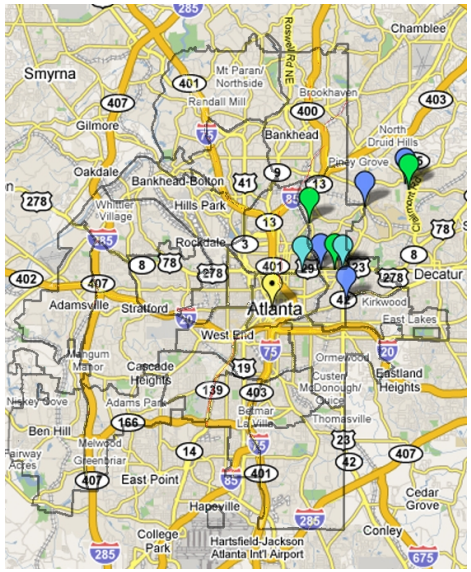
(Red triangles indicate monophthongs, while arrows show approximate length and direction of the glide.)

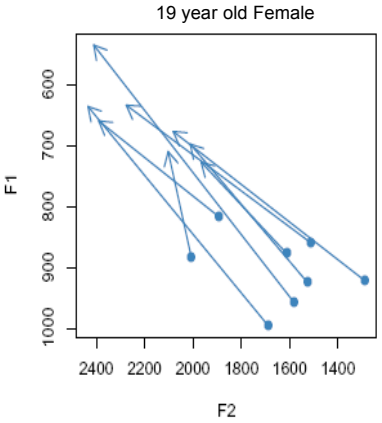












References

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