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# “We Act Like Girls and We Don’t Act Like Men”: The Use of the Male-Associated Variable (ay0) in South Philadelphia

Suzanne Evans Wagner \*

## 1 Introduction

Sociolinguistics is best known for its pioneering use of the present to explain the past: that is, the use of synchronic age distributions to infer linguistic change in progress and to apply the findings to our understanding of historical change. However, in recent years some sociolinguists have turned to real time studies, in part to confirm that our interpretations of synchronic evidence in apparent time are correct. In this paper, I present findings from a real time study of language change in the adolescent portion of the lifespan. Section 2 outlines the hypothesis that speakers’ sociolinguistic systems stabilize before adulthood. Section 3 reports on the raising and backing of the nucleus of /ay/ before voiceless consonants in Philadelphia. Raising and backing in this environment is notated throughout as (ay0), following Labov (2001). In section 4, I discuss the finding that in a South Philadelphia high school, Irish girls appear to be leading in the backing of (ay0). Since (ay0) is associated with male leaders, I explore the relationship between maleness, toughness and local identity in this peer group, and suggest how the girls’ use of (ay0) may change as they enter adulthood.

## 2 Language Stabilization

### 2.1 Apparent Time

A typical and well-known example of sociolinguistic change in **apparent time** is given in Fig. 1 below. The graph shows a community change in Montreal French from apical [r] to posterior [R] realization of /r/. The data are taken from the Cedergren-Sankoff corpus.<sup>1</sup> In 1971, younger people were using the new variant most frequently, whereas older people were over-

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<sup>1</sup>The Cedergren-Sankoff corpus comprises sociolinguistic interviews with 120 socially stratified informants, collected in 1971. For details, see D. Sankoff et al. (1976) and G. Sankoff (2005).

whelmingly apical [r] users.

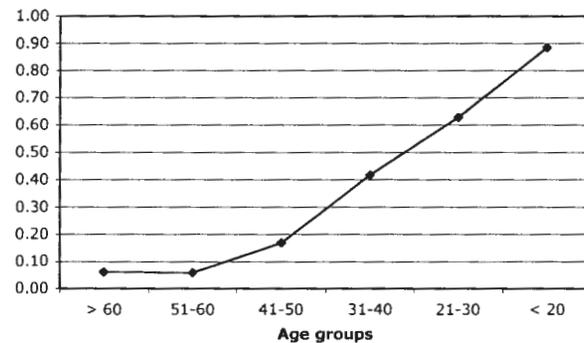


Figure 1: % posterior [R] for 120 speakers in 1971  
(based on Clermont and Cedergren 1979 and data from Gillian Sankoff)

The increasing use of posterior [R] in each new generation is interpreted as a community change.<sup>2</sup> But interpretation of apparent time relies on the assumption that for change in a community to occur, individuals must stabilize their use of a sociolinguistic variable in their early adult years and be overtaken by younger, more advanced speakers. Thus the speech of the older people on the left of Fig. 1 is assumed to be representative of their speech at some stable point earlier in their lives, making them directly comparable with younger speakers in the community.

## 2.2 Stabilization

There is debate about when in the lifespan stabilization takes place, which types of sociolinguistic variables are affected, and whether all individuals are involved.

The extent to which individuals continue to participate in ongoing community change, or stabilize and withdraw, may depend on the type of change. Changes occurring above the level of social awareness (Labov 1994) are by definition known to the community, and so individuals can be motivated to participate or withdraw based on the social prestige of the change. In a real time panel study of Montreal, for example, Sankoff and Blondeau

<sup>2</sup>Note that apparent time is not sufficient in itself: Clermont and Cedergren (1979) combined apparent time interpretation with real time evidence from (Vinay 1950) that [r] was the older variant.

(in preparation) found that some individuals increased their use of the incoming [R] variant as they aged, because [R] was the socially prestigious variant. [R] was appropriate for the higher levels of education and occupation than they had gained. Thus stabilization is not fixed at any particular age.

Labov (2001) has made a good case for hypothesizing that in the case of change below the level of social awareness, stabilization occurs in late-adolescence, after a peak in advancement in mid-adolescence and before engagement with the adult linguistic marketplace.

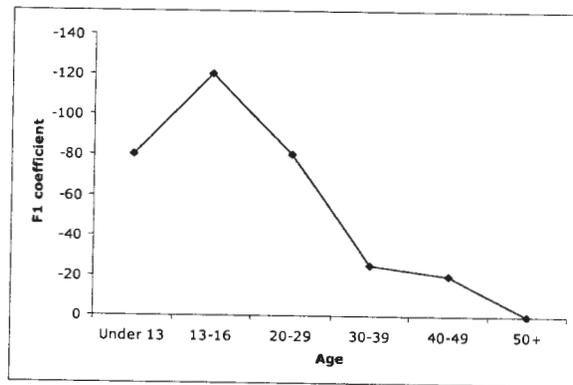


Figure 2: Age group coefficients for F1 of (ay0) in Labov (2001:172)

The mid-adolescent peak can be clearly seen in Fig. 2. The data, from Labov's LCV (Language Change and Variation) study of Philadelphia in the 1970s (see e.g. Labov 1980, 1994, 2001), show that speakers in the 13-16 year old group have the lowest predicted F1, or most raised nucleus of (ay0). They lead the community, ahead even of the youngest age group. There is a sharp drop-off in early adulthood. Labov suggests that the youngest members of the community are still influenced by their parents' realizations of the variable, while teenagers have departed from parental influence and are emulating their next oldest peers. The teenagers eventually overtake their older peers, producing this peak, and then stabilize, allowing the next wave of teenagers to overtake them in turn.

Labov's model accords well with the apparent time evidence, such as that displayed in Fig. 2. Real-time studies of speakers' participation or withdrawal from this kind of change are rare<sup>3</sup>, and none focus on the teenage to young adult portion of the lifespan.

### 3 Philadelphia

#### 3.1 The LCS project

The current LCS (Language Change and Stabilization) project is a real-time study that focuses on the use of changes from below in the speech of teenagers and young adults in South Philadelphia. Between March and June 2005 I spent almost every day at a predominantly white high school in South Philadelphia. The school gave me permission to wander freely, and so following Eckert's (1989) methodology, I made contact with students in hallways, stairwells, offices, at social events and particularly in the cafeteria. I talked to dozens of students and recorded sociolinguistic interviews with 25 seniors, 19 juniors and 3 sophomores. I also interviewed 12 alumnae of the school, giving a total of 59 informants. All the informants are female. In 2006, I am re-interviewing the same girls, finding out how they feel about going up a grade, or what they have been doing since they left high school. I will then have data to compare with their 2005 vowel productions, and can assess how they have stabilized or changed.

The speech of South Philadelphia has long been socially salient, identified with a stereotype of working class Philadelphia. The neighborhood today is a mix of upper working class and lower middle class. Larger, valuable homes are located in the Marconi Plaza district at its southern tip, but the majority of homes are densely packed two or three storey rowhouses. The neighborhood is mostly white, of Irish or Italian ethnicity, with most of the Irish located in the eastern Pennsport district ("Second Street") or western "Thirtieth Street" district. Italians occupy most of the middle space, with the exception of some narrowly defined districts around 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> streets, which house various other ethnicities including African-Americans and Asians. The Grays Ferry area to the far west is now mostly African-American and low-income. White flight from that district has been intensive, and continues today.

Nonetheless, South Philadelphia is fairly ethnically and socioeconomi-

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<sup>3</sup>See eg. Labov's (2001:101–107) discussion of Jenny Rosetti, and Yaeger-Dror (1989) for two such studies; also Sankoff and Blondeau (in prep) and Sankoff and Wagner (forthcoming) for panel studies of "change from above" (Labov 1994).

cally homogenous: a community in which linguistic change from below is relatively unaffected by external influence. Furthermore, the South Philadelphians I encountered are mostly non-mobile. The girls and boys I talked to frequently told me that they had no intention of leaving South Philadelphia and could not imagine why they would want to. Very many of them told me that their grandparents, older siblings, uncles, aunts and other extended family members lived within a block or two of their house. The school guidance counselor told me that only two girls in recent memory had gone to an out-of-state college. The majority attend local colleges, including the Philadelphia Community College. Among those not college-bound, the local beauty school is a popular choice for girls.

It is fair to expect then, that any changes to be seen in the speech of these girls in the course of a year will be due not to contact with an external speech community, but to their own sensitivity to the social transitions they are making. The sensitivity of changes from below to these transitions is not known. They may be below the level of social awareness, but as Eckert has shown in her study of adolescents in Detroit (1989) and her recent work on pre-adolescents in California, it is the unconscious attachment of social meaning to an advanced variant that pushes linguistic change forward. We can suppose that the social meaning of advanced, raised variants of (ay0), for example, will promote or retard its continuing use by an individual post adolescence.

### 3.2 Studies of (ay0) in Philadelphia

Labov's LCV in the 1970s described the raising of (ay0) as exceptional in two ways (Labov 2001). First, it was the only Philadelphian vowel shift for which men, not women, were in advance. Second, it was the only one of the Philadelphia vowel shifts to exhibit significant change in F1 (raising/lowering), rather than F2 (backing/fronting). There was also a tendency for women to produce slightly fronted means for (ay0) and for men to produce backer means.

Figure 3 reproduces a chart of the vowel system of Barbara Corcoran, aged 16 when she was recorded by the LCV project in 1973.

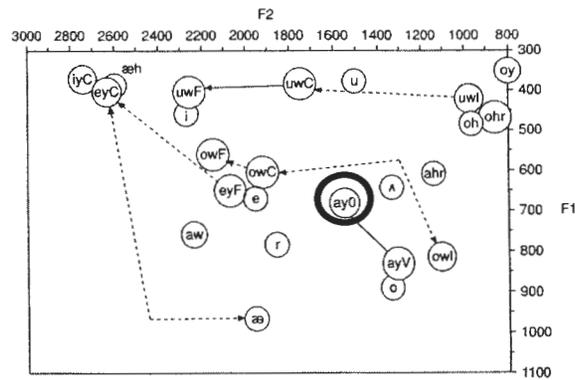


Figure 3: Partial vowel system of Barbara Corcoran, age 16  
(In Conn (2005), from Labov (2001:138))

The plot shows F1, or first vowel formant, in Hertz along the y-axis. Low F1 corresponds to a high vowel; thus the high front vowels /iy/, /i/, /ey/ etc. are ranged up in the 300-500 Hz region. The x-axis represents the second vowel formant, F2, and here an increase in Hertz corresponds to an increase in frontness. The circles represent the mean values of F1 and F2 for the nucleus of each vowel. Barbara's nucleus of (ayU), ringed in bold black, is raised about 200 Hz above the nucleus of (ayV). She also exhibits the characteristic female tendency to front the nucleus of (ayU) relative to the nucleus of (ayV).

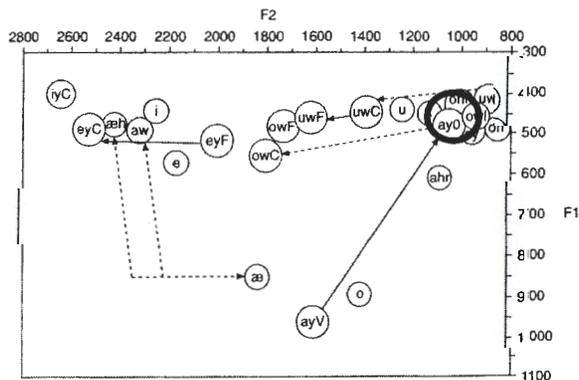


Figure 4: Partial vowel system of Rick Corcoran, age 13  
(In Conn (2005), from Labov (2001:141))

Compare this with her younger brother’s vowel system, in which the nucleus of (ay0) has raised to a high back position (Figure 4). Rick was 13 at the time of the LCV survey. It is illustrative of the male advantage in raising of F1. Rick also exhibits the male tendency to back the nucleus of (ay0).

Conn (2005) re-sampled the Philadelphia speech community and confirmed that the raising of (ay0) is continuing, and that *men are still in advance* of women. In addition, Conn looked at the F2 dimension and found that (ay0) is backing very slowly: a result that could be seen only when combining his data with the LCV data for a real-time analysis, and which had not been observed before.

In what follows, we will consider a subsample from the current LCS project in South Philadelphia.

#### 4 Findings and Discussion

The subsample comprises six girls, all seniors in 2005, three of Irish background, and three of Italian background.

- (1) Irish: Abby, Sheena, Danielle.
- (2) Italian: Hayley, Natalie, Emma.

Tokens of (ay0) and (ayV) from spontaneous speech and the word list exercise were collected from the six speakers, with an average of 5 tokens per speaker for each allophone. The nucleus of each token was measured with single point measurement in Praat, and graphed in Plotnik. Each speaker’s vowel measurements were normalized using Nearey’s logmean normalization in the Plotnik program against measurements of 345 speakers from the 1990s TELSUR survey (Labov, Ash and Boberg 2005).

Overall, the girls were more alike than different with respect to (ay0) production. When normalized plots were compared, five of the six girls showed raising of the nucleus of (ay0) about 200 Hz above the nucleus of (ayV). Figure 5 is a typical plot of the un-normalized means of the vowel nuclei measured.



Hayley's values for both (ayV) and (ay0) suggest that she would be better grouped with the Irish girls. This is considered in more detail in section 4.3.

For all six girls, there is no significant difference ( $p < 0.5$ ) between the F2 of their (ayV) and the F2 of their (ay0). In fact, only Emma's mean of (ay0) is actually higher than her mean of (ayV). But the point of interest here is the backing of a girl's (ay0) relative to the (ay0) of the other girls. The differences are small, and they reveal a tendency in the data rather than a statistically significant trend. But the tendency fits with the ethnographic observations I made, and suggests a hypothesis that can be tested against more data.

#### 4.1 Ethnic Pride

Why should there be a tendency for Irish girls to produce backer variants of (ay0) than Italian girls? Are Irish girls simply different, with different vowel systems than the Italians? There are certainly good reasons to think that ethnicity is being marked linguistically, since ethnicity is an all-important and salient category in this community.

The three Irish girls, Danielle, Abby and Sheena, live in the Second Street neighborhood. Abby and Sheena have a dense network of contacts there, among the Mummies<sup>5</sup> and the union workers' clubs, and the public recreation center where they either play basketball competitively or regularly hang out to watch a game. All three told me during and outside of interviews that they are proud to be Irish, and that they love the close community of Second Street. Danielle told me that she doesn't "stay" (hang out) on Second Street, but:

If Second Street ever gets in a fight, even though I'm not from—even though I don't stay there, I'd have to be part of Second Street side and go there along with Second Street.

Danielle, LCS-E05-S030-I014-R037

Natalie, Emma and Hayley by contrast live in Italian neighborhoods. Natalie can't understand the Irish obsession with being Irish:

We're all Italian but we don't show it, like "Oh, we're Italian." Like the Irish people are so into that they're Irish.

Natalie, LCS-E05-S022-I015-R028

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<sup>5</sup>Mummies' parades are part of Philadelphia Irish tradition. Gaudy costumes are worn and musical instruments are played. The participants are mostly men. See [www.phillymummies.com](http://www.phillymummies.com).

Natalie's observation that the Irish in school "are so into that they're Irish" is confirmed by the girls' choice of AOL screen names. I made a habit of collecting instant messenger screen names, since IMing the girls proved to be a more successful method than phoning or e-mailing when setting up times to meet. Of the 39 screen-names I collected, 14 were from self-identified Italian girls, and 17 from self-identified Irish. Only 2 of the Italian girls opted to incorporate ethnic names like *bella* and even *bella ragazza* 'beautiful girl' into their screen-names. Yet fully 12 of the 17 Irish girls incorporated an ethnic marker, usually a variation on "Two Street".

Ethnicity	N	N ethnic names	% ethnic names	Screen names
Irish	17	12	71	<i>Irish, Twostreet, 2st</i>
Italian	14	2	14	<i>bella, bella ragazza</i>
Other	8	--	--	--
Total	39	--	--	--

Table 2: AOL screen names as markers of ethnic identity

It seems that being Irish is more important to Irish girls than being Italian is to Italian girls. This may be a reaction to the local perception of South Philadelphia as "Italian", and the location of the school in Italian territory. But does the relative spatial separation and intense ethnic identification (on the Irish side at least) have an effect on the backing or fronting of (ay0)?

One way to check is to look at a comparable diphthong that is also undergoing a "new and vigorous change": the fronting of the nucleus of (aw).

	(aw)	
	F1	F2
<b>Danielle</b>	687	2255
<b>Sheena</b>	587	2465
<b>Abby</b>	611	1964
Hayley	675	2096
Natalie	617	2102
Emma	579	2111

Table 3: Mean normalized formant values for (aw)

In Table 3 above, there is a wide range of difference in F2, but it does not align with ethnic category. Indeed, the LCV study found a significant ethnic effect only for the fronting of (uw), in which Italians lagged behind all other ethnicities. Leaving aside ethnicity, then, let us consider what else is known about the social meaning of (ay0).

#### 4.2 Previous Subjective Reports on (ay0)

The 1970s LCV survey carried out a range of self-report and subjective reaction tests in Philadelphia. In the subjective reaction tests, people consistently downgraded advanced variants of (ay0). But the self-report test participants showed no overt awareness of the (ay0) change. After listening to conservative and advanced variants of *fight*, however, a few comments were noted down by the fieldworker, Ann Bower (Labov 2001). In South Philadelphia, an Italian informant described the advanced variants as "Two-streets! Sounds like the Irish on 2<sup>nd</sup> St." Barbara Corcoran, introduced in section 3.2 above, said that the advanced variants sounded "like tough kids."

This rare remark gives the first faint indication of an association of this male-led variable with something other than ethnicity: toughness and maleness on a subjective level.

Don Hindle's (1980) dissertation study of the speech of a single subject, Carol Meyers, over the course of a single day provided data on (ay0)'s sensitivity to social situations. Carol produced more advanced variants when she was at work, and less advanced variants when playing bridge at home with her girlfriends. In other words, we can suppose that more advanced, male-like variants were appropriate in the tougher, male-dominated world of work, while more conservative, female-like variants were appropriate for the bridge game.

Conn (2005), who also carried out subjective reaction tests, found that advanced variants produced by females were downgraded, while advanced variants produced by males were evaluated as tougher and more masculine than the conservative variants. In other words, advanced (ay0) variants carry covert male prestige.

By extension, it makes sense that Irish girls would produce the most male-like variants, if not in terms of height, then at least in terms of backness. Irish girls are perceived in the school as tough and keen to fight, and the neighborhoods in which they live have a similarly rough and tumble reputation. The Second Street neighborhood is thick with Mummers' clubs which function as male drinking hangouts, and street corner bars in which 8<sup>th</sup> graders can regularly buy alcohol. Street fights can erupt at any time, and are generally celebrated.

When I asked Natalie (an Italian) and her friend Monica about a street fight that had occurred outside the school that week, Natalie claimed not to know anything about it. Monica filled it in: it was a fight between Second Street and an Italian gang, and "the Second Street girls were in it too." Natalie responded: "See, like that, like that they wanted to fight. We would never really like... We wouldn't act like that."

We just act like girls and we don't act like men and try to like fight or whatever all the time...

Natalie, LCS-E05-S022-I015-R028

The prevailing Italian myth, whatever the reality, is that Italian girls are well brought up, well behaved and aware of social propriety. Girls frequently told me that it was the Italian girls who cared most about their appearance, and who would show up in school with carefully arranged hair, lots of make-up and lip gloss and jewelry. Most of the Irish girls I got to know wore no make-up and had the simplest of hair-styles.

### 4.3 The Social Meaning of (ay0)

And what about Hayley? Her (ay0) is almost as backed as that of the three Irish girls, but she isn't Irish. However, Hayley plays competitive sports and thinks of herself as tough. She told me a breathless story about a fight with her boyfriend in which she threw him into a refrigerator. She finished: "You have to set down them rules. You can't let them push you around like that." As for the other Italian girls, neither Natalie nor Emma engage in competitive sports, and neither one claims to be a fighter.

So perhaps the social boundaries in this school are not simply ethnic and territorial. They reflect the difference between those girls who enjoy the roughhousing of the athletics field and the gym, the relative asexuality of unbrushed hair and naked face, and those more interested in attracting a mate, acting like a lady and perhaps, acting more like a grown-up. In other words, it seems that more backed variants of (ay0) carry a certain social weight that indicates not simply toughness, but youthfulness and lack of care.

Furthermore, the girls who produced the most backed (ay0) are the girls who are most pre-occupied with asserting *local* social identity. The Irish girls strongly assert their *Irish* ethnicity in contrast to the Italian majority. Hayley, like other Italians, doesn't make a big deal out of being Italian, but for her it is extremely important to be *South* Philadelphian. I was introduced to her because she had recently written a piece for the school newspaper about South Philly sights, such as Pat's and Geno's dueling cheesesteak stands and the "Lakes" park. Hayley was described to me by her best friend as the most typical South Philadelphian you could ever meet, and Hayley almost visibly swelled with pride. For Italian girls Natalie and Emma, local social identity is relatively in the background. Neither asserts a strong territorial claim.

A year after these six girls' graduation from high school, what might

have happened to their realizations of (ay0)? If backed (ay0) is truly functioning as a marker of local pride and urban toughness, then its frontness or backness in the second time period will depend on how strongly the girls now identify with these qualities. All six girls are now in college, and those that I have re-interviewed have remarked on how their suburban peers regard them as "tough city girls". Some girls have reacted to this by embracing a tough girl identity, amused by their suburban counterparts' fear of the inner city, and cautious not to alienate their friends back in South Philadelphia by "going Jersey"—that is, behaving like a (New Jersey) suburbanite. Other girls are embracing the suburban campus lifestyle. In my recent re-interviews with some of these girls, it was noticeable that many of them had learned to project a less locally defined social identity. Abby and Sheena, now at Philadelphia's community college, have found that they are labeled as "South Philly girls" there, and that being Irish or Italian is no longer quite as relevant. Hayley, at a small liberal arts college in Philadelphia's suburbs, has found herself labeled as a "city girl", and that being from the southern part of the city is no longer quite as relevant.

I expect these differing orientations to city and suburbs to have an impact on their use of (ay0) at a period in which they are hypothesized to be stabilizing their systems, and this will be tested in further work.

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