

A Northern Cities Shift Retreat in the St. Louis Corridor

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This paper presents data from original interviews I conducted in 18 St. Louis Corridor towns alongside 11 speakers from the Atlas of North American English (ANAE). Analysis suggests that rather than demonstrating diffusion of the Northern Cities Shift (NCS) from the Inland North, the new data shows instead a retreat in recent years from certain variables of the NCS as well as concentration of other NCS variables for older speakers in the big cities of Springfield and St. Louis.

The St. Louis Corridor (henceforth SLC) is an Inland North dialect enclave surrounded by the Midland dialect (Carver 1986, ANAE, and Bigham 2010). The speech found in this area shows that the NCS permeates the dialect border between the Inland North and Midland (see Thomas 2010 on parallel North/Midland border stability in Ohio and Bigham 2010 on certain variables in younger SLC speakers). ANAE and Labov (2007) argue that this pattern was spread by dialect diffusion from adult speakers because of a) lack of correlation in the SLC between age and demonstration of NCS features b) higher use of features by St. Louis speakers than Corridor speakers. Interestingly, census data shows that the Illinois center of population has been moving along the Corridor towards Chicago since the 1830's. The exception to this is between 1930 and 1940, when Illinois also showed a greater percentage of migration than neighboring states as well as compared to later decades. Therefore, both linguistically and population-wise, this was an exceptional time in Illinois' history.

Recent data combined with ANAE shows that the backing of /ɛ/ and /ʌ/ and the fronting of /ɑ/ (stages 2, 3, and 5 of the NCS) are tied to age and urban locations. A cluster of speakers born in Springfield and St. Louis between 1929 and 1947 (during an exceptional time in Illinois' migratory history) satisfy the ANAE criteria for these vowel movements (Table 1). Figure 1 shows an example of a subset of speakers from Springfield (urban), Lincoln (rural), and Girard (rural). It is possible that some of these vowels permeated the SLC when this older speakers were growing up and have been disappearing since. The most striking of these is between a mother and son from Springfield, demonstrated in Figure 1 with black arrows pointing to the son's /ɛ/, /ɔ/, and /ɑ/, as well as the older Springfield speaker and the mother, represented with gray arrows. Although the NCS is not a part of the dialect of every speaker in a big city born before 1950, those born after 1950 satisfy an average of 1.2 ANAE criteria (out of 5) while those born before 1950 satisfy 2.2 and those born in big cities average 2.3. In the big cities group, those born after 1950 average 1.5 criteria while those born before average 2.9, over half.

In summary, this new data shows that speakers in the SLC do show some features of the NCS in their speech, but I argue that some of those features are centered in the dialects of those born in big cities and have been retreating over the last few generations. This data also leads to the conclusion that although speakers from more populated centers appeared to be the leaders in NCS features a generation or two ago, it is disappearing in those areas and is not being incorporated into the dialects of the younger generation. Finally, this finding opens up many questions for future research, including the actuation of this change in the SLC and whether the NCS in Springfield is a result of contact with Chicago or St. Louis.

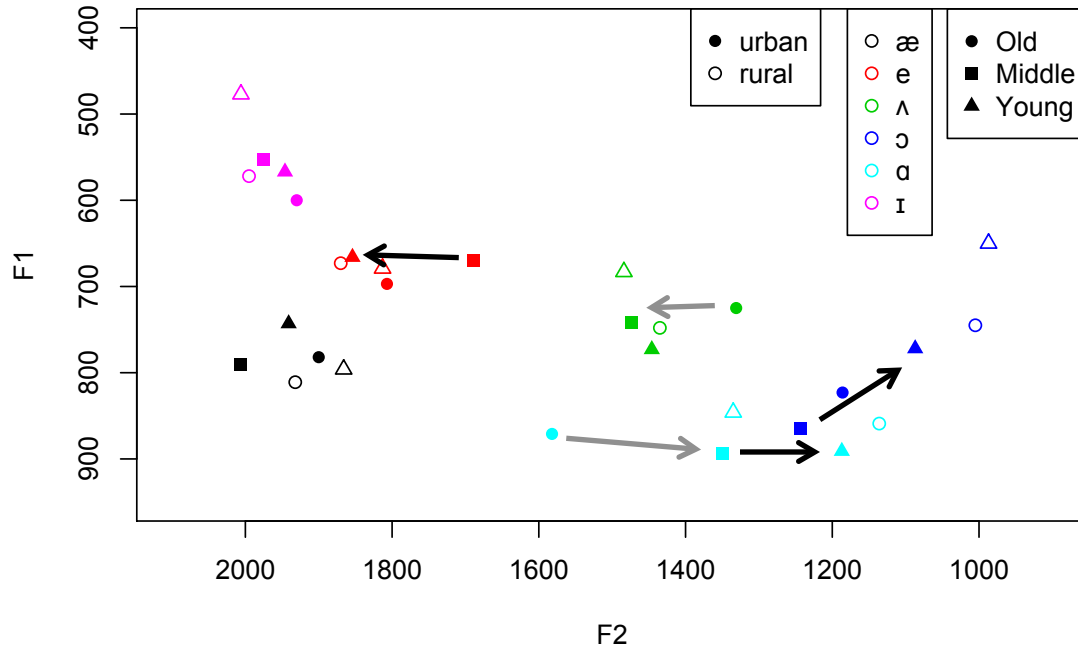


Figure 1: NCS vowels of selected speakers according to age and rurality of speakers.

Criteria		% satisfied for SLC	% sat. older big cities
AE	$F1(\text{æ}) < 700 \text{ Hz}$	62%	56%
O2	$F2(\text{ɑ}) > 1450 \text{ Hz}$	21%	44%
ED	$F2(\text{ɑ}) - F2(\text{ɛ}) < 375 \text{ Hz}$	10%	22%
EQ	$F1(\text{ɛ}) > F1(\text{æ}); F2(\text{ɛ}) < F2(\text{æ})$	41%	67%
UD	$F2(\text{ʌ}) < F2(\text{ɑ})$	31%	67%

Table 1: NCS criteria from the ANAE and percent satisfaction for SLC speakers.

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