

**Results and implications of a real time study:
Forty years of language variation on Martha's Vineyard
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Labov's 1962 study of centralization of (ay) and (aw) on Martha's Vineyard established some basic principles of social dialectology (1972). The methods he used, which involved sampling a range of speakers across the island and analyzing the degree of centralization in demographic cohorts, showed that variation in the speech community is not free, but instead is socially structured. The patterned variability that emerged when speakers were grouped by chronological age have been replicated in numerous studies of changes in progress since then; on the basis of this, sociolinguists have adopted the notion of 'apparent time' — a window on the past provided by synchronic variation.

In 2002, I undertook a real time evaluation of the changes in progress documented in Labov's earlier study. Replicating his sample base and his methods as closely as possible, I found real time evidence corroborates the inferences made on the basis of apparent time. Interviewing 116 speakers aged 4-100 years, and using the same centralization index Labov did in his earlier work, I find the same rise in centralization of (ay) and (aw) in speakers born between 1917 and 1931 that Labov did (see Figure 1). Although there is something of a decrease in centralization among speakers born between 1932 and 1998, rates of centralization never go lower than the levels recorded by Labov for his adolescent speakers in 1962. Like Cedergren's restudy of her Panama City data (reported in Labov 1994), I find a general increase in the relative frequency of what was the innovative variant forty years ago, but otherwise a close match between the real time data and the apparent time data (under-25s even seem to be increasing (aw) centralization, see Figure 2). Hence, unlike Blake and Josey (2002), I do not conclude that centralization has lost its symbolic value as a marker of local identity and is on the way out in Martha's Vineyard.

I conclude with a discussion of two implications of these findings for sociolinguistic practice. First, the robustness of the apparent time construct for the analysis of changes in progress. The demographic profile of Martha's Vineyard has changed considerably in the last forty years and as Bailey (2002) notes, under these conditions, the predictions based on apparent time may not cache out. This study suggests that even in communities characterized by extensive in-migration the apparent time construct is a valuable sociolinguistic tool. Second, the differences between the results reported here and those reported by Josey and Blake at last year's NWAV reinforce our growing understanding that the methods used to collect data may substantively affect our results. Methods of data collection must be another consideration for future real time studies of variation and change.

Keywords: apparent time, real time, sociolinguistic methods

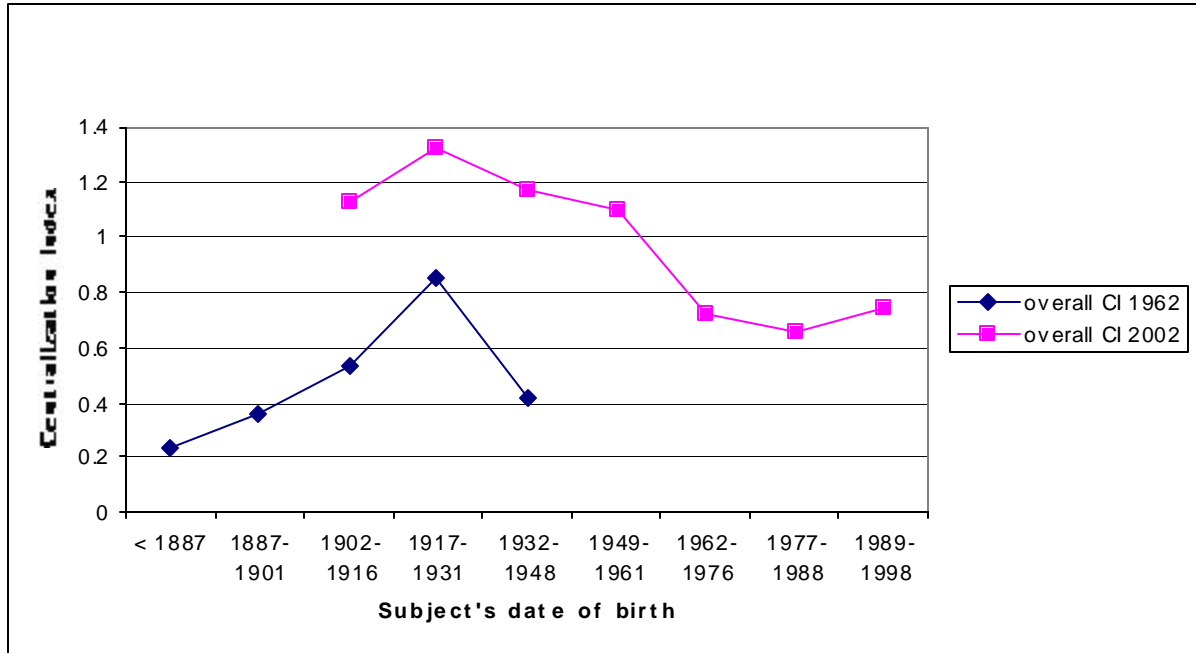


Figure 1: Overall degree of centralization of (ay) and (aw) variables on Martha's Vineyard. Labov's 1962 data compared with the present study).

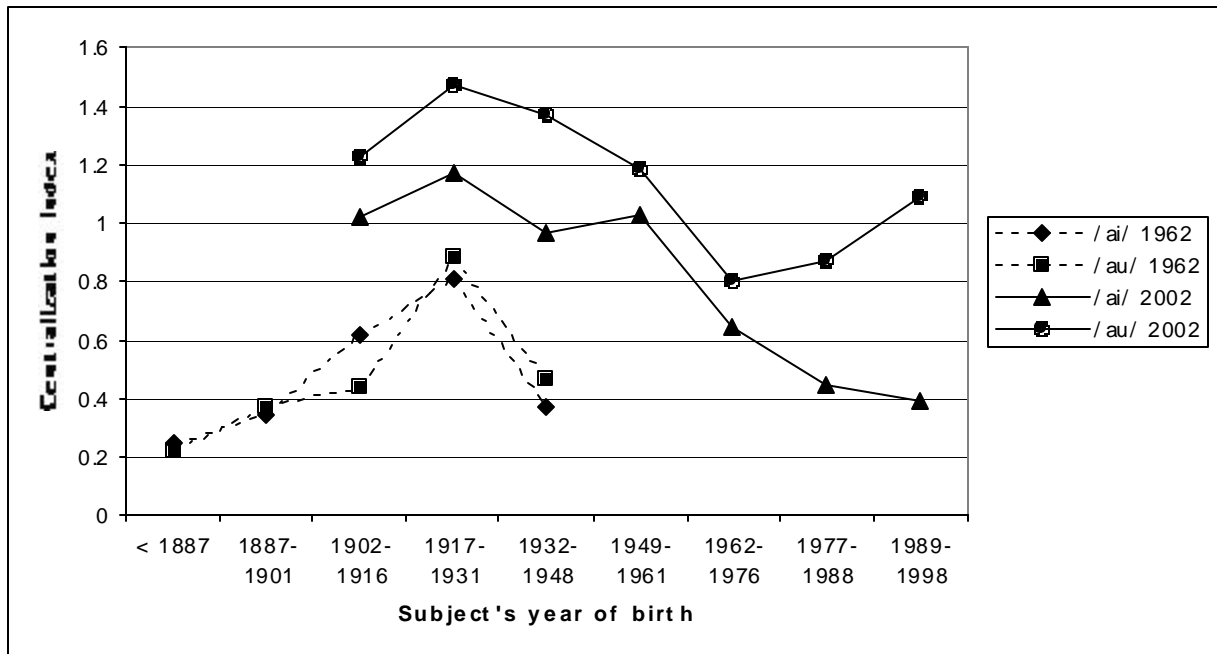


Figure 2: Centralization indices for (ay) and (aw), Labov's 1962 data compared with the present study.

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