

## Dialect contact in South Philadelphia: Indexing “street” with an outside variant

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The adoption of a new feature through dialect contact is often correlated with a speaker’s positive affiliation towards speakers of the source dialect (Cutler 1997; though see also Milroy and Milroy 1985) and to the social characteristics that are indexed by the source dialect (Eckert 2008).

In this paper, I present evidence of phonological transfer from dialect contact. I examine the adoption of (TH)-fronting, a feature of African American English (AAE), by white speakers who exhibit overtly hostile attitudes towards African Americans. Following the indexicality framework of Silverstein (2003) and Eckert (2008), I argue that this transfer has occurred because the feature itself is underspecified for demographic membership and has instead become a more salient index of *street* identity. The variant under consideration is (TH)-fronting, or the production of /θ/ as /f/, as in /tif/ for “teeth”. (TH)-fronting is a feature of Philadelphian AAE, but not a feature of white Philadelphian English.

The data under discussion comes from sociolinguistic fieldwork conducted with an Irish-Italian block in South Philadelphia pseudonymously named “Donegal Street.” Donegal Street is in a low-income neighborhood characterized by block-specific racial segregation and racial tension between white residents and African American residents (Newall 2005). Racial conflict between white and African American residents provides a clear avenue for dialect contact in Donegal Street, and I argue that it is precisely through conflict or *street* oriented activities that Donegal Street speakers are adopting (TH)-fronting, and that therefore (TH)-fronting has come to index *street* or *tough* for white speakers of Donegal Street.

Sociolinguistic interviews were coded auditorily in Praat for realization of (TH). Participants’ street orientation (Anderson, 1999) was scored based on their reported engagement in street-oriented activities (Table 1). Results are shown in Figure 1. Finally, participants’ attitudes toward speakers of the source dialect are operationalized on a four-point scale (Table 2), based on participant’s responses to interview questions regarding race relations. I note that both the racial animus score and the street activity score are simplifications of two very complex attitudes and do not purport to represent participants’ internal attitudes. Rather, both measures simply measure the sentiments and activities participants are willing to express to myself, a white listener who is an outsider to the community.

As shown in Figure 1, participants’ rates of borrowed (TH)-fronting correlates with their street activity score, as well as their racial animus score. Participants with higher street scores produce more fronting ( $p < .001$ ), and these are the same participants with the highest racial animus scores. I argue that it is through street-oriented interactions with their street-oriented African American neighbors that the white Donegal Street speakers are adopting (TH)-fronting. Furthermore, I argue that (TH)-fronting has been underspecified as a marker of group identity, and instead carries a primary indexicality of *tough* or *street*, allowing speakers with negative attitudes toward the source dialect to nevertheless adopt (TH)-fronting in their own speech. This paper demonstrates a case of phonological adoption across hostile lines, through second-order indexicality.

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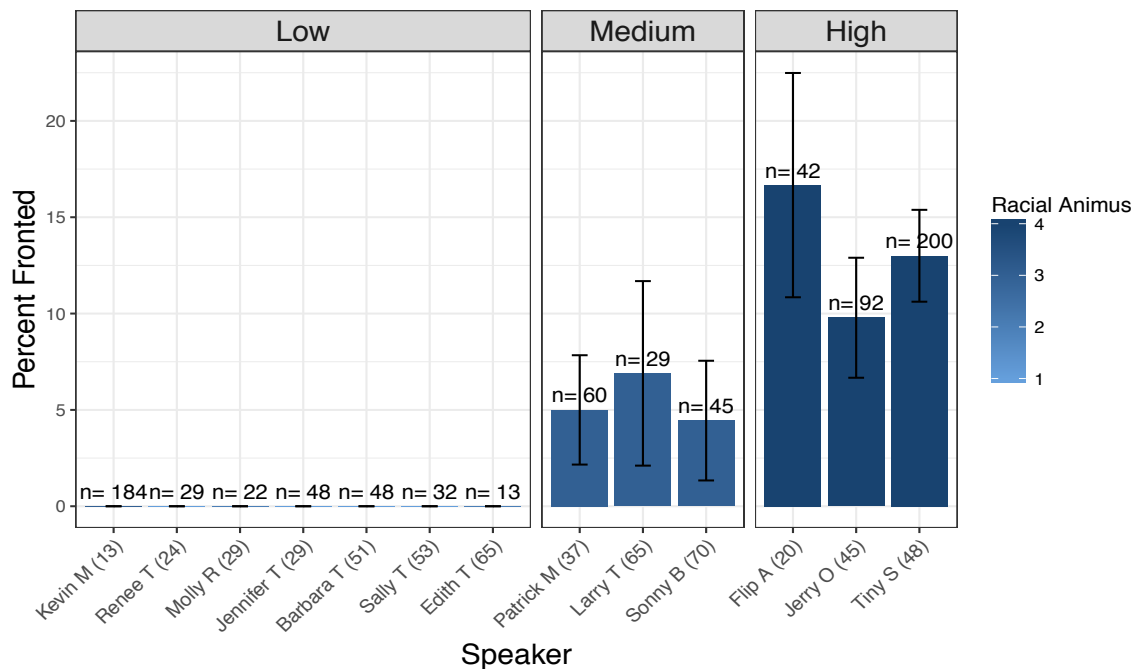
**Activities:** Drug dealing, drug purchasing, stolen goods trade, group turf disputes, overt opposition to police, positive orientation to fighting

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Activities reported	Street Activity Score
0-2	Low
3-4	Medium
5-6	High

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**Table 1:** Street-orientation score, based on activities mentioned in interviews and field notes



**Figure 1:** (TH)-fronting, grouped by street activity score. Bars depict standard error.

Racial Animus Score	Example
Overtly opposed racism (1)	“My daughter brought that [picture] home for me. It says ‘the shame of American democracy’, and it has the police lynching a black guy.” - Barbara, 51
No mention of race (2)	--
Non-aggressive racial animus (3)	“When they jump your little brothers, jump you, ruin the neighborhood [...], what are you gonna do?” - Kevin, 13
Racially-based sympathetic violence (4)	“Back in the day, a n----- couldn’t walk down Donegal Street without getting smacked in the face with a glass bottle.” - Flip, 20

**Table 2:** Racial animus score

**Selected References**

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