

The Role of /l/ and /r/ in the Evolution of Southern American Phonology  
Jan Tillery, Claire Andres, Brooke Ehrhardt and Guy Bailey

From around 1880 until World War II, Southern American English (SAE) underwent a series of extensive sound changes that radically reshaped its vowel system. Among the most prominent of these changes were the monophthongization of /ai/, the vowel rotations that are collectively known as the Southern Shift, and a number of conditioned mergers, including the merger of high and mid front lax vowels before nasals (so that *pen* and *pen* become homophones) and the merger of mid and low front vowels before heterosyllabic /r/ (so that *Mary*, *merry*, and eventually *marry* become homophones). Although linguists have worked out the spatial distribution and the sequence of these developments (see Bailey 1997, Labov et al. forthcoming, Thomas, 2001, and Tillery and Bailey, 2003), exactly what initiated them is still unclear. The linguistic changes began during a period of extensive social change and demographic dislocation in the South, but they cannot be accounted for by dialect contact in any straightforward way, and any phonetic motivation for them has yet to be determined.

This paper explores the motivation for two of the most prominent changes that have affected SAE since 1880: the monophthongization of /ai/ and the merger of mid and low front vowels before heterosyllabic /r/. It does so by examining /ai/ and front vowels before /r/ in four surveys of SAE (the Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States, the Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States, a Survey of Oklahoma Dialects, and a Survey of Texas Dialects) and in a series of mechanical recordings of black and white Southerners born between 1844 and 1890. The recordings come primarily from the Library of Congress and the American History Center at the University of Texas. Taken together, these sources allow us to examine SAE during the crucial period when the sound changes began and to track the changes to completion. The sources also allow for an extensive analysis of the linguistic and social constraints on monophthongization and the pre-/r/ mergers.

Our most important finding is that both the monophthongization of /ai/ and also the merger of mid and low front vowels before heterosyllabic /r/ are responses to the phonetic character of post-vocalic /l/ and /r/ in SAE. The motivation for monophthongal /ai/ was the coarticulatory effects of following /l/ and /r/. Glide-shortened and fully monophthongal /ai/ emerged first before /l/ and /r/ when the offglide of the diphthong assimilated to a following vocalized consonant. Monophthongization then spread to other voiced environments and finally to voiceless environments among some Southerners. The merger of mid and low front vowels was motivated by the resyllabification of heterosyllabic /r/. In words like *Mary* and *merry* in earlier SAE, /r/ was syllabified with the second syllabic, but after 1880 /r/ increasingly came to be part of the first syllable. The merger of the mid front vowels before /r/ (and later their merger with low front vowels in words like *marry*) closely followed this resyllabification.