

# The indexical re-interpretation of a sound change in progress

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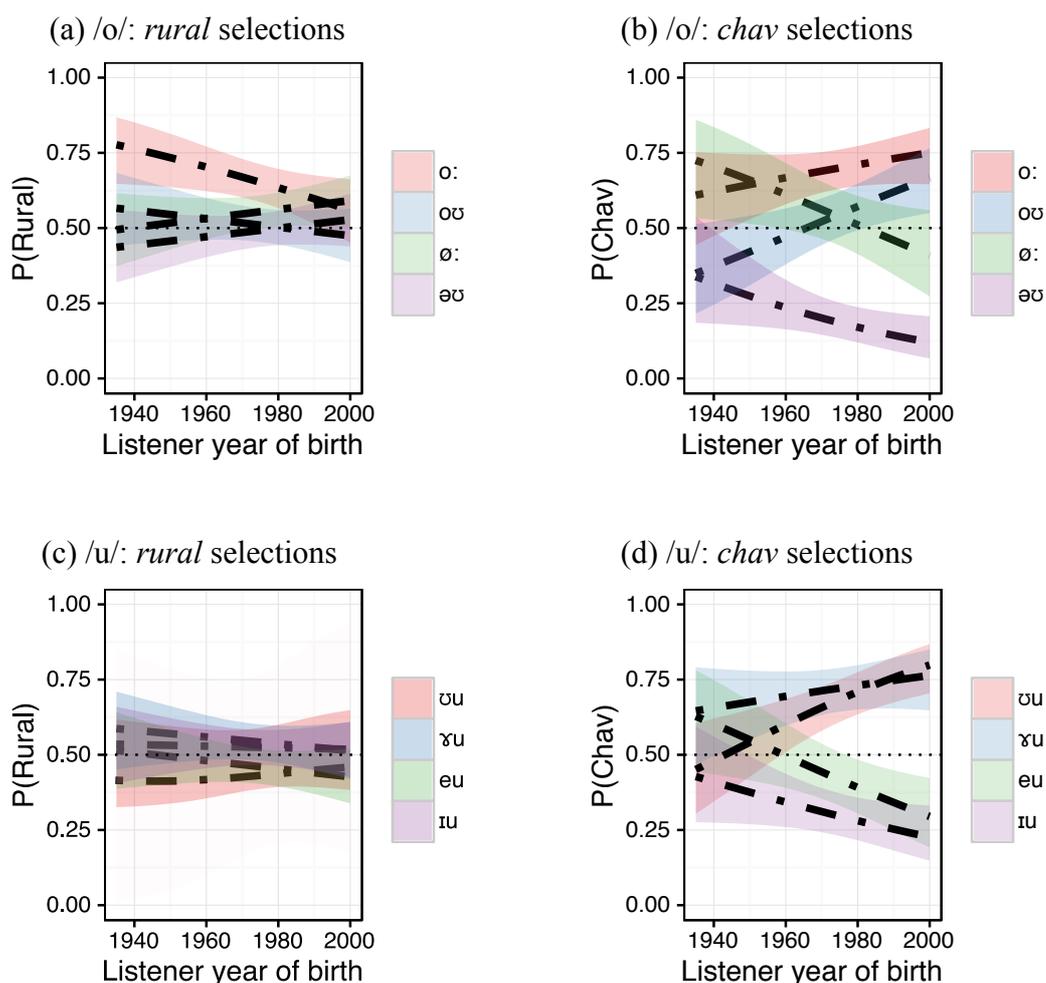
A core proposal of work theorizing the social meaning of language variation is that indexical meanings are constantly available for re-interpretation (Eckert, 2008). Speakers' continual use of variants for different indexical purposes may lead to changes in the community-level social meanings attached to them. This claim is supported by evidence from the historical representation of speech registers (e.g. Beal, 2009; Clark, 2013), discourse analysis (e.g. Johnstone et al., 2006), and the popular representation of language variation (Johnstone, 2009). The present work contributes controlled perception data to this literature, demonstrating age-related variability in the social perception of two vowel changes in progress in York, Northern England.

Data are drawn from a combined corpus of speech and social perception data collected from 52 individuals born between 1935 and 2000. The production data broadly confirm previous findings on this variety (Haddican et al., 2013) indicating that /o/ and /u/ are undergoing fronting in York speech, and that they are subject to relatively stable, socially-stratified diphthongization. During the perception experiment, participants heard words containing digitally-manipulated vowel tokens (including back, front, monophthongal and diphthongal variants) and matched them to a set of visual stimuli representing a simple indexical field (Eckert, 2008). These stimuli consisted of images representing constellations of locally-meaningful places and social practices, aiming to reflect both macro-level social categories (e.g. *old/young urban/rural*, *middle class/working class*), as well as locally-relevant characterological figures (e.g. 'typical Yorkshireman').

The results demonstrate considerable age-related variability in the indexical interpretation of /u/ and /o/ variation. This talk will compare the forms older and younger listeners associate with the *rural* category and those they associate with a stigmatized, class-based persona: the *chav*. While older listeners tend to hear monophthongal /o/ variants as *rural*, younger listeners are less sensitive to this meaning (1a). While both older and younger listeners link monophthongal /o/ to the *chav* category, younger listeners are more sensitive to the distinction between back and front variants (1b). Back, diphthongal /o/ strongly cues a *chav* selection among younger listeners, but not among older listeners (1b). While /u/ variation does not appear to be associated with the *urban/rural* dimension (1c), the oldest listeners show weak sensitivity to back variants as an index of *chav*, and this effect is much stronger among younger listeners (1d).

I will argue that these results provide evidence of three processes of indexical re-interpretation with regard to the community-level meanings attached to /o/ and /u/ variation: i) the weakening and loss of indexical meanings (monophthongal /o/ and *rural*); ii) the attachment of new indexical meanings (back, diphthongal /o/ and *chav*), and iii) the strengthening of existing indexical meanings (/u/ fronting and *chav*). The findings contribute to work on indexicality (Eckert, 2008) by providing controlled perceptual evidence of ongoing changes in indexical meaning. Additionally, they are consistent with existing experimental results (e.g. Campbell-Kibler, 2009; Levon, 2007; Pharoa et al., 2014), pointing to the crucial role of the listener in sociolinguistic perception.

Figure 1: Interaction of vowel variant and listener year of birth on selections of *rural* and *chav* images.



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