

**Mary, Darling, Make Me Merry, Say You'll Marry Me**  
Tense-Lax Neutralization in the *Linguistic Atlas of New England*  
(maps can be seen at <http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~dinkin/TLN/>)

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**Tense-Lax Neutralization (TLN):** the merger of the short lax vowels /æ e i o ʌ/ with the nearest tense ingliding vowels when before intervocalic /r/. Thus *marry* and *merry*, originally with /æ/ and /e/ respectively, become homophonous with *Mary*; *mirror* (/i/) comes to rhyme with *nearer*; *horror* (/o/) with *explorer*; and *hurry* (/ʌ/) with *furry*. This study concerns TLN in the *marry-merry-Mary* classes.

**LANE:** The *Linguistic Atlas of New England* presents the results of a study conducted in the 1930s by nine fieldworkers, in which over 700 phonetic and lexical variables were elicited from some 400 speakers in various towns and cities throughout New England. All the informants' responses are represented in highly detailed phonetic transcription.

**Methodology:** I used data on six words<sup>1</sup> presented in Volume 2 of LANE:  
*married*, with historic /æ/;  
*merry* (*Christmas*), *cherry* (*tree*), *American*, with historic /e/;  
*Mary* and (*Aunt*) *Sarah*, with the original tense vowel /ehr/.

The transcription used by LANE distinguishes 18 levels of height among front vowels: the six basic symbols [a æ e i i], each of which may appear either on its own or with one of two diacritics [ ] that indicate slight raising and slight lowering. I assigned a number to each of these vowel height values, from -4 for [a ] up to 8 for [i ], with 9 for [i] and everything above.

My methodology for designating a particular informant as having TLN was as follows:

- If, for one speaker, the range of vowel heights encompassed by one of the three phonemes overlapped at all with that of another phoneme, then I

<sup>1</sup> A seventh word, *parents*, was excluded on the grounds that there is some ambiguity as to whether its underlying original vowel is /æ/ or /ehr/, or both with some original social or geographic variation.

regarded those two phonemes as merged before /r/ for this particular speaker, for the purpose of this study.

- If the difference between the heights of the lowest token of one phoneme and the highest token of another was 1 according to the -4-to-9-scale of vowel height described above, I regarded the phonemes as not merged but "close".
- Neither of these criteria applied if, in the overlapping or "close" range, all the tokens of /eh/ were diphthongized and all the tokens of the other phoneme were not.

On the TLN maps, the spots (red on the poster) marked "full TLN" include

- speakers for whom all three phonemes are merged;
- speakers for whom, by the above definition, one phoneme is merged with each of the other two, but the other two are not merged with each other;
- speakers who merge two of the three while the third is close.

The (dark blue) spots marked "all 3 distinct" include

- speakers who keep all three phonemes wholly separate, as well as
- speakers for whom two are close, while the third is separate from both of the others.

The (pink) "partial TLN" spots have either *merry* or *marry* merged with *Mary*, while the other is separate from both.<sup>2</sup>

The few remaining (light blue) spots are those for which *merry* and *marry* are merged with each other but *Mary* is separate. Since this merger does not involve TLN, they are incidental to the current study.

In drawing the isogloss between the TLN and non-TLN regions, I considered it more important to exclude non-mergers than to include partial mergers. For the purpose of the isogloss, I regarded towns with both non-mergers and partial mergers equivalent to those with only non-mergers. If we ignore the pink spots, my TLN isogloss has about 77% homogeneity and 80% consistency<sup>3</sup>; with respect to both the red spots and the pink spots, it has about 90% homogeneity but only about 61% consistency.

The blue line on Maps 2, showing the boundary between the Eastern and Western New England settlement regions, was taken from Plate 1 of the *LANE Handbook*.

On Map 3, the magenta spots represent speakers who had diphthongs before /r/ in both of the /ehr/-class words *Mary* and *Sarah*; the dark green spots are speakers with monophthongs in both. The yellow spots, for speakers who had a diphthong in one and a monophthong in the other, were completely ignored in drawing the isogloss.

<sup>2</sup> Usually *merry*: only three speakers merged *marry* but not *merry* with *Mary*.

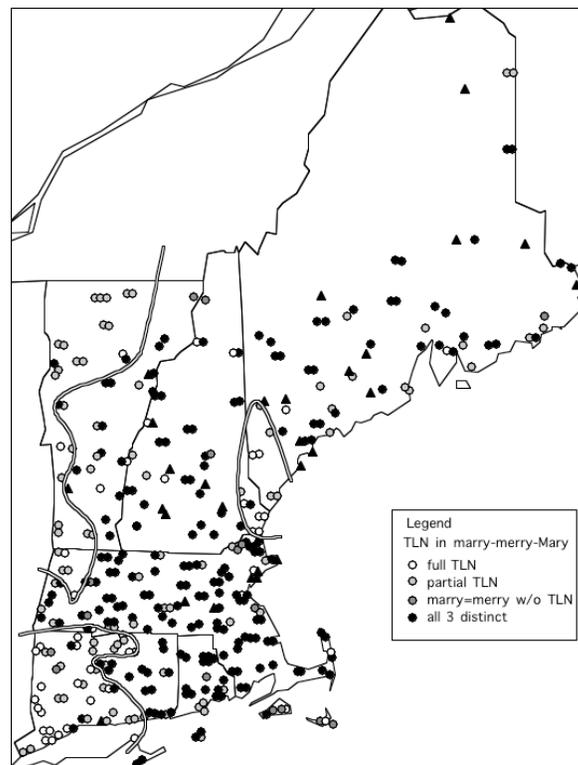
<sup>3</sup> As defined in Chapter 6 of the *Atlas of North American English*.

With respect to the dark green spots and ignoring the yellow, the isogloss has homogeneity of 95% and a consistency of 92%. Only four towns are inside the TLN isogloss and outside the monophthongal-/ehr/ isogloss.

**Non-rhoticity** is the well-known absence of /r/ from codas, as in *Park your car in Harvard Yard*. Map 4 is based on LANE's data for the word *chair*: yellow spots represent speakers whose pronunciation of *chair* as given in LANE showed any rhoticity at all; this includes those transcribed as containing [r] or the rhoticized vowel [ə̃], and those whose final vowels were transcribed with a diacritic that was defined as representing "r-coloring". Dark brown spots represent complete absence of [r] or r-coloring. The isogloss has 87% homogeneity and 75% consistency.

**Summary of findings and conclusions:**

- TLN in *marry-merry-Mary* is found in LANE principally in the Western New England region, as well as in the southeastern corner of New Hampshire and the adjacent portion of Maine.
- This corner may represent the earliest stage of Nagy (2001)'s finding of TLN across all of southern New Hampshire several decades later, attributed to emphasis of cultural distinction from Boston.
- In Western New England, complete TLN is most prevalent along the Housatonic River, suggesting TLN may have originated or progressed fastest in the Bridgeport area and spread north from there along the river.
- A monophthongal realization of /ehr/ is prevalent across all of southern and western New England—perhaps it was an original feature of the Connecticut and Plymouth settlers—but was apparently lost in southwestern Massachusetts.
- This monophthongal /ehr/ is apparently a necessary precondition for TLN to spread throughout a region, since it reduces the phonetic distance between /ehr/ and /e/ before /r/.
- Western New England is rhotic, except for the immediate vicinities of Hartford, Springfield, and New Haven, which may have lost rhoticity through the cultural influence of Eastern New England.
- An analysis of English syllable structure similar to that of Wells (1990) suggests that rhotic regions are more likely to develop TLN because, in dialects where /r/ is allowed to be syllable-final, the /r/ will become part of the first syllable in *marry* and *merry*, and then the vowels in the first syllables will become a vowel which is less marked before coda /r/.
- The TLN isogloss is quite close to the boundary of the intersection of the rhotic and monophthongal-/ehr/ regions. The gaps in the distribution of TLN within Western New England can be explained as due to the gaps in one or the other of those two conditioning factors.



TLN, in black and white.

**References**

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