

Making a merger: Social and linguistic factors in the low back merger in New Orleans English

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Background:

- New Orleans English has historically featured raised THOUGHT (Labov 2007)
- There is a change in progress towards merger of LOT and THOUGHT (Carmichael 2014).

Methodology:

- Lobanov-normalized vowel tokens for 57 white NOLA speakers (sample balanced across age/gender)
- F1/F2 for THOUGHT and LOT extracted & plotted in F1/F2 space (N=3912; ~69 per speaker)
- Examined patterning of THOUGHT and LOT according to age and ethnicity

Findings, part 2:

Two paths towards merger (FIGURE 4):

- Women merge mostly by lowering THOUGHT ($p < 0.001$) while for men movement of LOT is more relevant

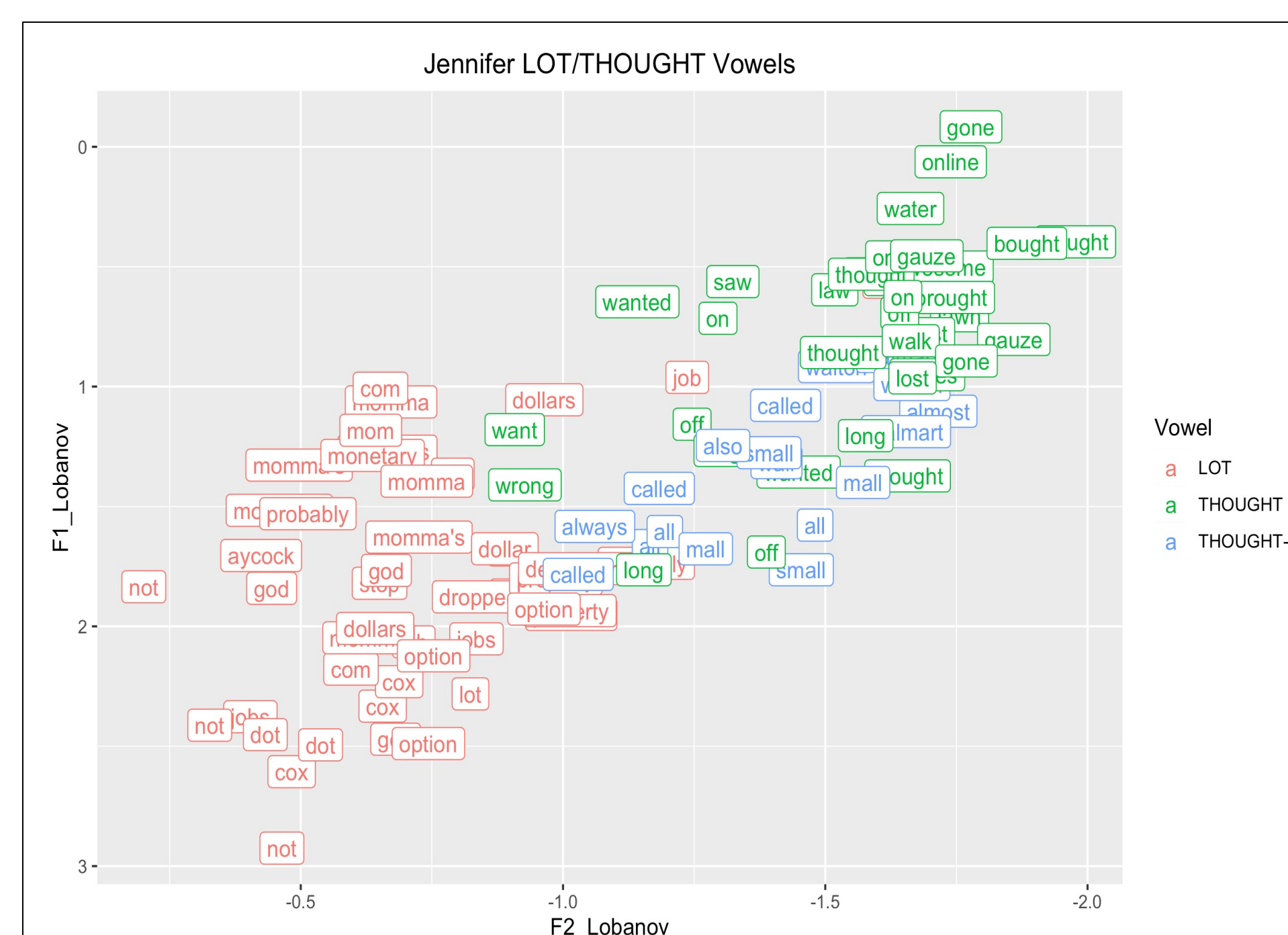


FIGURE 1: Jennifer, b. 1970, unmerged with lower pre-/l/ THOUGHT

Findings, part 1:

The merger was most advanced in pre-/l/ environments ($p < 0.001$), due to THOUGHT being lower and fronter for all speakers in this environment (FIGURES 1-3)

- This contrasts with THOUGHT patterning in other communities (e.g. Labov et al 2006; Dinkin 2016) – thus appears to be specific to the New Orleans English low-back system

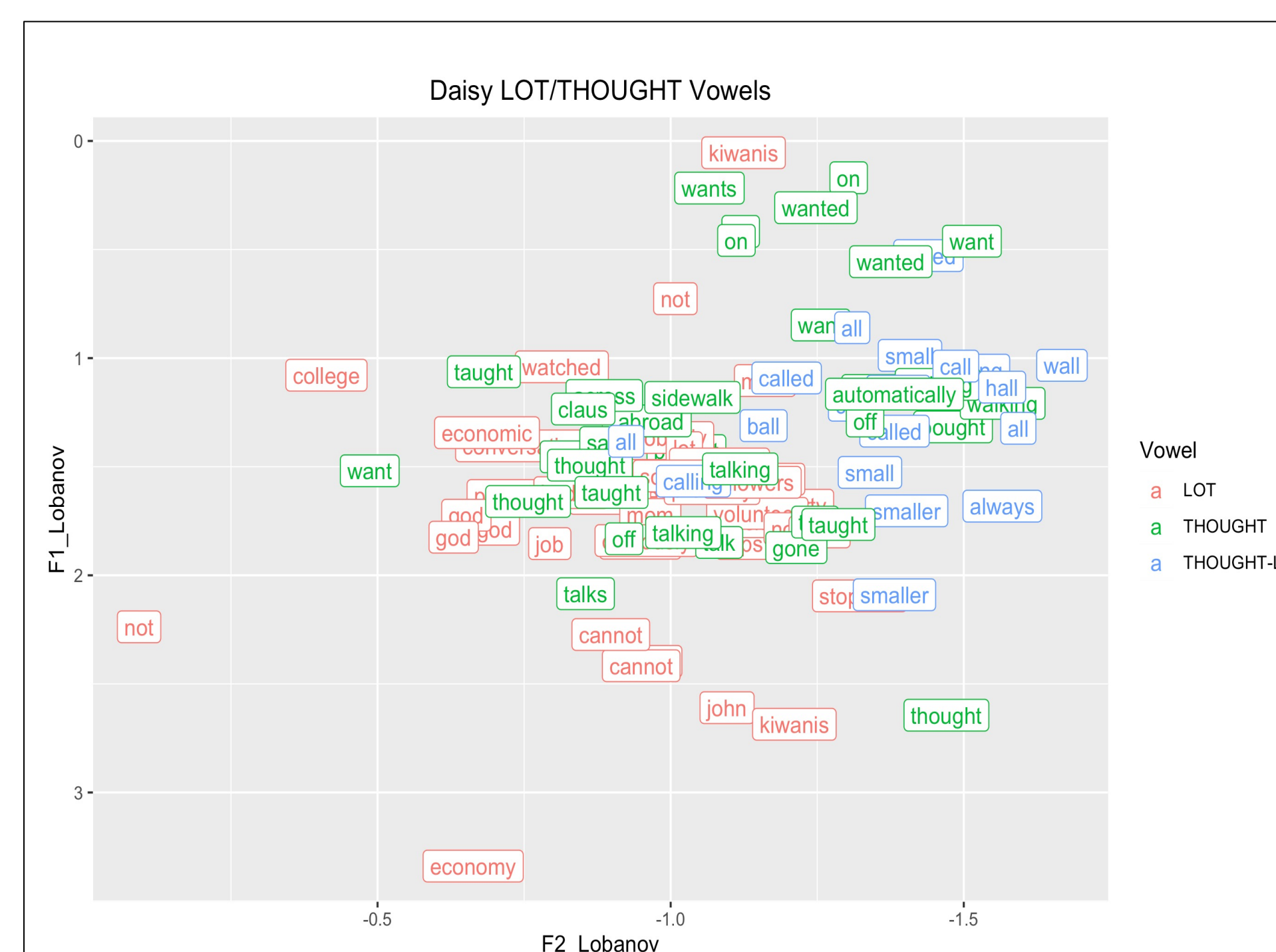


FIGURE 2: Daisy, b. 1994, merged

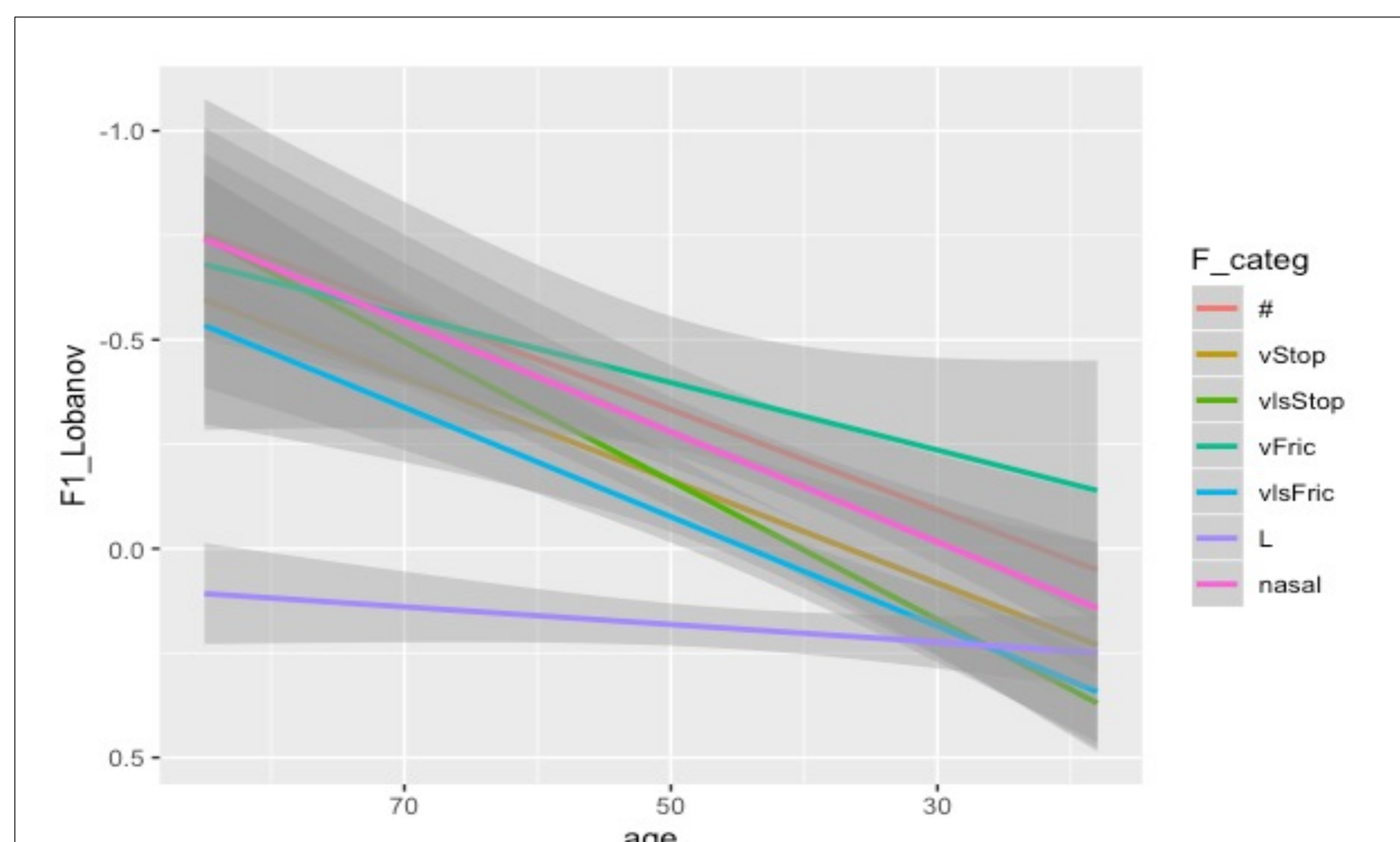


FIGURE 3: THOUGHT F1 by age and following sound

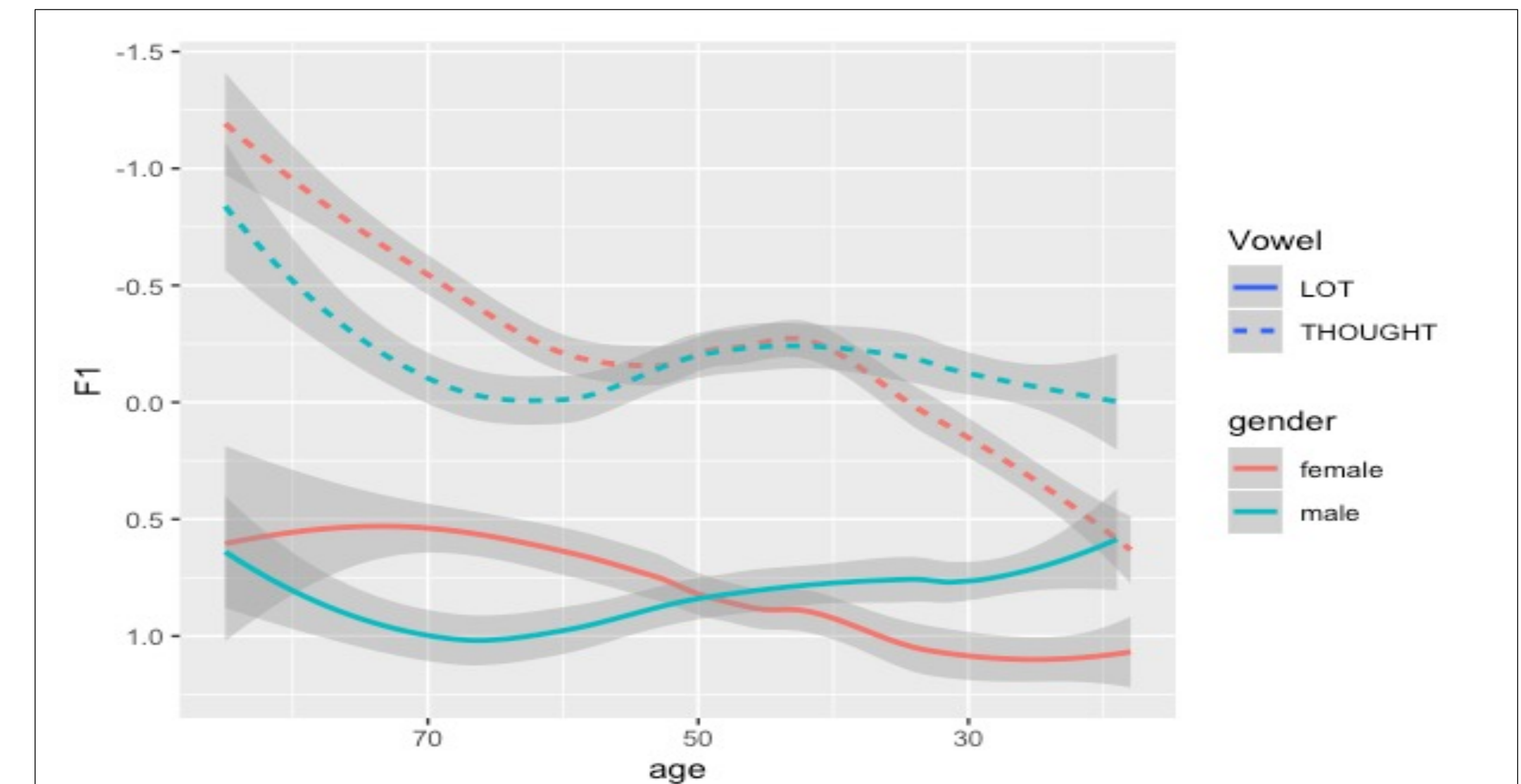


FIGURE 4: THOUGHT and LOT F1 by age and gender

Discussion:

Raised THOUGHT is marked in New Orleans as 'yatty' and working class (Mucciaccio 2009; Carmichael & Dajko 2016)

- We argue that the stigmatized associations with raised THOUGHT motivates its lowering
- Women are lowering more dramatically than men, similar to patterns observed in Philadelphia (Labov, Rosenfelder & Fruehwald 2013).
- So although men and women both participate in the merger of THOUGHT and LOT, men are doing this mostly via movement of LOT.
- As a result, younger men have both LOT and THOUGHT higher than younger women.

Conclusions:

- The striking lowering effect of following /l/ on THOUGHT seems to be a distinctive property of New Orleans English, though it is being lost in apparent time as speakers shift towards low-back merger.
- Women and men are arriving upon the merger in different ways; we posit this is due to the social meaning of raised THOUGHT in NOLA English.