

Why here? Why now? Sudden merger from gradual demographic change  
Daniel Ezra Johnson, University of Pennsylvania

Herold (1990) documented the aftermath of sudden low back vowel merger in a speech community. She found that all speakers born in Tamaqua, PA before c. 1920 distinguished /o/ and /oh/, while all those born afterward merged the two word classes. Herold convincingly attributed the origin of this merger to a very high rate of foreign immigration. The immigrants, possibly due to their largely-Slavic background, failed to acquire the low back distinction from the minority of native Pennsylvanians. The immigrants' children not only retained the merger, but spread it to the entire community.

Johnson (2006) found two communities in Southeastern Massachusetts where a similarly sudden low back merger occurred much more recently. Both South Attleboro (ABS) and Seekonk (SK) are directly adjacent to Rhode Island, and like there, the distinction between /o/ and /oh/ is universal among adults. In ABS, children born after c. 1985 – whose parents maintain the distinction – are merged. SK's children underwent the change ten years later, those born after c. 1995 being merged. This data comes from interviews with 20 children in ABS and 34 in SK, and survey responses from 309 children in ABS and 223 in SK.

Unlike in Tamaqua, in ABS and SK there was no catastrophic demographic event coinciding with, and serving to explain, the actuation of merger. Nor is there any obvious reason why ABS underwent merger ten years before SK. This paper proposes an explanation in a quantitatively refined version of Herold's hypothesis. Instead of foreigners unable to learn the /o~/oh/ distinction, the agents of change here were in-migrants from Eastern Massachusetts, where /o/ and /oh/ have long been merged.

As more parents moved from Eastern Massachusetts, their young merged children joined peer groups in ABS and SK. At first, they were greatly outnumbered by locals who had acquired their own parents' distinction. In such an environment, merged children could learn the distinction. Over time, the proportion of children with merged backgrounds grew, both patterns became well represented in peer groups, and in-migrants' children remained merged, local children distinct. But as migration continued, children from merged backgrounds became numerous enough that locals no longer maintained the distinction beyond the first years of school.

Information on children's and their parents' origin collected from three age groups show Eastern Massachusetts in-migration into SK rising, but still lower than ABS's rate, consistent with the timing of the mergers. 20% of native SK 12<sup>th</sup> graders – a mainly distinct cohort – had at least one merged parent. 25% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders did, and 32% of 4<sup>th</sup> graders – a mixed cohort, just before total merger. This compares with fully 47% of native ABS 12<sup>th</sup> graders, just after total merger occurred there.

Results like these will be correlated with Census data showing the rates of migration between 1985-1990 and 1995-2000, confirming Herold's hypothesis, and showing that

the same mechanism, whereby enough initially-merged children cause initially-distinct ones to merge, applies to migration across dialect boundaries, as well as across oceans.

Herold, Ruth. 1990. *Mechanisms of merger: the implementation and distribution of the low back merger in eastern Pennsylvania*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.

Johnson, Daniel Ezra. 2006. Adopted at an early age: juvenile merger and dialect change. Paper presented at NWAV 35, Columbus, Ohio.