

Vowels in Appalachia: Linguistics and Language Change

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A Family Story

- 3 Generations – Grandmother, Father, and Sisters
- 3 Sisters in One Generation – Susanne, Hannah, and Morgan
- Language telling a broader story of Identity
 - We know friends, family members, others who are Appalachian and that part of them is central
 - We also know others that are Appalachian, but do not have the same feeling about the region
 - Each of these groups use language differently

The Area – The Homeland



Initial Questions

- What is linguistics?
 - The scientific study of language
 - This means we look for the system behind language
 - Not the do's and don'ts, but the why
- Sociolinguistics
 - We all know that language communicates ideas, but there is more to it than that
 - We convey social information about ourselves with language
 - Thus, sociolinguistics studies how speakers express social information linguistically

Initial Questions

- Sociophonetics
 - Phonetics studies how speakers produce sounds, what particular qualities those sounds have, and then how a listener interprets those sounds
 - Socio – refers back to the social information
 - Sociophonetics is the investigation of how speakers express social information phonetically
 - With their vowels and consonants, intonation, voice quality, etc.

Vowels

- What are vowels?
 - Not just the written letters 'a, e, i, o, u, and sometimes y'
 - English has about 15 Vowels
 - Bead, Bid, Bed, Bad, Bud, Bod, Bird, Bawd, Book, Booed
 - Boyd, Bide, Bade, Bode, Bowed
 - Sounds made with a fairly open vocal tract and lots of vibration

Two types of Vowels

- Simple Vowels (monophthongs)
 - Where the vowel stays basically the same throughout
 - Bead, Bid, Bed, Bad, Bud, Bod, Bird, Bawd, Book, Booed

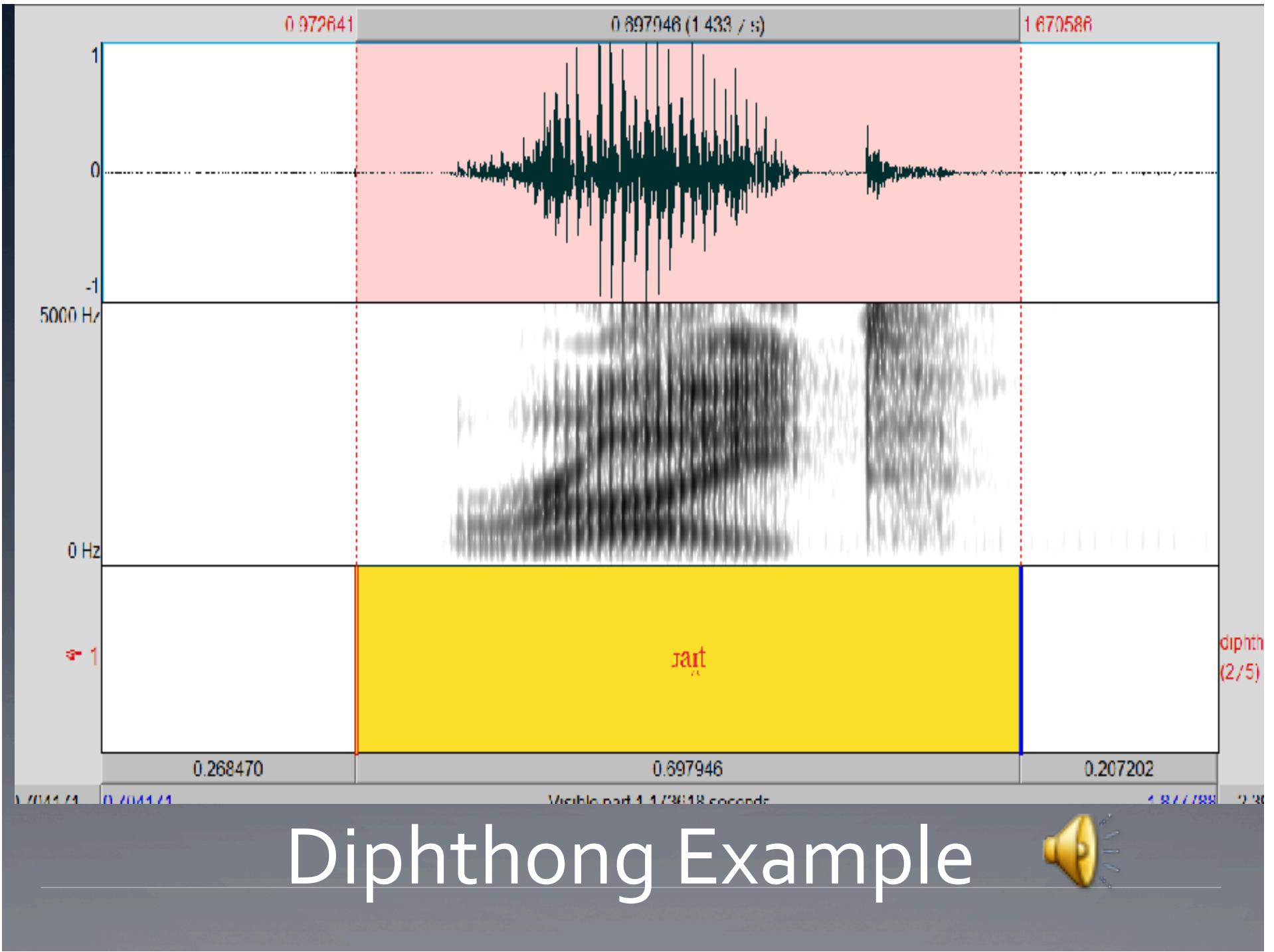
- Complex vowels (diphthongs)
 - Where the vowel changes over the course of its production
 - Boyd, Bide, Bade, Bode, Bowed

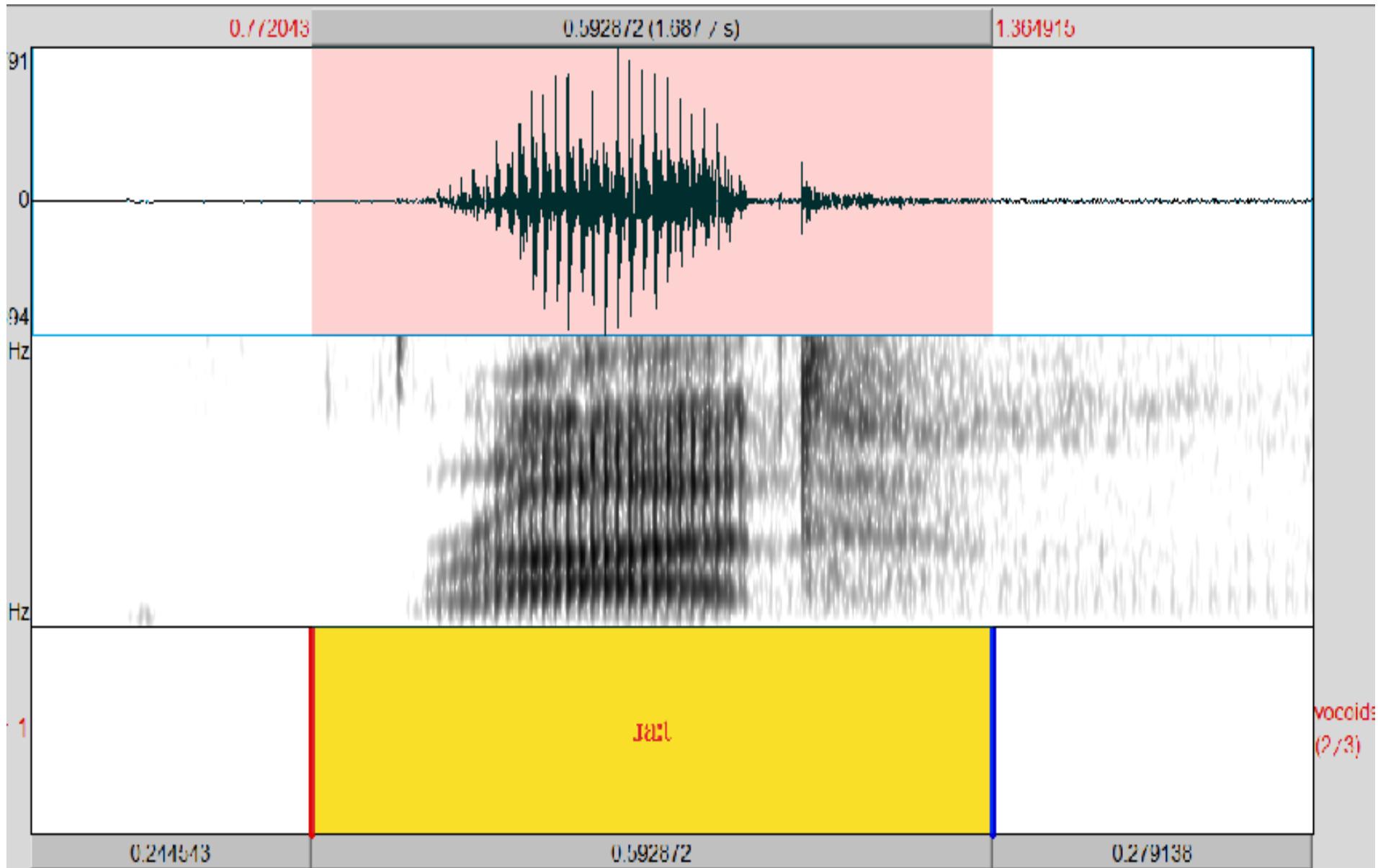
Vowels and Appalachia

- We know that language expresses social information, which includes region
- Appalachia is a region that has a language variety that differentiates it from the South as a whole, and other varieties of English
 - One way in particular is in the vowels
- In the General South, the vowel in words like 'rye' and 'ride' can be pronounced with a simple vowel (monophthong)
 - Other varieties use a complex vowel (diphthong)
 - This is called glide weakening or monophthongization

Vowels and Appalachia

- In Appalachia (and a few other regions), the vowel in words like 'rye' and 'ride', and also 'right', can be produced with a simple vowel (monophthong)
 - This is different from the American South as a whole, and other American English varieties
- This is one of the defining characteristics of Appalachian English, monophthongization in all phonetic environments
 - Open syllables – 'rye'
 - Pre-voiced – 'ride' (pre-voiced means that the sound that follows is produced with the vocal cords vibrating)
 - Pre-voiceless – 'right' (this means the sound that follows is produced without vibrating the vocal cords)





Monophthongization



Vowels in Appalachia

- Since this monophthongization (using simple vowels where others use complex) is characteristic of Appalachia, it can be used by speakers to express their own personal identity toward and affiliation with the region
 - The union of the social with the linguistic
- Speakers with differing degrees of Appalachian Identity may have differing degrees of monophthongization
 - Among other features and factors

A Family Story - Continued

- Older Generations – 1 Grandparent - Maxine, 1 Parent – Henry
 - They both had traditional Appalachian vowels in all environments
- Children - 3 Sisters
 - All born and raised in the same Southern Appalachian town
 - All attended college in Southern Appalachia (two attended the same university)
 - All have post-graduate degrees (not all from universities located in Southern Appalachia, but all located in the South)
 - All are middle-middle to upper-middle class (white collar careers)
- Yet, their vowels tell a different story

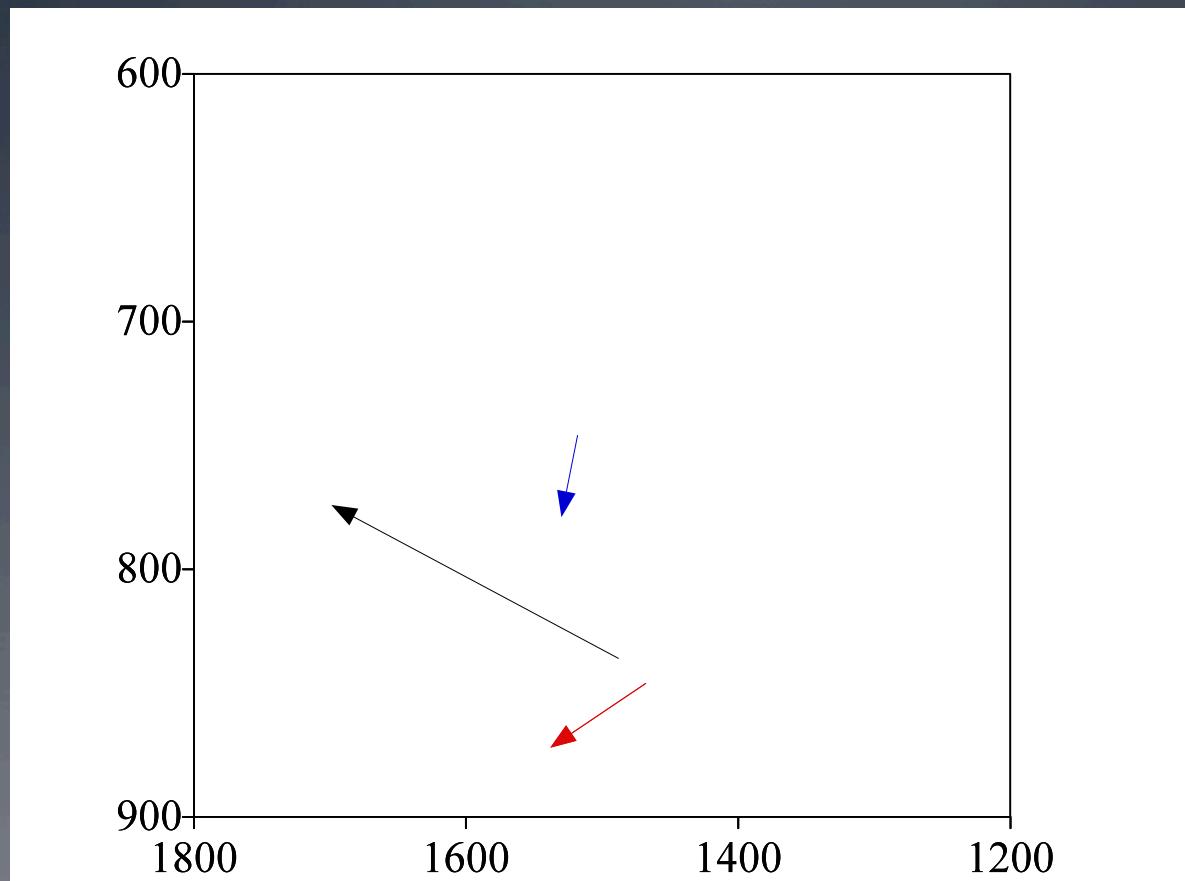
The Data

- Family Narratives and Discussion were collected
- Sociolinguistic interviews were later conducted with each person
 - A semi-structured interview with many open ended questions
 - Additionally, a reading passage and word lists were also used to ensure comparability

How I analyzed the Data

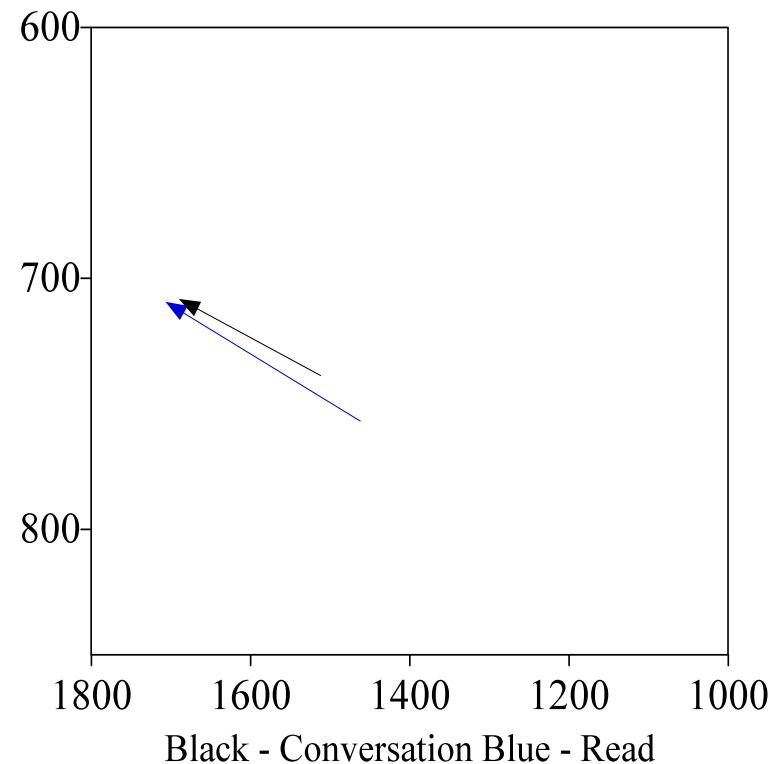
- The first 30 possible occurrences the vowel variants were extracted from the conversation and reading, and measured
 - Praat (Boersma and Weenik 2012)
- I measured the vowels at 25%, 50%, and 75% of duration
 - Monophthongization (use of a simple vowel) was called if the formant values were stable across the measurements and the auditory impression was that of a simple vowel

Vowels

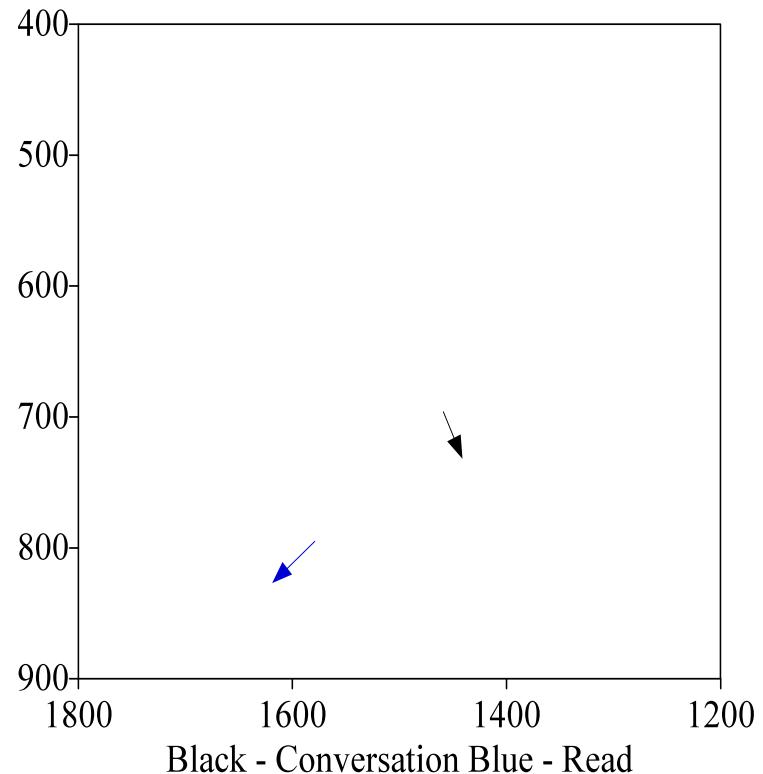


Susanne – Black line; Hannah – Red line; Morgan – Blue Line

Results



Susanne



Hannah

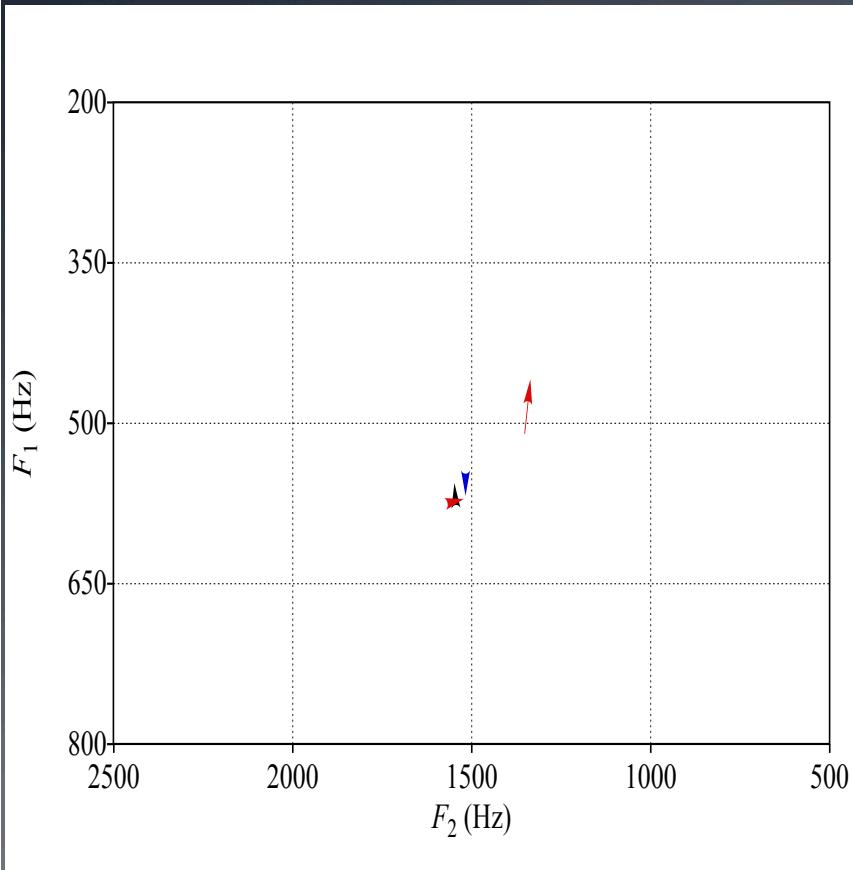
Discussion

- What could account for this difference?
- One facet is identity
 - Susanne – ‘displaced hillbilly’ but no longer just that, ‘citizen of the world’, has an affinity for the South in general, but does not consider it a core part of her identity
 - Hannah – ‘Appalachia is home’, identifies closely with a certain location, loves the ‘hills’, is aware of possible stigma but does not care
 - Morgan – ‘You know that you’re Appalachian’, ‘straight up Southern’, upholds an Appalachian identity personally and professionally

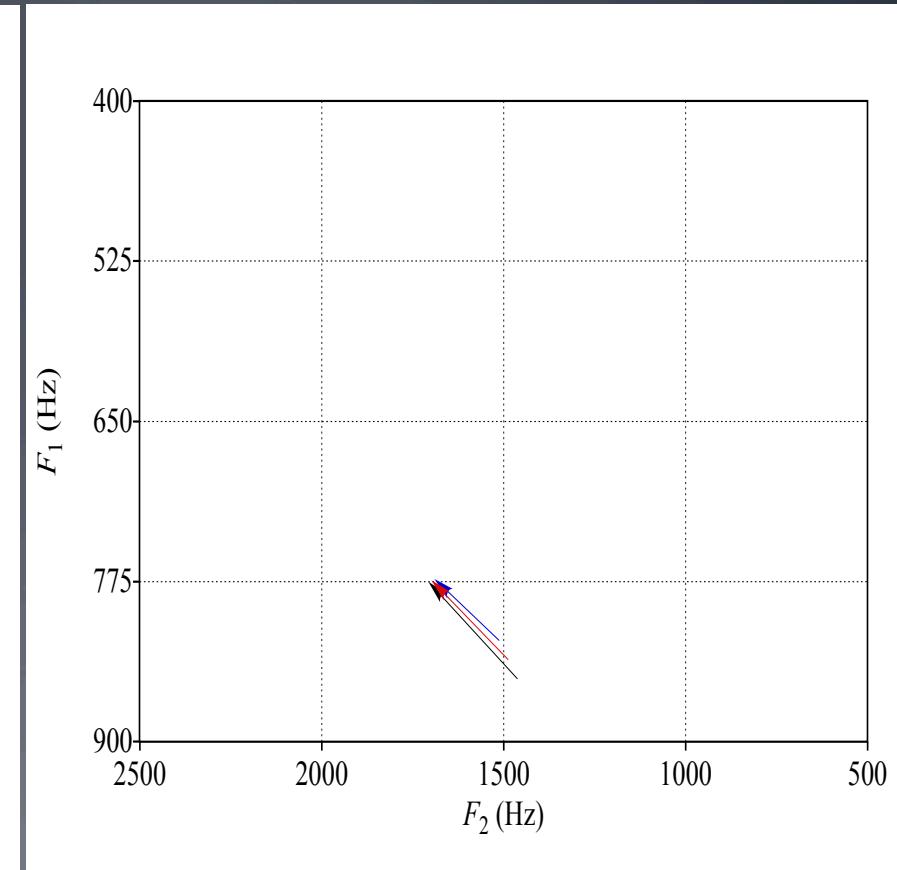
Discussion

- Both Susanne and Morgan have careers where they have to present in front of groups often. Each relies profoundly on their speech, yet the realization is quite different.
 - Different types of careers, which is a possible additional reason beyond just their differing Appalachian identities
- Hannah's career does not require much presenting, but she no longer lives in Appalachia. She says she longs to move back, and professes to 'miss the hills' and also to 'miss home'.

Susanne – A 20 yr. Story



High School



Current



Implications

- What does all this tell us?
 - Language is social, and social factors are powerful influences on language
 - Identity has a profound impact on language and can differentiate speakers, even closely related speakers within a single family
 - Also, language changes over generations – Maxine and Henry were similar, and Hannah and Morgan were very close. Yet, Susanne was quite distinct.
 - As a person's identity can change over time, their language can and does as well
 - Susanne changed from high school to the present, roughly 20 years

Thank you!

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