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Fear of a Black Phonology: The Northern
Cities Shift as Linguistic White Flight

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Abstract

The geographic distribution and potential linguistic triggers of the Northern Cities Shift (NCS), a complex chain shift of vowel realizations in urban areas between Madison, WI and upstate New York, have been well-documented (Labov, Yaeger and Steiner 1972; Labov, Ash and Boberg 2006). However, we are left with an actuation problem (Weinreich, Labov and Herzog 1968), especially with respect to social motivations. How might local identity practices (Eckert 1999) relate to similar linguistic processes across such a large area (Labov 2002)? Why should a vowel subsystem that has remained stable for a millenium suddenly shift? Why now, and why should only part of the area with the appropriate pre-existing linguistic system be involved? Why should the shift be absent or delayed among African Americans, rural speakers, or Canadians?

This paper proposes a social-historical explanation for the shift: that it was triggered by the Great Migration, the movement from the South into NCS cities of millions of African Americans in the period between 1916 and approximately 1960 (Marks 1989). This population movement, the largest in American history, dramatically changed the ethnic composition of NCS cities. I argue that the first stages of the NCS represented an attempt by white residents to differentiate their speech from that of their new fellow citizens, in effect, a linguistic version of “white flight”, the rapid residential segregation that took place in these same cities.

Working from 100 years of US Census data and historical descriptions of the Great Migration (e.g., Work 1937), I demonstrate powerful correlations between participation in the NCS and the speed and degree to which communities increased their African American populations, as well as the degree of residential white flight, as indicated by racial segregation and differentiation scales (Mumford Centre 2001). These correlations, paired with the original sound systems of the areas involved, account remarkably well for the temporal, social and geographic boundaries of the NCS, including such distinct features as the exclusion or partial exclusion of Canadians, African Americans, Erie, PA, and rural areas; the eastern and western boundaries of the shift; and the participation of outliers in some other areas, including the St. Louis corridor. I suggest that more detailed city-by-city historical correlative studies might illuminate some of the apparent internal distinctions in the core NCS area, in particular the differences between the highly-focused sound change in western New York state and the apparently more diffuse participation of cities from Cleveland westward.

I essay a preliminary theoretical situation of the NCS as an extension of traditionally-invoked social differentiation processes, and suggest ways in which studying the actual processes involved

in linguistic white flight might both inform and be informed by work on identity, other changes in progress in American English, the divergence hypothesis (Labov and Harris 1986), and regional differences in African American English (Wolfram 2005).

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1 Introduction

The complex change in the lax vowel system known as the Northern Cities Shift (NCS) represents one of the most dramatic and widespread sound changes in American English. Many linguistic and some historical aspects of this shift, both in terms of its components and its pre-existing linguistic system and dialect boundaries, have been widely described and explained, most thoroughly and recently in Labov et al. (2006). Explaining the social and historical characteristics of the NCS, however, has proven more difficult. If the shift is a necessary consequence of an unstable pre-existing system, why has it happened more slowly (if at all) in some areas, such as the eastern and western fringes of the Northern dialect area? How does such a widespread language change, sometimes compared to a flood, stop dead at the Canadian border, or around Erie, PA? Why does the shift seem to proceed far more slowly (if at all) among some sections of society, especially African Americans and rural speakers? And, given the tedious regularity of the English lax vowel system through most of its history, why has the shift happened now?

This paper attempts to address these social and historical questions through social and historical speculation. The premise is that the earliest stages of the NCS reflected an attempt by White speakers in the urban inland North to differentiate their speech from that of the five million African Americans who migrated into northern cities in the period between World War I and 1960. In effect, vowel shifters have engaged in the linguistic equivalent of White Flight, the residential segregation that was the most visible demographic response to the African American Great Migration. Most of the evidence I muster to support a White Flight hypothesis involves correlating the temporal, geographic, and social characteristics of the NCS with demographic evidence, such as intensity of residential segregation and the speed and degree to which northern cities increased their African American populations. I also suggest some ways in which the White Flight model might inform, and be informed by, work on attitudes, identity, and local practice.

This is not a paper about the linguistic details of the shift, or the temporal ordering of its components, which I leave to the sociophoneticians (e.g., Gordon 2001). Instead, I accept existing descriptions of a single early step in the NCS, the raising of the short **a** vowel found in words like *trap*, and investigate it like any other perplexing social behaviour, such as the spread of tango schools or support of the Toronto Maple Leafs.

2 The Great Migration

Considering White Flight when investigating American identity creation practices is a reasonable starting point, given the primacy of race in the nation's public and historical discourse. To understand why the Great Migration in particular might trigger such profound language change requires an awareness of its magnitude. Although African Americans had been moving northward since the early 1800s, these numbers increased dramatically when they were recruited by northern industries suffering labor shortages due to the disruption of Atlantic shipping by WWI. In a few years, Chicago's African American population more than doubled; Cleveland's tripled; Detroit's increased by eightfold (Nearing 1929). Early migrants were largely male, young, semi-urban, and unskilled or semi-skilled. They were highly visible, and highly resented, and consequently were met with racial violence and housing restrictions. Later migration involved more family groups and step migration. By 1960, five million African Americans had moved north, the largest internal migration in American history. Almost all of this migration was to cities.

The Great Migration is the type of event that social psychologists would expect to trigger heightened group identification: the increased salience of the Other (in this case, due to sheer numbers) leads group members to focus on traits that they share with their own group, rather than on internal differentiation (Tajfel 1978). The migration offers us an opportunity to empiricize the

theoretical construct of group salience, by measuring the speed and degree of demographic change. Measuring rapid change alone is not useful: doubling your city's African American population will have little effect if it means that a second black family moved in. Likewise volume alone: if your city already has a large African American population, another few thousand people will not change white residents' perception of its composition. Here, I measure the combined effect of degree and speed of change through a coarse metric: I multiply the percentage of a city's population that is African American at the end of a time period by the rate of change over the period. A city whose African American population moves from 2% to 3% will have a "migration metric" score of 4.5 ($3 \times 3/2 = 4.5$).

		1910-40	1940-60	1910-60
<i>Northern Cities</i> <i>Shift Participant</i> <i>Cities</i>	Detroit	57.55	48.69	345.98
	Cleveland	37.42	33.51	175.14
	Chicago	27.02	38.94	145.31
	St. Louis	27.76	61.27	127.63
	Buffalo	16.03	19.76	126.72
	<i>New York</i>	106.55	34.61	233.60
<i>Non-Participant</i> <i>Cities</i>	Cincinnati	20.24	19.74	38.69
	Pittsburgh	12.11	10.64	20.21
	Erie	1.88	9.73	22.89

Table 1. Size by speed of African American population growth

Table 1 ranks some cities relevant to a discussion of the NCS with respect to the growth of their African American population during the Great Migration. Cities participating in the NCS show dramatically higher rates than those that do not. Buffalo, a shift city, does not look all that different from non-shifting Cincinnati or Pittsburgh in the short run (because its African American population expanded later than in other NCS cities), but the figures for 1910-60 reveal a clear difference. Cincinnati and Pittsburgh score low because they had fair-sized African American populations to start with; Erie scores low because it started white and stayed that way, during this time period at least. In all of these cases, we see a strong correlation between large rapid demographic change and participation in the NCS, supporting a White Flight model.¹

The history of the Great Migration also explains some characteristics of the NCS. Rural areas, Minnesota, and upper Wisconsin were, like Erie, not migration targets, so they showed no large or sudden African American population increases. The NCS stops at the Canadian border, and so did African Americans: Canada's racist immigration policies excluded most blacks during the Great Migration years.

One complexity here does require a little linguistic and geographic detail. Parts of upstate New York and around Scranton in northeastern Pennsylvania seem to have had some very early proto-shift: raised *trap* vowels before nasals in western New York (Labov et al. 1972) and fronted *cloth* vowels in Scranton (DeCamp 1940). This is at odds with the description of the NCS (Dinkin & Labov 2007) as moving eastward across New York state. Reference to earlier observers, though (e.g., Thomas 1936, Emerson 1891), suggests that these proto-shift features were long-standing in these communities, and perhaps even in decline, while both anecdotal evidence and the behaviour of the older rural males in Labov et al. (1972) identify these as rural features, but not part of an active urban sound change. In fact, a closer reading of Labov et al. (1972:76) shows a perfect apparent time trajectory for the spread of short *a* from pre-nasal to other contexts for Buffalo speakers, but not Chicagoans. In other words, Buffalonians engaged in real shifting later (and perhaps more intensely) than Chicagoans. This makes sense under a White Flight scenario: these areas increased their African American populations later than Michigan, Ohio, or Illinois.

¹It could be argued (largely on lexical, rather than phonetic, data) that southern Ohio and Pittsburgh didn't have the right pre-existing linguistic systems for the shift anyway. That argument is weakened by the high migration metric numbers and NCS participation of St. Louis. I am more comfortable with a scenario in which St. Louis residents may have first fled to local features, but over time moved to the less-marked NCS.

What of New York City and its surroundings? Table 1 shows high migration metric numbers, but New York isn't an NCS city. I would argue that other sound changes might have done work in New York that was done by the NCS elsewhere. Some vowel changes might profitably be investigated in this respect, but a more likely candidate is the retreat from *r*-lessness (Labov 1966, Bonfiglio 2002). This local feature would have been highly salient in the speech of the Atlantic coast African Americans who migrated to New York City, and flight from a shared stigmatized feature may have accomplished more for white speakers than a vowel shift would have.²

3 Linguistic and Social White Flight

The correlations between the Great Migration and the NCS do not, of course, prove causation. I would argue, though, that the burden of proof in this respect does not need to be too great. The Great Migration was America's largest demographic shift. The NCS is probably its largest sound change. Beyond correlation, they are tied together by race, America's major determinant of identity in public discourse. It would be surprising if such a dramatic racial change in America *didn't* trigger an identity-defining linguistic change.

In fact, we can investigate empirically the attitudinal set that relates the two; if the NCS is linguistic White Flight, is it related to residential White Flight? The Lewis Mumford Centre at SUNY Albany³ uses US Census data to calculate a Dissimilarity Index, a measure of residential segregation. Each Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) is scored for what percentage of the people of one race in that city would have to move to the other race's neighborhood in order for that race to be equally distributed throughout the city. Scores over 60 are considered high. Table 2 lists the fifteen CMAs with the highest dissimilarity scores in America. The top three, and ten of the top fifteen, are NCS cities.⁴ Buffalo is moving quickly up the chart (as shown by comparing its #8 ranking with #21 twenty years ago); farther down the chart, Syracuse (#32, up from #57) and Rochester (#49, up from #113) are also moving up quickly, just ahead of New Orleans and Baton Rouge, respectively. These upstate New York cities also appear to be moving up to or surpassing their western counterparts in their degree of participation in the NCS. The cities where whites flee African American neighbors are those where whites flee African American accents.

<i>Census Metropolitan Area</i>	<i>Score (1990 & 1980 rank)</i>
1. Detroit, MI	85 (2) (4)
2. Gary, IN	84 (1) (1)
3. Milwaukee-Waukesha, WI	82 (4) (12)
4. New York, NY	82 (8) (17)
5. Chicago, IL	81 (3) (3)
6. Newark, NJ	80 (5) (16)
7. Cleveland-Lorain-Elyria, OH	77 (6) (5)
8. Buffalo-Niagara Falls, NY	77 (10) (21)
9. Flint, MI	77 (9) (7)
10. Cincinnati, OH-KY-IN	75 (17) (25)
11. Saginaw-Bay City-Midland, MI *	74 (7) (10)
12. Nassau-Suffolk, NY	74 (13) (31)
13. St. Louis, MO-IL	74 (12) (15)
14. Benton Harbor, MI*	74 (26) (60)
15. Bridgeport, CT	74 (32) (55)

Over 60 = high; **bold** = NCS participant. * = African American populations under 10,000.

Table 2. Top White/Black Dissimilarity Scores, USA

²Of course, you could also argue that NYC had the wrong pre-existing system, too (see footnote 1).

³<http://mumford.albany.edu/census/data.html>

⁴Most of the remainder, and many of the cities moving up the chart, are in the New York City area, which suggests that it is the next place we should be looking for White Flight effects.

4 Practice, Attitudes, Identity

Does this mean, then, that everyone with a raised *trap* vowel is engaged in hegemonic racial differentiation practices? Presumably not; at least, not today. This is where work on local practice is particularly useful. In an ethnographic investigation of “Belten High”, Eckert (2000) suggests that advanced NCS features in that community index urban-ness. Belten High is in a very white suburb; its speakers have virtually no interaction with African Americans, and certainly not in the city of Detroit.⁵ Belten High “burnouts” interact with urban (white) Detroiters while cruising in cars and hanging out in parks in the urban fringe; the NCS features they hear (and adopt) from these white Detroiters naturally carry connotations of urban-ness for them. Thus local practices can lead to geographically dispersed language changes, even though participants don’t know what’s being done 500 miles away. Across NCS cities, downtown speakers responded to identical stimuli, African American in-migration, by foregrounding the whiteness-indexing aspects of local language (perhaps even resuscitating proto-shift features that would otherwise have declined into rural obsolescence). All the NCS cities shared a pre-existing system, and all the migrants shared a contrasting system, so the resources available to do this work were similar. Suburbanites then substituted (or added) urban-indexing meanings to these features. In other words, the NCS indexes whiteness where whiteness needs indexing, but picks up an additional meaning of urban-ness where it doesn’t. Given that urban-ness carries prestige for suburban youth, it isn’t surprising that the NCS filters outward from NCS cities everywhere into suburbs and rural areas.

There may be other ways in which a White Flight model can illuminate existing work on attitudes, and be illuminated by work on identity. Consider a puzzling finding in Preston (2002:58-9), where Michigan respondents single out Alabama English as not only the least correct, but also the least pleasant speech in America, contrary to the typical finding that correct people are unpleasant, but pleasant people are incorrect. As Alabama (along with Georgia) was the source state for most African American migrants to Michigan, perhaps (white) Michiganders are covertly expressing their opinion of African American Michiganders and their ancestors. The lack of stigma for the NCS, at least in comparison to the self-loathing triggered by *r*-lessness is less puzzling if speakers use the NCS to flee other stigma.

Implicit in this paper is acknowledgement of work on whiteness (Frankenberg 1993), especially associated with Bucholtz (2001), which expressly challenges the power whiteness retains through unmarkedness and essentially reveals it as a construct, an object of study. Equally required, however, is the observation by Smitherman (1977), that whiteness is traditionally constructed negatively, through contrast with blackness. While discussion of identity in variationist studies of change usually operates in an aspirational frame, dealing with prestige and movement toward a target variety, the literature also includes flight models (Kroch 1978), especially in creole studies, which uses flight-oriented terminology (we refer to *decreolization* or *debasilectalization*, not *acrolectalization*).

It’s not my intent here to claim that two tables and a reference to local practice constitute a model of language change. What I am suggesting is that the social contours of change are most usefully explained as responses to social forces, and that we can often ground ideas about identity in research that’s empirical enough to speak to the concerns of our field. The ideas proposed here can be expanded; some may even be falsifiable. If we can correlate participation in language change with local demographic change or reliably-operationalized social attitudes, we might find we can say more about change and flight and speaker intent than we previously thought.

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⁵In fact, to seek out urban life, they cross the river into the rather small Canadian city of Windsor.

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