

A Stilted Shift: The Southern Vowel Shift in Midland Appalachia

West Virginia (WV) has long been considered a part of the rural South (Wolfram and Christian 1975). Given this designation, the Southern Vowel Shift (SVS) (Labov 1991; Labov, Ash, and Boberg 2006) should have been propagated throughout WV in the 20th century, but its progress has been intermittent. The SVS is primarily a rural shift that occurs where there is little immigration (Dodsworth and Kohn 2012). As WV has faced tremendous out-migration throughout the last half of the 20th century, it faces a markedly different situation than Raleigh, NC (Dodsworth and Kohn 2012). With non-urban areas and a declining population, WV transmission of the SVS should have continued unabated (Labov 2007). We use our WV study to ask: Is the decline of the SVS solely attributable to demographic shifts in Southern Urban centers, or is it also due to the increasing indexicality of the shift as stigmatized?

Our study investigates sociolinguistic interviews of 67 native Appalachians. Using FAVE, the vowels were analyzed for numerous measures (Rosenfelder et al. 2011). 51,000 vowels were analyzed and eight social factors were considered for possible correlations. Linear mixed models were used to discern statistical trends and handle random variables. This paper focuses on the front vowel patterns of the SVS since, as Dodsworth and Kohn note (2012:229), these patterns “do not occur consistently in the United States outside the South”. We track the midpoint means and dynamics of four vowels: FLEECE (3,300); KIT (4,500); FACE (3,300); DRESS: (5,100). In the SVS, the front-lax vowels are fronting, tensing, and diphthongizing as the front-tense vowels have backed and lowered (Fridland 2003; Thomas 2003).

For the oldest speakers, the FACE and DRESS nuclei overlap; younger Southerners and all rural speakers maintain this overlap. For FLEECE and KIT vowels, the oldest speakers’ nuclei overlap more than the middle-aged speakers, but both rely on off-glide direction to distinguish the vowels. Younger speakers lead FLEECE and KIT nuclei and offglides along divergent paths depending on rurality and social class. Dodsworth and Kohn (2012) did not find the tensing/raising of the KIT and DRESS vowels to be a social stereotype, but we have found that KIT and DRESS tensing/raising has reached, as Dodsworth and Kohn qualify (2012:223) “. . . the higher orders of social indexicality . . . that /aɪ/ monophthongization has reached.” As we move through the 20th century in apparent time, the emerging offglides of KIT and DRESS become important social markers and form the basis for social distinction in WV.

These changes follow Britain and Trudgill’s (2005) process of “sociostylistic reallocation” whereby certain variation patterns are reassigned to particular corners of social space. KIT and DRESS tensing/raising has become a sociolinguistic stereotype in WV for rurality with associated negative traits. Our findings are similar to Onosson, Roeder, and D’Arcy (2015) where Victorian English adopted of some supra-regional norms while demonstrating stability for others. Diversity in WV vowels demonstrates diversity among possible identity choices, and shifting vowel systems factor into the evolution of the Appalachian identity.

References

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A Stilted Shift on Southern Boundaries: The Southern Vowel Shift in Appalachia

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Northern speakers born after XXXX stopped this shift as it increasingly became noted as rural and southern (hick, redneck). Geographically speaking, all of the Appalachian speakers, except those in the northern panhandle of WV, should have the front-vowel component of the Southern shift. The results indicate otherwise.

{ {Though dialects in Appalachia are widely noted, data on vowel systems is more limited, with a dissertation by Greene (2010) and an article by Irons (20XX) as the major sources. Yet as Grieve (2016) notes, the Appalachian region, and WV specifically, is a major transition area between the north and the south, as well as the boundary between eastern dialects and the Midwest.} }

We have focused our research on making a general assessment about major vowel patterns in WV and how they are shifting over time and between regions. We analyze data from 67 Appalachian speakers in the WV region. {DATA DESCRIPTION: HOW MANY VOWELS, FAVE ANALYSIS BUT HAND CHECKED BOUNDARIES; HOW MANY TOKENS; HOW MANY SOCIAL GROUPS}

Southern Shift: front-vowel shifts: When did it start? Are younger speakers at the end of the 20th century following in the shifts that began in the middle of the century? Which social groups are leading this change?

In the Southern Shift, the front lax vowels are fronting, tensing, and becoming more diphthongal as the front tense vowels have filled their gap (Fridland (2000, 2001, 2003) and Thomas (2003)).

“Two frequently observed SVS processes operating in the front vowel system are the raising and fronting of the front lax nuclei, and the lowering and backing of the front tense nuclei.”

“Britain and Trudgill (2005) referred to as “sociostylistic reallocation.” “The SVS variants of the front vowels do not occur consistently in the United States outside of the South, and so they are predicted to be disfavored in a dialect contact setting as “marked regional forms” (Kerswill & Williams, 2000).”

Dodsworth and Kohn (2012:240) “The speed with which dialect features are leveled, and with which focusing occurs, is known to vary across dialect contact settings However, as Kerswill and Williams noted, the process may take longer or remain incomplete in sparsely populated regions without regular contact among speakers. For example, Britain (1997) contended that the focusing of phonological variables in the English Fens, following migration to the area during the 17th century, was originally hindered by the lack of regular interaction among children, as compulsory education was not yet established. ”

“Again, the lack of focusing during Stage II is attributed in part to the lack of regular interaction among

children, as the population was not well-connected and education was not centralized.”

Dodsworth and Kohn: 2012:243 “There are two significant sex effects in these data (Table 2). Men lead in the case of /i/ and lag in the case of /e/. A possible explanation is that the two vowels carry distinct social meanings, as Fridland (2001) proposed for Memphis.”

The trends that emerge for some parts of WV resemble those of Dodsworth and Kohn’s Raleigh study: What was once strictly a geographic divide in Appalachia has become a marker of rurality.

Following Dodsworth and Kohn’s analysis (2012:240), the reversal of the SVS has been affected by the sparsely populated rural regions of WV. The conundrum we present is why some people adopt the more socially salient parts of the Southern Vowel Shift, but others do not.

{{Interspeaker variability
Intraspeaker variability}}

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