

22. African-Americans

The Atlas of North American English includes a considerable amount of social information, but it is not a sociolinguistic investigation. It is a study of the regional distribution of phonological patterns, with a strong focus on change in progress. Chapter 4 described the Telsur sampling procedure of selecting surnames identified with the dominant ethnic groups in each speech community. The purpose was to avoid the selection of particular ethnic groups which for one reason or another had remained linguistically separate from the main community. Table 4.2 showed that the largest single ethnic identification of Telsur speakers was German (216), followed by English, Scots-Irish, Irish, Italian, Scandinavian, French, and Polish. None of the many multivariate analyses reported in the previous chapters found a significant effect of ethnicity, a finding consonant with other studies which show that ethnicity and language background are the weakest of all the social correlates of language in the urban speech community (Labov 2001). There is generally no significant difference between the second and third generations of each ethnic group in the mainstream population (Allen 1973; Labov 1976).

This finding does not apply to language and ethnic groups that are generally classified as “minorities”. The U.S. census 2000 figures show 12.3% African-American and 12.5% Latino.¹ Studies of the English of the Latino minority have found distinguishing features in the English of the second and later generations (Wolfram 1974; Santa Ana 1991; Wald 1981). Many of these are common to the English of those whose families spoke the Spanish dialects of the Caribbean, Mexico, Central and South America.² Several studies have found sharp divisions within the Latino community in orientation towards the surrounding local white dialect, African-American English, and traditional Spanish-speaking culture (Poplack 1978; Fought 1999, 2003). The Telsur sample was not designed to provide the fine-grained social data that could distinguish and report on these subgroups. The seven Telsur speakers who gave their ethnic identification as “Hispanic” were not part of a systematic effort to study the Latino speech community; on the contrary, they generally represent individuals who are integrated into the mainstream speech community.

The African-American [AA] speech community is structured quite differently. There is a well-studied continuum that extends from a standard African-American English, distinguished from middle-class Euro-American English by only a few phonetic features, to African-American Vernacular English [AAVE], which shows sharp phonetic and grammatical divergence from European-American varieties. Many studies have converged to show that AAVE is a relatively uniform dialect, spoken across the United States with relatively little regional differentiation by the great majority of African Americans living in districts with large African-American populations (NYC: Labov et al. 1968; Detroit: Wolfram 1969; Washington: Fasold 1972; Los Angeles: Baugh 1983; Philadelphia: Labov and Harris 1986; Texas: Bailey 1993, Cukor-Avila 1995; North Carolina: Wolfram 1992). Geographic differences that have been reported so far for AAVE are limited to such limited effects of the surrounding dialect as the rate of *r*-vocalization (NYC: Labov 1966; Philadelphia: Myhill 1988). Numerous studies report that African-Americans do not participate in the regional vowel shifts that have been the main focus of this Atlas (Thomas 1989, 2000; Graff, Labov, and Harris 1986).³ The Telsur studies of the major cities of the Northeast, the North, the

Midland, and the West were not designed to obtain a representative sample of the African-Americans in those cities. Of the 44 interviews with African-Americans in Table 4.2, 18 were with individuals from outside the South, who showed no marked features of AAVE.⁴

The situation in the South is quite different. At least for the older, rural speakers who form the backbone of the LAMSAS data, it might be said of phonology as it was said of lexicon, that “by and large the Southern Negro speaks the language of the white man of his locality or area and of his level of education” (Kurath 1949: 6). Thomas 1989, Bailey 1987, and Wolfram, Thomas, and Green 2000 show that this is only a rough approximation. It is clear that an accounting of the regional dialect of the South cannot ignore the speech of African-Americans. We need to know the extent to which African-Americans match, surpass or lag behind Whites in the active sound changes that define this region, and how they might have contributed to its formation. Using the techniques described in Section 4.6, we located the areas of the largest Southern cities in which a high percentage of the population was African-American, and obtained 23 interviews with African-American subjects in those areas. {map22.1}

Map 22.1 shows the locations of the 44 Telsur subjects who identified themselves as African-American.

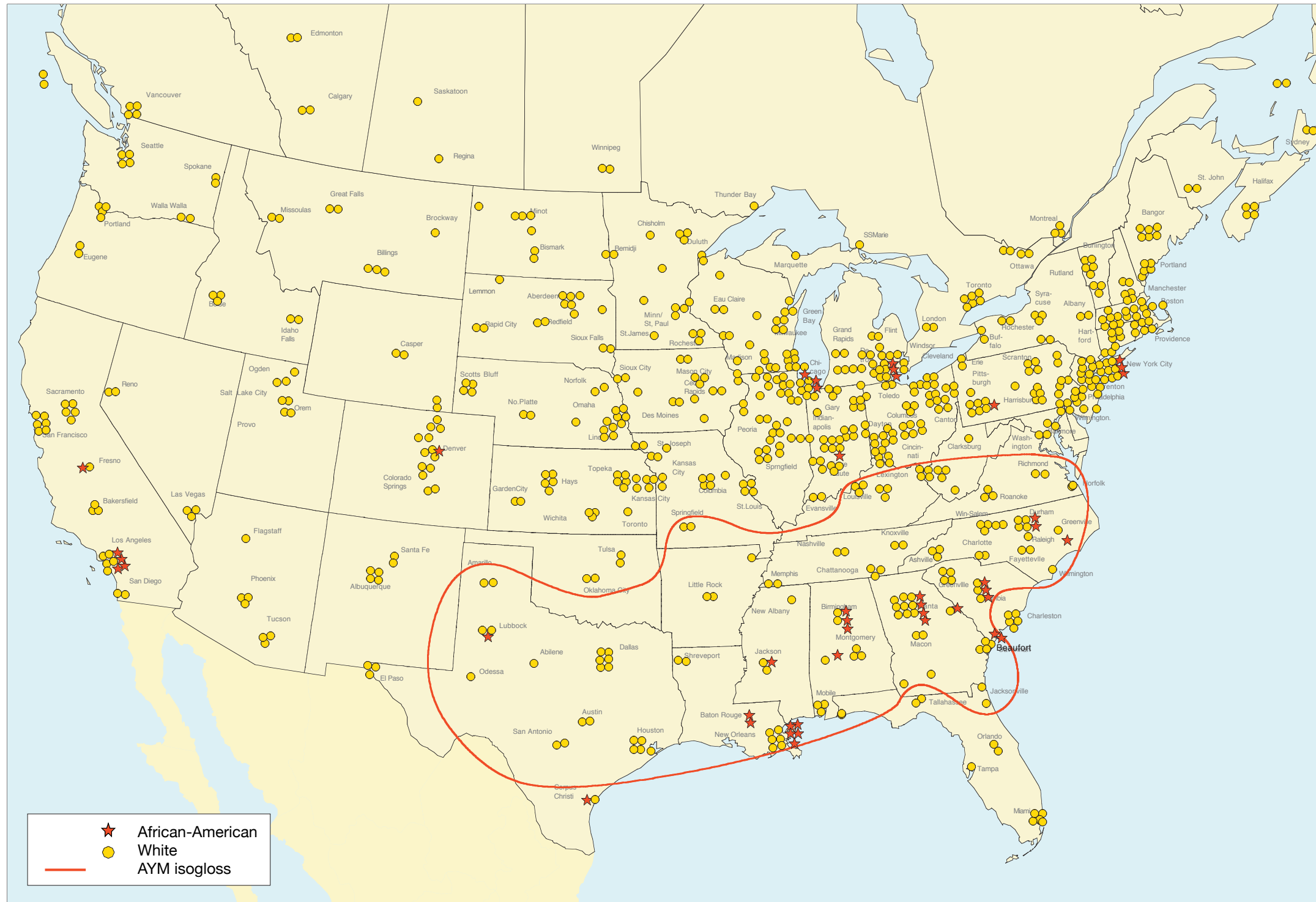
22.1

22.1. Ongoing mergers in the African-American community

A number of differences between African-Americans and Whites have emerged so far. Chapter 7 showed that African-Americans have a much lower probability of using constricted [r] than Whites, and have maintained *r*-less pronunciation in areas of the South where Whites have become completely *r*-full. Chapter 9 found that African-Americans have led in the merger of /i/ and /e/ before nasals. In Chapter 20, it was found that African-Americans tended to use different terms for ‘carbonated beverage’ than Whites, and were more likely to accept the construction *needs washed*.

Table 22.1 compares Whites (W) to African-Americans (AA) for seven phonological features studied in Chapters 7–9, based on minimal pairs and the frequency of *r*-vocalization. The table shows for each city and ethnic group the numbers of subjects who satisfied the description of that variable out of the total number of subjects. Seven cities within the regional dialect of the South are listed

- 1 The discussion in this chapter will exclude Canada, where the majority of the population of African ancestry immigrated relatively recently from Caribbean countries and shows comparatively little divergence from European Canadian speech in the Canadian-born generation.
- 2 Simplification of coda clusters /rt, rd/; alternation of palatal affricates and fricatives; weakening of prosodic constraints on coronal stop deletion.
- 3 Thomas (1989) reports some fronting of /ow/ among African-American high school students in Columbus, Ohio.
- 4 Despite the general finding that most African-Americans do not participate in local sound changes in Northern cities, there are always individuals who are integrated into the surrounding community.



Map 22.1. Distribution of African-American subjects



in the upper part of the table, and four cities outside of the South in the lower part. The overall probability for all subjects of the difference between W and AA being significant is given in the last line.

A number of the maps in this Atlas have showed a difference between Whites and African-Americans in the South, but the differences shown here are more extensive and systematic. For all of the variables studied here, there is a significant difference between the two groups, though some are much stronger than others. The smallest effect is found with the (hw ~ w) variable, the maintenance of any difference between the initials of *whale* and *wail*, and the greatest difference in the (il ~ iyl) variable, the merger of *fill* and *feel*.

On the whole, AA speakers are more conservative than Whites. They show more resistance to the incursion of consonantal /r/ in the South, in every city in the formerly *r*-less areas (excluding Lubbock). In the non-Southern areas, only New York City provides relevant data: here all three AA speakers show some *r*-vocalization. Since all African-American dialects of English and English-based Creoles show a high degree of *r*-lessness, this is to be expected. In every city where *r*-lessness is a traditional feature of both Black and White speech, African-Americans show a higher degree of *r*-vocalization (Labov 1966; Labov, Cohen, and Robbins 1968; Myhill 1988). The behavior of the AA group with the nearly completed mergers studied in Chapter 8 gives more evidence of this conservative tendency. The rapidly disappearing distinction of *ohr* ~ *oh* in *horse*–*hoarse*, *morning*–*mourning*, is preserved more by AA speakers in each of the eleven cities of Table 22.1. As noted above, there is a significant tendency of AA speakers to preserve the distinction of *whale* and *wail* more than whites.

It has been noted that African-Americans have a greater tendency to resist the low back merger of /o/ and /oh/ than Whites (Veatch 1992). Only Los Angeles is relevant to this issue in Table 21.1, where all five Whites show a complete merger, but none of the four African-Americans.

While AA speakers are conservative in regard to the almost completed changes of Chapter 8, they are in the forefront of three ongoing mergers described in Chapter 9. The merger of /in/ with /en/ is a general characteristic of the African-

American speech community, extending beyond AAVE to all social levels. In the South, 75 percent of the AA speakers had a clear merger in both production and perception, as opposed to 42 percent of the whites. In the North, only AA speakers have the merger.

Chapter 8 showed that the merger of high vowels before /l/ was advancing in different geographic areas of the U.S. with the *feel*–*fill* merger concentrated in the South, and the *fool*–*full* merger most advanced in western Pennsylvania. Table 22.1 registers all those responses that show any tendency towards merger: that is, subjects who do not make a clear difference in both production and perception. The figures show that AA speakers are considerably ahead of Whites in the il ~ iyl merger, with 82 percent of AA speakers merged vs. 28 percent of Whites in the seven cities of the South. The opposition is even stronger in the four cities of the North, with 1/25 merged for Whites, and 11/12 for African-Americans. The situation is similar but less marked for the opposition of /ul/ and /uwl/.

The only ongoing merger that is not advanced among African-Americans is the low back merger of /o/ and /oh/. Here the AA speakers show a minimal tendency, as noted above.

22.2. Acoustic analysis of African-American speech

The analysis of the South in Chapter 18 was focused primarily upon two active chain shifts: the Southern Shift and the Back Uplide chain shift. The South shares with the Midland a strong fronting of /ow/ as well as the general fronting of /uw/, and shows in addition fronting of /uw/ before /l/. The acoustic analysis of four African-American speakers will illustrate how AA speakers differ from Whites in regard to these dynamic processes.

Figure 22.1 shows the mean values of the vowel system of two Telsur subjects from Columbia, South Carolina. On the left is Kathy F., 46, of Irish background, a housewife who does bookkeeping at home. On the right is Daniel W., also 46 years old, an African-American. He is a computer consultant, with two years of college education. It is evident that his vowel system is more conservative in many ways.

Table 22.1. Comparison of Whites and African-Americans for minimal pairs and *r*-vocalization in six cities of the South and four outside of the South. 00 = 'same' in production and perception; 22 = 'different' in production and perception

	(r) < 100%		o ~ oh = 00		in ~ en = 00		ohr ~ ohr <> 00		il ~ iyl <> 22		ul ~ uwl <> 22		hw ~ w <> 00	
	W	AA	W	AA	W	AA	W	AA	W	AA	W	AA	W	AA
South														
Durham NC	1/5	2/2	0/5	0/2	4/5	2/2	1/5	1/2	3/5	1/2	1/5	1/2	2/4	2/2
Columbia SC	1/3	3/3	0/3	0/3	2/3	3/3	0/3	2/3	1/3	2/3	2/3	1/3	0/3	1/3
Augusta GA	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	1/1	0/1	1/1	0/1	1/1	1/1	1/1
Atlanta GA	2/9	4/4	0/9	0/4	5/9	2/4	1/9	1/4	0/9	4/4	3/9	3/4	5/9	2/4
Jackson MI	0/2	1/1	0/2	0/1	0/2	1/1	1/2	1/1	1/2	1/1	0/2	0/1	1/2	1/1
New Orleans LA	4/6	5/5	0/6	0/5	0/6	4/5	5/6	5/5	1/6	4/5	1/6	3/5	3/6	2/5
Lubbock TX	0/2	0/1	0/2	0/1	2/2	1/1	0/2	0/1	2/2	0/1	2/2	0/1	1/2	1/1
Total	8/28	15/17	0/28	0/17	11/26	12/16	8/28	11/17	8/28	14/17	9/28	9/17	13/28	12/17
Non-South														
Los Angeles CA	1/5	1/4	5/5	0/4	0/5	2/4	1/5	2/4	0/5	4/4	2/5	2/4	0/5	2/4
Chicago IL	0/4	1/2	0/4	0/2	0/4	0/2	2/4	1/2	0/4	1/2	2/5	2/2	4/4	1/2
Detroit	0/7	2/3	0/7	0/3	0/7	2/3	0/7	1/3	0/7	3/3	2/7	3/3	1/7	1/3
NYC	7/9	3/3	0/9	0/3	0/9	2/3	2/9	2/3	1/9	3/3	1/9	3/3	1/9	1/3
Total	8/25	8/12	5/25	0/12	0/25	6/12	5/25	6/12	1/25	11/12	7/25	10/12	6/25	5/12
Total	16/53	23/29	5/53	0/29	13/53	18/29	13/53	17/29	9/53	25/29	16/53	19/29	19/53	17/29
(chi-sq)	< .0001		<.005 (LA)		<.0001		<.0001		<.00001		<.001		<.05	

The Southern Shift is well developed in Figure 22.1a, but not in Figure 22.1b. Both speakers show deletion of the glide of /ay/, the first stage of the Shift, with slightly less than half the tokens as monophthongs (highlighted). In both cases, vowels before voiced obstruents are included in the monophthongal group. But while Kathy F. clearly shows Stage 2 of the shift, with /ey/ and /e/ reversed, the two nuclei are at the same level for Daniel W.

The fronting of the back upgliding vowels is much more advanced in Figure 22.1a. /uw/ after coronal (Tuw) and non-coronal stops (Kuw) is front of center,

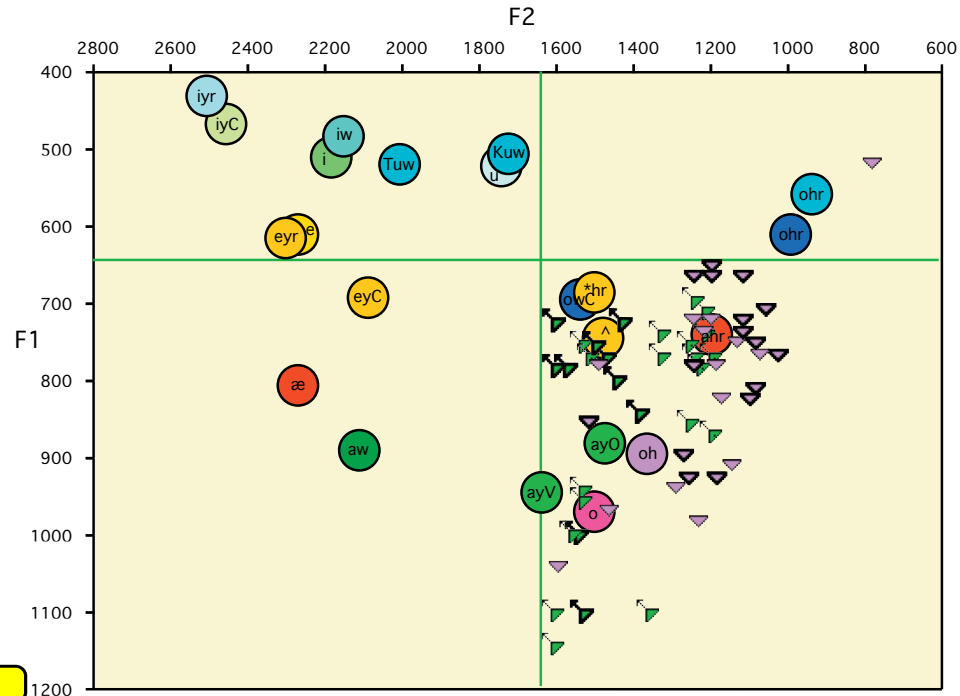


Figure 22.1a. Vowel system of Kathy F., 46, Columbia, SC. Highlighted /ay/ tokens = glide deletion. Highlighted /oh/ tokens = back upglide

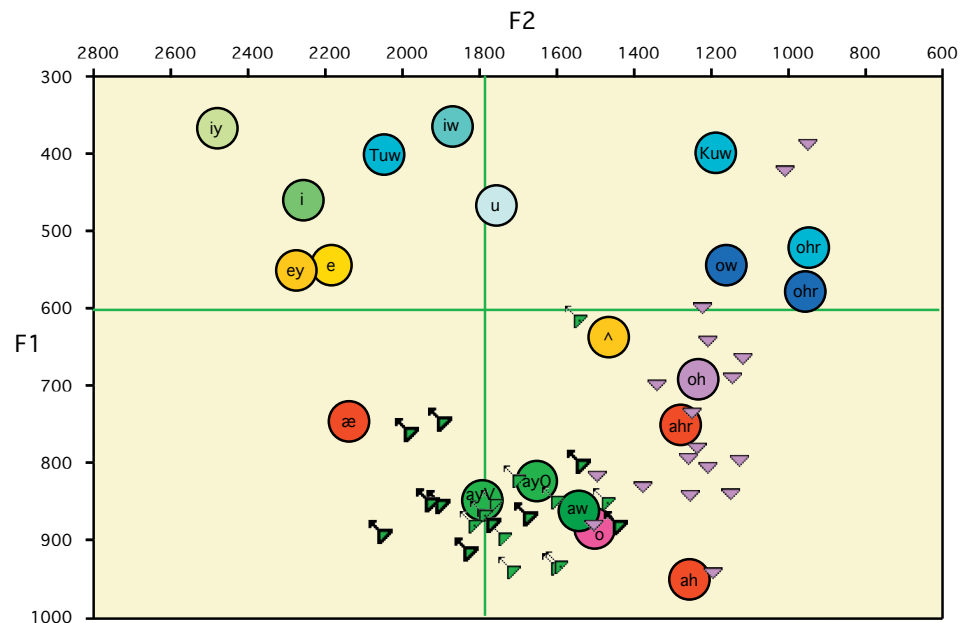


Figure 22.1b. Vowel system of Daniel W., 46, Columbia, SC. Highlighted /ay/ tokens = glide deletion

and /ow/ is close to center position. But in Figure 22.1b, /uw/ is fronted only after coronal consonants, while /Kuw/ is in far-back position along with /uw/. There is distinct fronting of /uw/ for the White speaker, but not for the African-American.

The most dramatic difference between the two speakers is in the Back Upglide shift. For Kathy F., /aw/ is well to the front, in a position that might well be labeled /æw/. The great majority of the /oh/ tokens show a back upglide (highlighted), and many are unrounded. Daniel W. has no back upglides with /oh/. The chain shift /oh/ → /aw/ → /æw/ is fully developed in Figure 22.1a but not at all in evidence in Figure 22.1b.

Figures 22.2a, b are a comparable pair of analyses of speakers from Durham, North Carolina. Elizabeth C. is a 40-year-old homemaker from a working class family; her ethnic background is a mixture of Scots-Irish and Cherokee. Linda B. is an African-American day-care teacher, 35 years old. The contrast between the two systems is similar with that seen in the Columbia speakers. Elizabeth C. has an even more complete Southern Shift than Kathy F. Almost all /ay/ tokens show glide deletion, and both Stage 2 and Stage 3 are evident in the reversals of /e/ and /ey/, /i/ and /iy/. Linda B., the African-American speaker, has fewer instances of glide deletion. She does show a Stage 2 reversal of /e/ and /ey/, but not of /i/ and /iy/. Just as in Figures 22.1a, b, there is much more fronting of the back upgliding vowels for the white speaker. Elizabeth C. shows /uw/ after non-coronals just back of center, while for Linda B., this category shows no fronting at all. A similar contrast is seen in the fronting of /ow/. The mean /ow/ of Elizabeth C. is almost central, while the mean for Linda B. is in mid back position.

The Back Upglide chain shift is fully exemplified in Figure 22.2a, with most of the tokens of /oh/ showing a back glide. There are no such back upglides in Figure 22.2b. However, /aw/ is fronter than /ay/, unlike the situation in Figure 22.1b. It can also be noted that /iw/ is fully front and separate for Elizabeth C., but not for Linda B.

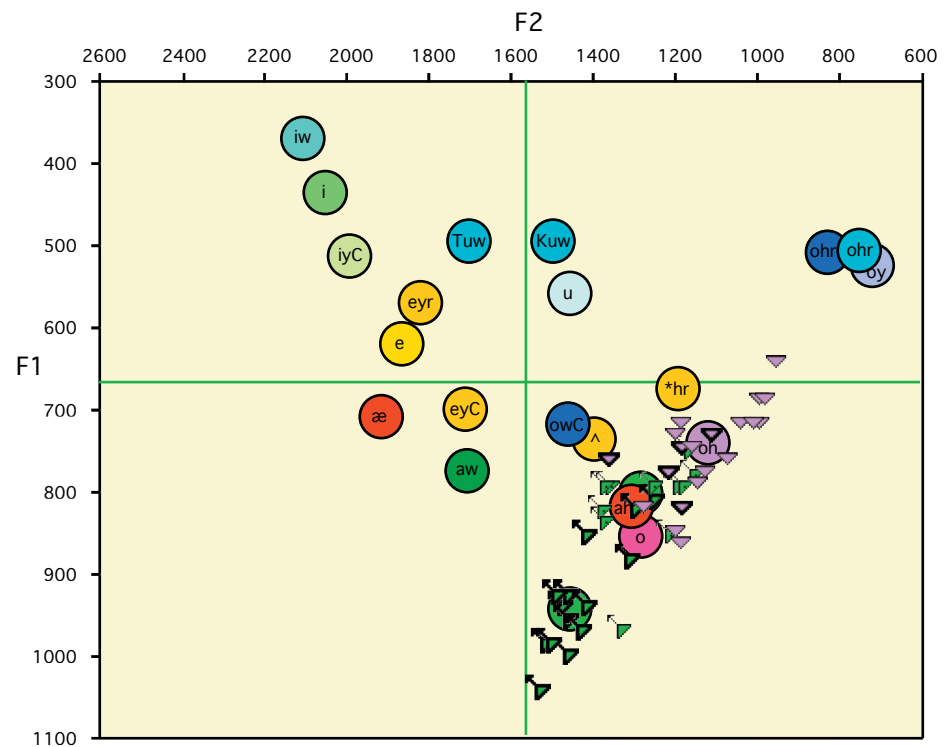


Figure 22.2a. Vowel system of Elizabeth C., 40, Durham, NC. Highlighted /ay/ tokens = glide deletion. Highlighted /oh/ tokens = back upglide

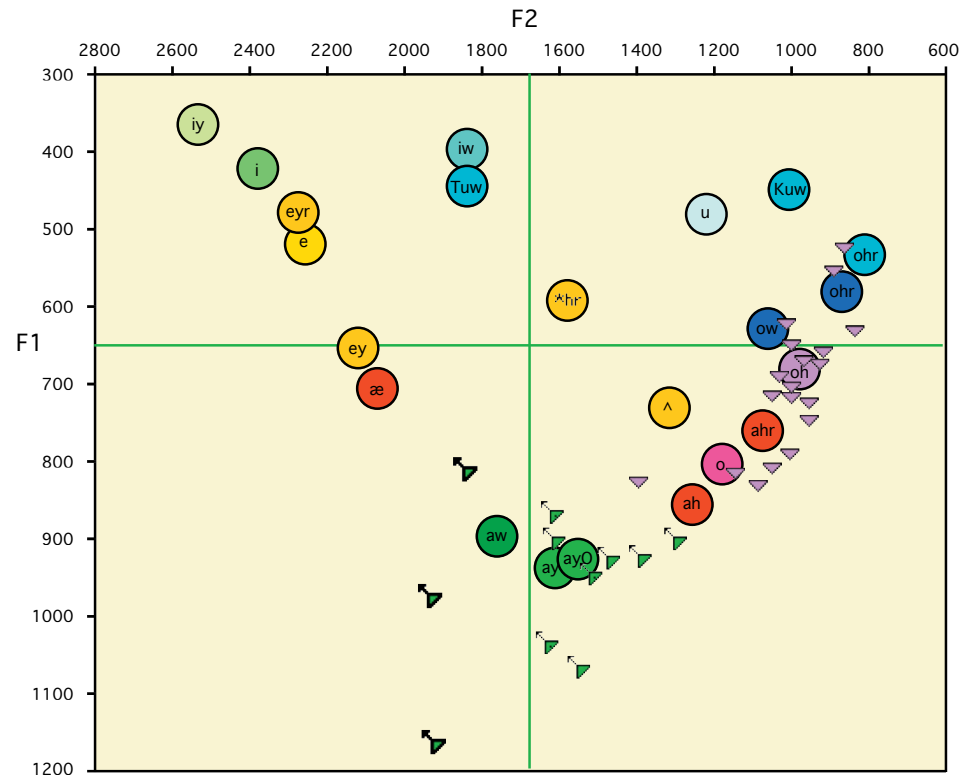


Figure 22.2b. Vowel system of Linda B., 35, Durham, NC. Highlighted /ay/ tokens = glide deletion

In respect to the dynamics driving the Southern vowel system, Durham is in advance of Columbia by all the measures we have taken. And in both cities, the White speaker is more advanced, the African-American speaker more conservative.

22.3. Comparison with rural and small town African-American speakers

Thomas (2000) presents mean vowel charts for 28 African-Americans, largely from rural areas in North Carolina and Texas, with birth dates ranging from 1848 to 1989.⁵ Table 22.2 is our summary of the phonological developments that are the focus of this Atlas. The “East” section of Thomas’s data includes one speaker from Virginia and Alabama along with the North Carolina data, and the “West” section includes two speakers from Memphis along with the Texas data. Since Thomas’s data extends to speakers born in the nineteenth century, it gives us some insight into the history of the Southern Shift among African-American and White speakers.

The table indicates that the Southern Shift developed more slowly among African-Americans than among White speakers. For these AA speakers, there is no glide deletion before voiceless consonants, and there is no trace of Stage 2 for the older subjects. At the same time, it is clear that younger AA speakers do participate in the Shift. Since Thomas did not work with speakers from the Inland South, it is understandable that Stage 3 does not appear. Many of his interviews are in the Texas South area, and the 60 percent glide deletion before voiceless consonants shows that African-Americans in that area share this development with Whites.

The Back Upglide chain shift is also less vigorous among AA speakers. The development of the back upglide with /oh/ is found, but not the vigorous fronting of /aw/ to /æw/. In fact, the /aw/ column is the single most striking difference between the two groups. While Whites move to 100 percent strong fronting of /aw/, this is a minor tendency among African-Americans, and the majority keep /aw/ back of center. In Philadelphia, the opposition of front to back nucleus for /aw/ has become a categorical contrast of white and black phonology. A shift from back to front /aw/ changes the general perception of a speaker from black to white ethnicity (Graff, Labov and Harris 1986).

The fronting of the other back upgliding vowels is generally less marked among African-Americans, particularly in the case of /uw/. Vowels after coronals and non-coronals are not distinguished in the mean values given by Thomas. The average of /Kuw/ and /Tuw/ in Figures 22.1–21.2 will give a result back of center, even when /Tuw/ is well front of center, and this is probably the case with the Thomas subjects as well.

African-Americans and Whites show the same rapid decline in the contrast of /ohr/ and /oh/. The three AA subjects in the West who retain this distinction show the same conservative tendency as in Table 22.1.

The Thomas data includes remarks on the vocalization of /r/. Vocalization is consistently stronger among African-Americans than among Whites. In the Thomas data for Whites, no remarks are made on (r) among the younger speakers; it is assumed that they are 100 percent r-ful. However, all of the AA subjects are recorded by Thomas with variable /r/; none show the 100 percent /r/ characteristic of White speakers in Texas.

The merger of /ul/ and /uwl/ is noted in the speech of three younger African-Americans in Texas, consistent with the data earlier in this chapter. No reflection is found of the higher degree of merger of /il/ and /iyl/.

From these studies of older and younger speakers among rural African-Americans, it can be seen that the Southern Shift is advancing in the western region of the South, but not in the eastern region. Fronting of back upgliding vowels does not show the remarkable advance found among Whites. r-vocalization is declining, but not as rapidly as among Whites. This agrees with the view developed above of African-American English as a phonologically conservative dialect in urbanized areas in the South.

⁵ Analyses of speakers with a Caribbean or Gullah background are not included in this summary, nor those from the Outer Banks of North Carolina, since these distinctly different vowel systems are not immediately relevant to the major trends reported here for the urbanized areas of the South. Reports of mainland communities in eastern North Carolina are included.

Table 22.2. Percent realization of phonological features of Southern English for Whites and African-Americans, derived from acoustic measurements provided in Thomas (2000). Under Southern Shift, Stage 1 is glide deletion of /ayV/ and /ay0/; Stage 2 is reversal of the relative positions of /ey/ and /e/; Stage 3 is reversal of the relative positions of /iy/ and /i/.

	Born	Southern Shift			Back Up glide oh → aw	Fronting of			ohr ≠ohr	r=0	r=100	il=iyl	ul=uwl	N	
		ayV	ay0	Stage 1		Stage 2	Stage 3	ow							uw
White															
East	<1930	82	9	36	9	64	36	45	73	82	36	0	0	0	11
	1930–	82	27	64	9	82	91	82	100	18	9	55	0	0	11
West	<1930	67	17	33	0	58	83	8	75	50	0		0	0	12
	1930–	95	89	84	0	26	84	84	100	5	5		26	37	19
African-American															
East	<1930	40	0	0	0	50	10	0	10	70	60	0	0	0	10
	1930–	25	0	25	0	25	50	25	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
West	<1930	50	0	0	0	50	0	25	25	100	0	0	0	0	4
	1930–	70	0	60	0	50	40	0	30	30	10	0	0	30	10