THREE SOUTHS, ONE COAST: VOWEL SYSTEM NEGOTIATION IN A LINGUISTIC CROSSROADS

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Introduction

The Mississippi Gulf Coast (MGC) is a historically understudied dialect area situated at the intersection of three distinct linguistic regions: Louisiana Englishes, rural Southern varieties, and emerging urban Southern speech. These regions participate in the Southern Vowel Shift (SVS) in different ways; **Louisiana Englishes exhibit substrate-influenced patterns diverging sharply from canonical SVS (weakened /aɪ/ monophthongization, distinctive retraction in NURSE and SQUARE sets); rural Southern varieties closely approximate the traditional SVS trajectory; while many urban Southern communities (i.e. Raleigh) show partial reversal or retreat of hallmark SVS features.**

This study draws on sociophonetic data from a single MGC speaker to explore these influences on an individual level. The dataset includes wordlist and reading-passage elicitations, normalized using Nearey-1 log transformations.



Documentary Sources

- Carmichael, K. (2020). (æ)fter the storm: An examination of the short-a system in Greater New Orleans. Language variation and Change, 32(1), 107-131.
- Knight, W. L. (2015). The Southern Vowel Shift in the speech of women from Mississippi (Publication No. 1596062), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Labov, W., Ash. S., & Boberg, C. (2006). The Atlas of North American English: Phonetics, phonology and sound change. Mouton de Gruyter.

Results

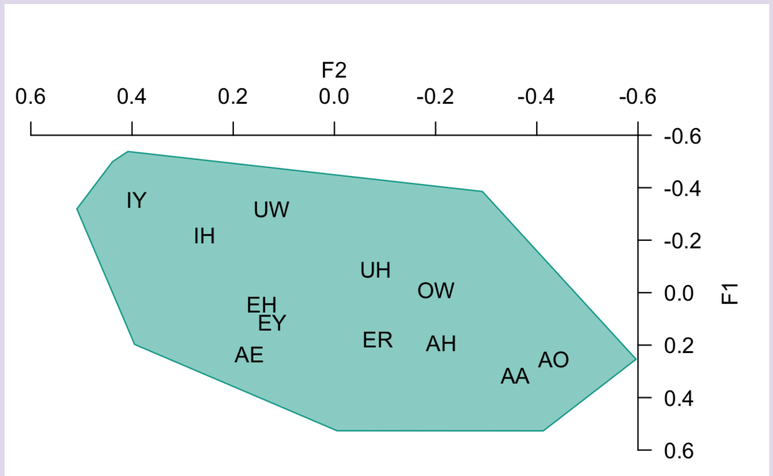


Figure 1: MC01's vowel system

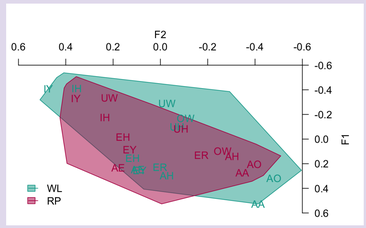


Figure 2: MC01's vowel system, grouped by task

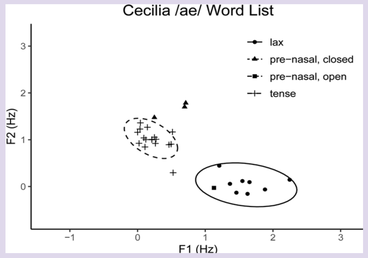


Figure 3: Example of short-a system

Louisiana-aligned Features

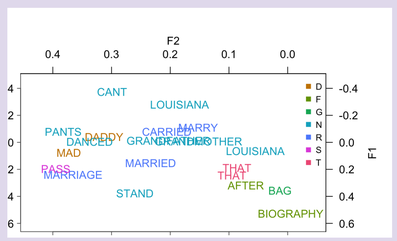


Figure 4: short-a system in MC01 by word

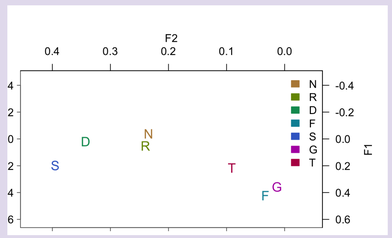


Figure 5: Short-a system in MC01 by following segment

- Nasal-tensing short-a system, indicating Louisiana-style participation
- Presence of short-a system; reinterpretation of a split /æ/ system associated with both New Orleans and French Coast identities
- Maintains /ɑ/-/ɔ/ distinction
- /ɔ/ not raised to the degree of some New Orleans speakers

Rural South-aligned Features

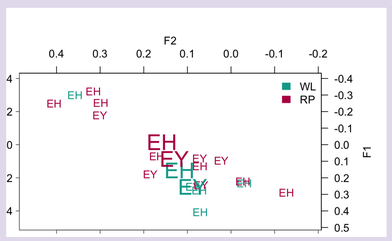


Figure 6: Plotted tokens and means of /e/ (EY) and /ɛ/ (EH) by task

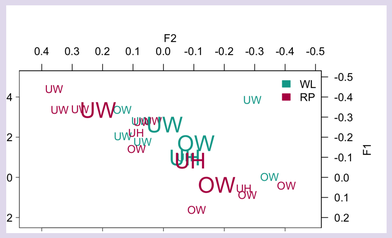


Figure 7: Plotted tokens and means of /u/ (UW), /ʊ/ (UH), and /o/ (OW) by task

- Partial , but not categorical, /aɪ/ monophthongization
- /e/ and /ɛ/ reversal
- Consistent with SVS Stage II participation documented in rural Mississippi women (Knight 2015) and other inland regions

Urban Southern Reversal Features

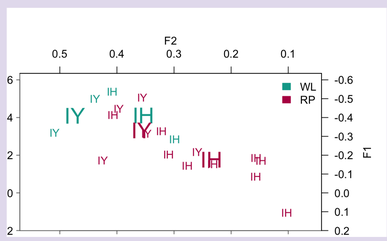


Figure 8: Plotted tokens and means of /i/ (IY) and /ɪ/ (IH) by task

- Lack of Stage III reversal (/i/ and /ɪ/)
- /aɪ/ monophthongization in only in voiced contexts, but pre-voiceless glide weakening does not occur; aligns with urban retreat patterns of Atlanta, Raleigh, and Memphis

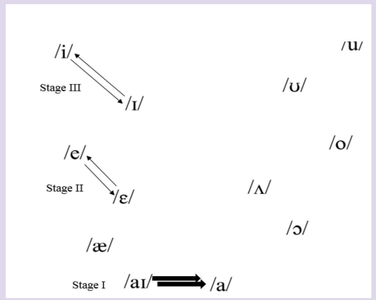
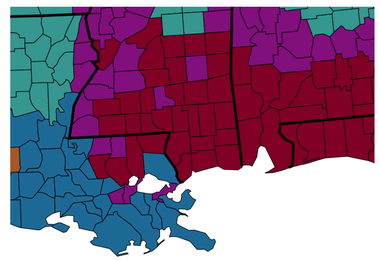


Figure 9: Stages of the Southern Vowel Shift (SVS) (Knight, 2015)

Reference Map



- Louisiana Creole
- Gulf Coast / Piney Belt
- Southern African American Vernacular
- Highland Southern

Louisiana English patterns
- Short-a system (includes nasal tensing)
- NURSE backing or centralization
- Reduced SVS participation
- Raised /ɔ/

Rural Southern patterns
- /aɪ/-monophthongization
- Front vowel inversion
- Back vowel fronting

Urban Southern Reversal
- Stability of /i/-/ɪ/
- Weakening of monophthongization

Methodology

Data for MC01 were collected during a 2021 sociolinguistic field interview focused on language attitudes on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The interview included demographic questions, a modified word list, a reading passage, and a perceptual pile-sort task. The present analysis draws solely from citation-style tokens in the word list and reading passage to minimize stylistic variation.

All vowels were measured in Praat and normalized in R using the Nearey-1 log-mean method via phonR package. F1, F2, and F3 are included in the normalization procedure. 200 total tokens were recorded, with 95 being analyzed after exclusion of pre-nasal, pre-liquid, and unstressed vowels.

Conclusion

MC01 exhibits a Stage II-like /e/-/ɛ/ reorganization without advancing to Stage III and only partial participation in Stage I. **Their system can be interpreted as indexing both local Frenchness and regional Southernness without committing to either extreme.** Avoidance of strongest monophthongal /aɪ/ variants may reflect awareness of stigma associated with heavy "country Southern" speech.

While this is a single case study, it appears that **local vowel systems can be shaped by interactions between three forces: classic Southern features diffusing from inland Mississippi; influence by Louisiana and New Orleans vowel systems; and supra-regional pressures toward national urban norms.**

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