

Changes in dialect and dialect perception in Cooperstown, New York

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Cooperstown, NY:

village in rural Otsego County, central New York State; population ca. 2000:
home of National Baseball Hall of Fame, nearby baseball summer camps, etc.

Like most Northern Cities Shift communities, Cooperstown is **losing NCS**:

Abrupt apparent-time retreat from TRAP-raising and LOT-fronting (Dinkin 2022)—
a **sharp distinction** between Baby Boomers and post-Boomer generations.

Cooperstown experienced **rapid growth in tourism** in second half of 20th century;
downtown businesses now mainly cater to tourists rather than locals (Anania 2016).
Do locals' **attitudes toward tourism** explain loss of NCS? (cf. Labov 1963).

Data: 40 new sociolinguistic interviews collected summer 2018;

speakers grew up in **Cooperstown school district** from age 8 or younger.

Formants extracted, Lobanov-normalized with FAVE (Rosenfelder et al. 2014);

speakers coded as having **positive**, **mixed**, **negative** attitudes about tourism
based on notes taken by research assistants transcribing interviews.

Mixed-effects models calculated in Rbrul (Johnson 2009):

factor	coefficient	p
post-Boomer × wordlist	+40 Hz	< 10 ⁻³
post-Boomer	+20 Hz	
wordlist	-4 Hz	
male	-23 Hz	0.008
post-Boomer × positive tourism attitude	-11 Hz	0.02
post-Boomer × negative tourism attitude	+45 Hz	
positive tourism attitude	+21 Hz	
negative tourism attitude	-27 Hz	

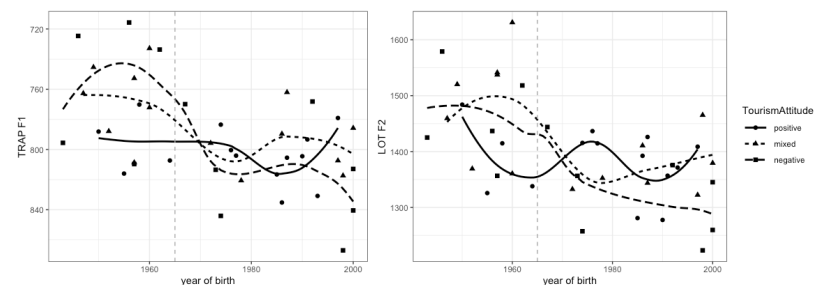
TRAP F1. *n* = 5654. Baseline: Boomer, spontaneous speech, female, mixed attitude. Random factors:
speaker, word, speaker × style. Intercept ≈ 821 Hz. Tokens before sonorants excluded.

factor	coefficient	p
post-Boomer × wordlist	-80 Hz	< 10 ⁻³
post-Boomer	-79 Hz	
wordlist (including minimal pairs)	+22 Hz	
has lived outside Inland North 5+ years	-51 Hz	0.01
male	+46 Hz	0.01
post-Boomer × positive tourism attitude	+60 Hz	0.01
post-Boomer × negative tourism attitude	-67 Hz	
positive tourism attitude	-52 Hz	
negative tourism attitude	+19 Hz	

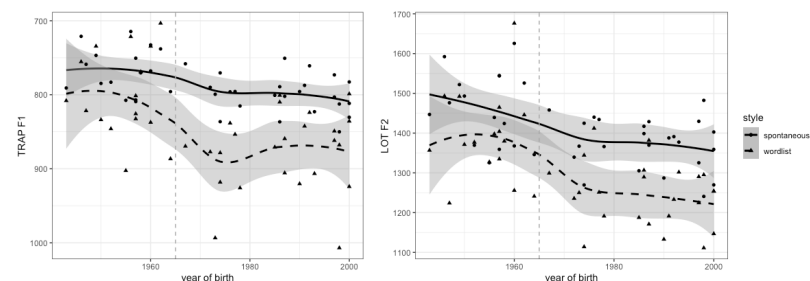
LOT F2. *n* = 5007. Baseline: Boomer, spontaneous, never lived 5 years outside Inland North, female,
mixed attitude. Random factors: speaker, word, speaker × style. Intercept ≈ 1401 Hz. Pre-L excluded.

Results: TRAP F1 and LOT F2 show **interactions** of age with **tourism attitude** and **speech style**:

- **Wordlist style** leads change **from NCS**, more for post-Boomers than Boomers.
- **Positive** tourism attitude **disfavors NCS** for Boomers;
attitude effect is **absent or reversed** for younger speakers.



TRAP F1 and LOT F2 by age and tourism attitude



TRAP F1 and LOT F2 by age and style

So apparently the NCS has **changed its social meaning**:

- for Boomers, it indexes **local orientation** in opposition to the growth of tourism;
- for post-Boomers, it is a **non-standard** feature avoided in careful style.

Interview subjects were also asked for **metalinguistic beliefs** about Cooperstown's
dialect status and similarity to other communities.

These **also** show change between Boomers and post-Boomers.

Does Cooperstown have a distinctive dialect or way of speaking?

- Only 6 out of 40 said yes
 - All but 1 of those were Boomers with non-positive tourism attitudes
 - Also all but 1 said it was similar to other parts of New York State or the Midwest
- Four post-Boomers gave noncommittal or unsure answers like "maybe" or "probably".

Utica, in the Mohawk Valley, is the nearest major NCS city to Cooperstown;

I asked whether Utica, or other NCS cities, have a dialect distinct from Cooperstown.

Even among those who considered Cooperstown unmarked,

post-Boomers were more likely to think Utica etc. were **distinct** from Cooperstown.

belief about other Inland North city dialects, such as Utica	Boomers	Post-Boomers
different from Cooperstown	2	11
sometimes / maybe / probably	1	3
same as Cooperstown	8	5

Includes only those who said “no” to “Does Cooperstown have a distinctive dialect?”

Fisher’s exact test: Boomers favor “same” at $p \approx 0.04$.

Cooperstown is surrounded by working-class rural communities;

I asked most subjects whether those have a dialect distinct from Cooperstown.

Post-Boomers were more likely to think they did.

belief about nearby rural town dialects	Boomers	Post-Boomers
different from Cooperstown	4	18
maybe / probably different	1	2
(probably) same as Cooperstown	9	3

Fisher’s exact test: Boomers favor “same” at $p \approx 0.01$.

Among those who thought the rural communities were different than Cooperstown:

- 8 said they have less educated speech, slang, worse enunciation, etc.
- 6 said they have a “country” or “redneck” accent
- 5 said they sound Southern
- 3 said they have an Upstate NY / Mohawk Valley accent

These aren’t mutually exclusive or exhaustive; not quite everyone give one of these descriptions.

“Country”, “Southern” and “nonstandard” are indexically linked (Hall-Lew & Stephens 2012), suggesting **most** post-Boomers think nearby towns have **nonstandard** speech. Unsurprising, since Cooperstown (mostly in the town of Otsego) is largely **middle-class and affluent**, while surrounding towns are poorer and working-class:

	Otsego	Middlefield	Hartwick	Milford	Springfield
Bachelor’s degree	56%	37%	33%	25%	28%
White-collar jobs	59%	46%	43%	33%	37%
Median income	\$76,141	\$52,543	\$52,679	\$53,929	\$45,455

Comparison of middle-class indices among nearby towns in Otsego County. Data from U.S. Census American Community Survey 2018 five-year estimates; “white collar” denotes census’s “management, business, science, and arts” category.

But Boomers mostly **don’t** report perceiving such a linguistic difference—

they grew up when Cooperstown **was** just another rural community in Otsego County.

Although tourism had been increasing since 1950, the growth of **tourism-focused businesses** began in the early 1980s (Anania 2016): when Boomers were adults but Gen X mostly children/adolescents.

This suggests a picture of how **social change** led to both **dialect change** and **change in dialect perception** in Cooperstown:

- Tourism in Cooperstown began to increase between the 1950s and 1970s, the childhood and adolescence of the Baby Boomers.
- Boomers perceived NCS as indexing the difference between locals and tourists.
- Boomers with high local orientation and antipathy to tourists maintained high levels of NCS, tourism-friendly Boomers accommodated more away from NCS.
- Younger generations perceived less NCS in Cooperstown than nearby towns.
- Nearby towns are less affluent, more working-class than Cooperstown, so post-Boomers interpreted NCS as a nonstandard feature.

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