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## Saks vs. Macys: (r-1) marches on in New York City department stores

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## Saks vs. Macys: (r-1) marches on in New York City department stores

### **Abstract**

Labov's 1963 study of /r/ in New York City department stores had three principal findings: 1) social stratification: use of consonantal /r/ in coda position (r-1) was correlated with the status of the store, i.e. more (r-1) in Saks than Macys 2) an age distribution suggesting ongoing 'change from above' towards increased (r-1) use 3) linguistic conditioning: more (r-1) in word-final position and emphatic repetitions. These observations have subsequently been reinvestigated, in 1986 by Fowler, and in 2009 by Mather, effectively providing a real-time trend series by replicating the original methodology. In this paper we replicate Labov's methodology. The results indicate continuing progression in the direction Labov predicted. This is a unique case in variationist studies of change in progress; no other change has been so frequently sampled with controlled methodology across so long a time frame. The present study extends the duration of this series to 54 years. The original study investigated three department stores that were socially stratified by price level and target clientele: Saks, Macys and S. Klein. Klein, the low-end store, closed in 1976, but the other two still operate in their original locations in Manhattan and were investigated for the present study using Labov's original methodology. 160 speakers were observed in each store. The results show continued advance of (r-1) in real time. The percentage of speakers using all (r-1) has increased by a factor of 2.8 in both stores since Labov's study, but the rate of change has accelerated considerably since Mather's 2009 data collection. Social stratification of the variable is still apparent: Saks, the high-end store, continues to show higher rates of (r-1) than Macys. In Labov's apparent time results, (r-1) use increased among younger speakers at Saks, but was higher among older speakers at Macys, suggesting that the change originated among higher status speakers, and spread to lower status speakers by diffusion in adult life. In the current study, this pattern has shifted. The age distribution at Saks is flattening out at a high level (speaker groups under age 50 all produce over 80% (r-1) tokens), while Macys now shows a conventional apparent time pattern, with (r-1) advancing among younger speakers. The linguistic conditioning on the process is moderating as the change approaches completion: Macys speakers showed moderate increases in (r-1) of about 7% between internal ('fourth') and final position ('floor'), and between non-emphatic and emphatic productions, but Saks employees are essentially uniform across all conditions.

# Saks vs. Macys: (r-1) marches on in New York City department stores

Gregory R. Guy\*

## 1 Background

Labov's landmark study of the social stratification of /r/ in New York City department stores was a foundational work in sociolinguistics. Originally conducted in 1963 and published in 1966 and 1972, this study revealed an age distribution among the speakers surveyed which Labov interpreted as reflecting an ongoing "change from above" in the City dialect towards increased use of consonantal /r/ in coda position, which he labelled (r-1), as opposed to deleted or vocalized realizations which were coded as (r-0). This variable has subsequently been investigated by several other scholars (e.g., Fowler 1986, Mather 2012). Taken together this sequence of studies effectively provides a real-time trend study of the community by replicating the original methodology. The trend thus revealed has shown continuing progression in the direction that Labov predicted. This is a unique case in variationist studies of change in progress; no other change has been so frequently sampled with controlled methodology across so long a time frame.

Methodologically, Labov pioneered in this work the technique of the rapid anonymous survey; he visited three different New York City department stores asking employees for directions to a sales department located on the fourth floor, thus eliciting the phrase "fourth floor" from each respondent. He followed up by saying "excuse me?", which usually elicited an emphatic repetition of the same phrase. He took note of the realization of the /r/ tokens produced, along with observable characteristics of each speaker, including the approximate age. The stores in question, Saks, Macys, and S. Klein, were selected so as to represent different status levels as indicated by their branding, marketing, price points and target clientele: Saks Fifth Avenue as the high-end store, Macys the mid-level, and S. Klein a low-end discount store. S. Klein subsequently went out of business, but Saks and Macys are both still operating at their original locations. With this method, Labov obtained 68 respondents in Saks and 125 in Macys.

In the original 1963 research, Labov's principle findings were:

- (1) **Social stratification:** Coda /r/ is used more in Saks than in Macys, consistent with the status difference between the stores.
- (2) **Change in progress:** In Saks, younger speakers used more (r-1); in Macys this was reversed: older speakers used more (r-1).
- (3) **Linguistic conditioning:** Word-final position favored more (r-1) (floor vs. fourth), and more /r/ was used in emphatic productions (in a second repetition of the answer).

Figure 1 shows the age distribution that Labov observed, which he interpreted as reflecting an ongoing "change from above" in apparent time. He hypothesized that this pattern of usage indicated that (r-1) was an incoming prestige form, adopted first by higher status (upper middle class) adult speakers represented by Saks employees, with the lower middle class lagging behind by about a generation. Figure 2 shows the linguistic conditioning that Labov observed, with higher rates of (r-1) in *floor* than in *fourth*, and higher rates in the emphatic repetition.

In 1986, Fowler performed a replication of Labov's study, substituting Mays department store for the defunct S. Klein. Her results showed higher rates of (r-1) usage overall, confirming Labov's prediction that the change was advancing. Rhotic pronunciations were still socially stratified across the stores, with Saks showing the highest (r-1) rate, followed by Macys and then Mays. The apparent time distribution Labov had observed was still present: younger speakers at Macys used less (r-1

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than older speakers, while the reverse was true at Saks. The linguistic constraints that Labov observed were replicated in Fowler's results.

A third data point on this change is provided by Mather's work (conducted in 2009, published in 2012), again replicating Labov's methodology, but using new replacements for the low-end store, as Mays had also closed by this time. Among 56 respondents at Saks and 88 at Macys, Mather found a substantial further advance in the rate of (r-1) use. Saks still led Macys in (r-1) use, and the linguistic constraints of position and emphatic were also replicated. However, the age distribution was altered: Labov and Fowler found, in 1963 and again in 1986, the age asymmetry illustrated in Figure 1. But Mather found a symmetrical pattern in Saks and Macys: younger speakers in both stores now used more (r-1).

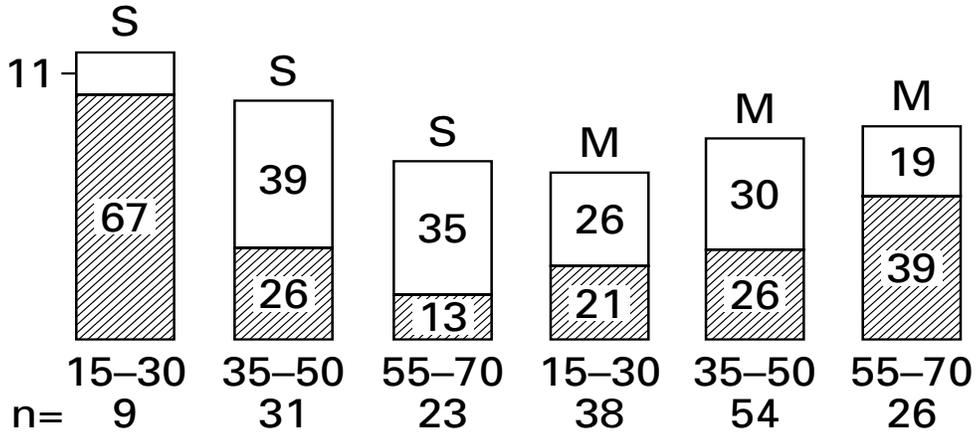


Figure 1: % (r-1) speakers by age, Saks & Macys (from Labov 1972). Shaded areas represent speakers who used (r-1) in all four tokens observed; unshaded areas represent speakers who used (r-1) at least once.

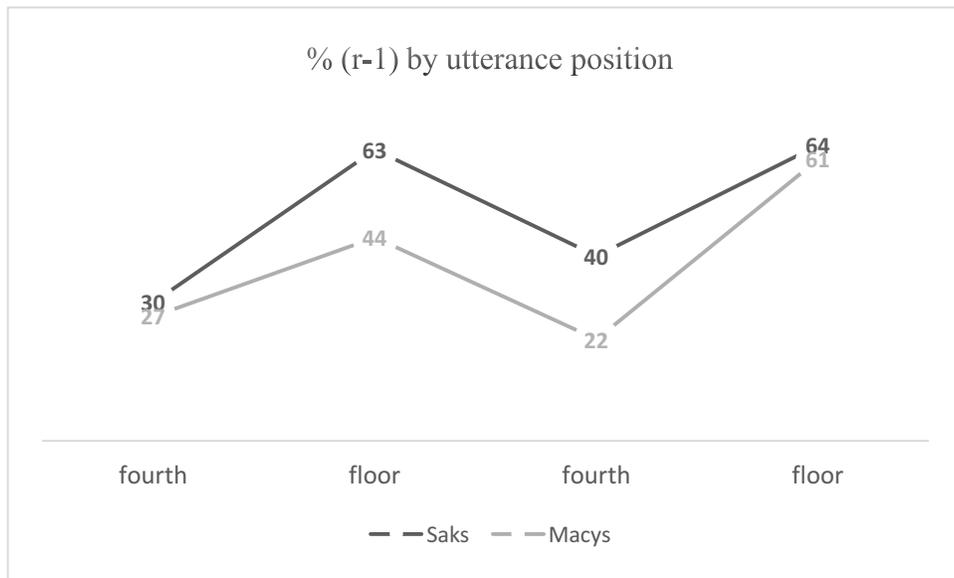


Figure 2: Linguistic conditioning on (r-1), after Labov 1972, Figure 2.2.

The present study extends the time span of this unique longitudinal survey of a linguistic change. In spring 2017, the author and student researchers (see acknowledgements) at NYU re-surveyed Saks and Macys replicating Labov's methodology. Given the ongoing changes in merchandising and Manhattan real estate markets, we abandoned the effort to identify a low-end department store; the two investigated by Mather (Filene's Basement and Loehmann's) have also closed. We obtained responses from 160 employees at Saks and 165 in Macys, exceeding the numbers observed in previous studies.

## 2 Results

The 2017 survey finds a substantial overall increase in the rate of (r-1) use in both Saks and Macys, as shown in Figure 3. Saks' employees who use only (r-1) were 78% of those observed, up from 29% in 1963, while the comparable figure for Macys is now 57%, up from 20% in Labov's study. The balance between speakers who use all (r-1) and some (r-1) has shifted. A substantial majority of speakers in both stores now use (r-1) in all four utterances. The social stratification of the two stores remains remarkably stable, with Saks currently surpassing Macys by a ratio of 1.37 to 1, fairly close to the ratio of 1.45 observed by Labov.

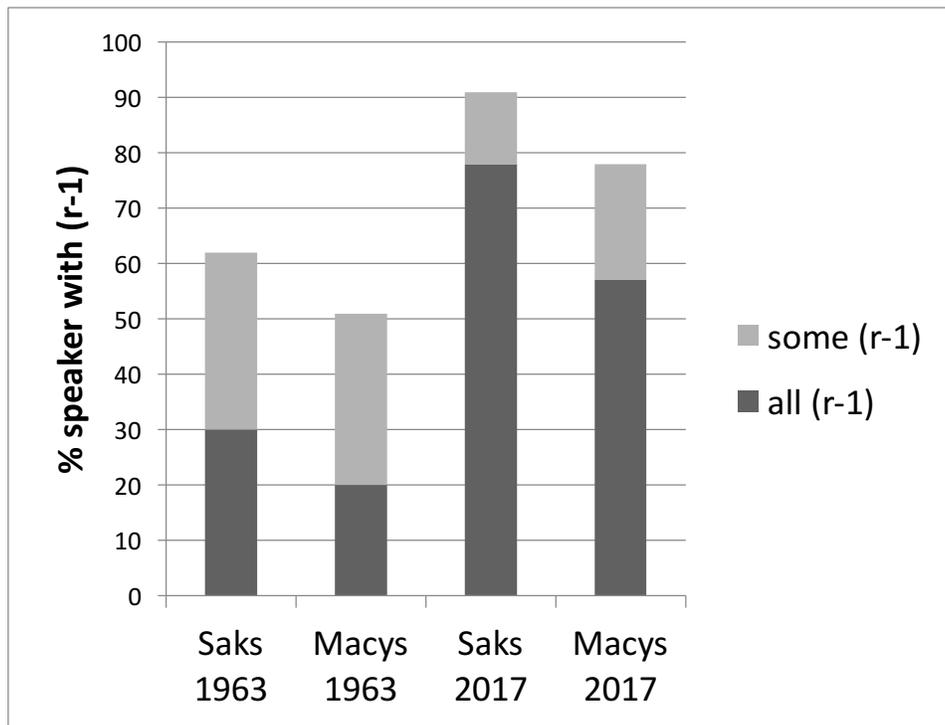


Figure 3: Overall stratification of (r) by store in 1963 and 2017.

In apparent time, as shown by the age distribution of the variable, younger speakers are leading in the use of (r-1) in both stores. This is the expected pattern for an advancing variable that is well established across a speech community. Labov accounted for the asymmetry he observed between Saks and Macys as reflecting the early stage of a change from above: the rhotic pronunciation was a prestige norm borrowed from the rhotic Midlands and Northern dialect regions neighboring New York City, including upstate New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. As such, he postulated, it was adopted first by upper and upper-middle class speakers; during the early stages of the change, lower-middle class speakers would hypothetically only become exposed to the new prestige form as they entered the labor market.

The Saks-Macys asymmetry was also evident in 1986, in Fowler’s study. However, in the present study, as in Mather 2012, this status-related asymmetry is no longer present. Our results appear in Figure 4. This indicates a convergence with the kind of age distribution typically found for other changes, which are typically construed as spontaneous innovations, or “changes from below.” Clearly, class differences in age distribution are not stably associated with the particular sociolinguistic origin of an innovation – whether emerging spontaneously within the community or originating in contact with an external source; rather, the intersection between age and social class may alter during the course of a change.

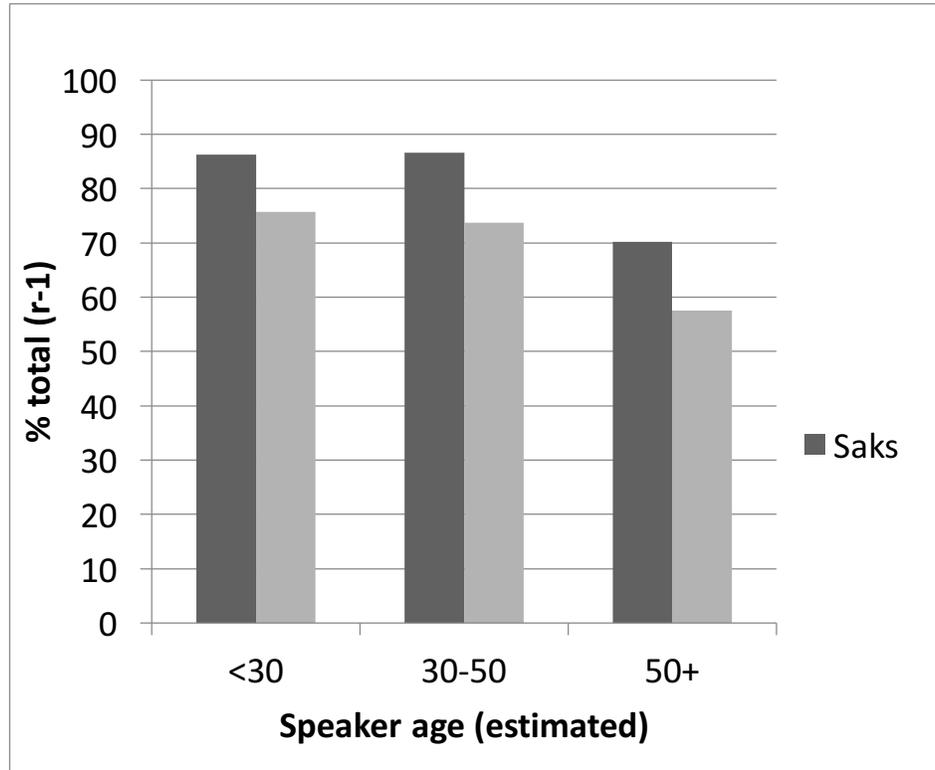


Figure 4: (r-1) in apparent time, in 2017.

The linguistic conditioning on this variable, with word-final tokens (*floor*) showing higher rates of (r-1) than word internal tokens (in *fourth*), and with the second, presumably emphatic, repetition of the phrase showing higher rates than the first, was robust in the first two studies (in 1963 and 1986), but somewhat attenuated in Mather’s study conducted in 2009. Now, after the passage of a further 8 years, we find even more attenuation of these effects. In Macys the main effects are present, but less markedly differentiated. In Labov’s study, *floor* had double the rate of (r-1) found for *fourth* in the first articulation (44% vs. 22% in Macys, 63% vs. 30% in Saks), and the second, emphatic repetition of *floor* was tripled in Saks (61%). But in the present study, the results in Figure 5 show that at Macys there is an absolute increase of only about 7-8% for both constraints, from 60.7% for the first articulation of *fourth*, to 69.5% for the first instance of *floor*, and finally to 76.3% for the emphatic repetition of *floor*. At Saks, the linguistic constraints are disappearing: the rate of (r-1) use is approaching the ceiling and flattening out across the positions, with only the emphatic articulation of *floor* showing any elevation.

The results of the four studies can be compared across time to provide a real time picture of the advance of rhotic articulations in NYC English. This is the fortuitous equivalent of a longitudinal trend study, given the consistency of the methodology, the research sites, and the characteristics of the sampled population. The figures are given in Table 1, and in graphic form in Figure 6. There we see what approximates the first half of an “s-shaped” or logistic curve that is typical of the time

course of linguistic change. The steeper slope of the curve in the last decade is a characteristic of the midrange of a logistic function and does not necessarily indicate a qualitative acceleration in the time course of the change. Note that the relative positions of Saks and Macys appear to be maintained fairly consistently. This is approximated by the Saks/Macys ratio in Table 1. It is modestly larger in the early studies, which is consistent with Labov’s hypothesis that the change began earlier in the social class associated with Saks.

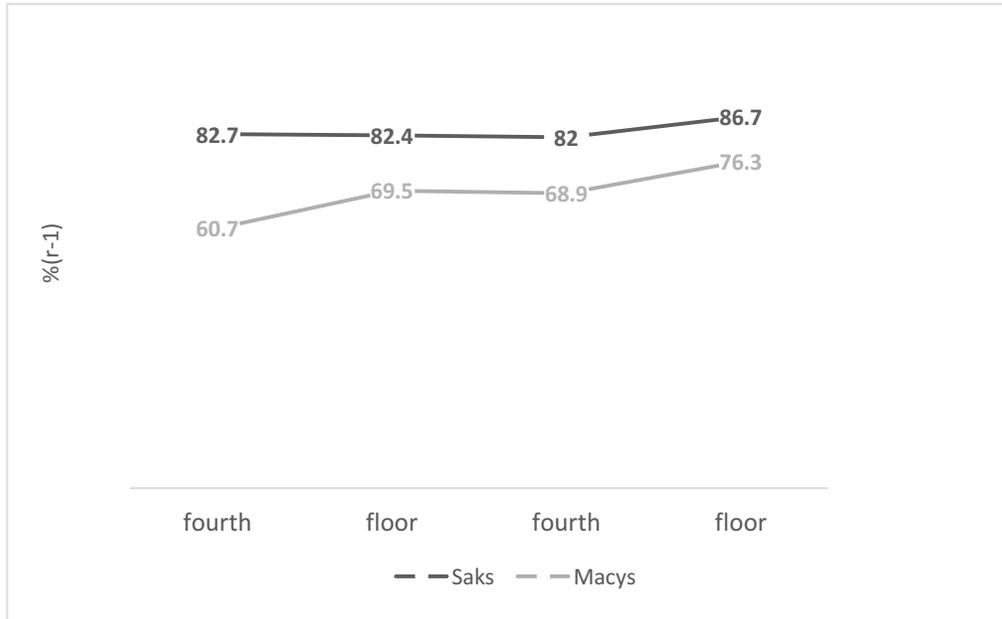


Figure 5: Linguistic conditioning on (r-1) in 2017.

% all r-1	Labov 1963	Fowler 1986	Mather 2009	Guy 2017
Saks	29	39	54	78
Macys	20	24	43	57
ratio S/M	1.45	1.63	1.26	1.37

Table 1: (r-1) use in Saks and Macys in real time.

### 3 Discussion

The vocalization or deletion of coda /r/ is a long-standing shibboleth of New York City English, frequently stigmatized by outsiders. This was the central observation of Labov’s pioneering work on NYC English, reflected in the differences between Saks and Macys: more (r-1) use is associated with higher social status. The present study confirms this fundamental finding: the variable is still socially stratified, and Saks maintains a firm lead on Macys in the use of the normative variant. Notably, the relative position of the two stores has remained remarkably stable across a half-century.

Partly as a consequence of its stigmatization, r-lessness, like other features associated with the city dialect, is being replaced in New York City by a variant that is found in wider use in American English, in this case, the constricted rhotic realization. In his original study of this variable, Labov hypothesized that the age and class distribution of the (r-1) form indicated that it was advancing through the community in the early stages of a “change from above.” In his analysis, this represented a shift to a new community norm, which accorded prestige to the wider American English (r-ful) phonology, rather than the former New England and English (r-less) norm. Initial adoption of (r-1)

was led by adults with wider social contacts, from the UMC. It entered their usage as a “superposed” variant, acquired in adulthood or late adolescence. In this view, the LMC speakers exemplified by Macys staff were lagging by a generation in adopting the new prestige form.

Labov’s prediction about the direction of change is confirmed in the present data. The observed rate of rhotic pronunciations has increased dramatically in the past 55 years and is approaching the ceiling in the Saks data. Indeed, a substantial majority of speakers in both stores used (r-1) exclusively throughout the four-word samples of their speech that were obtained with this methodology. Some, perhaps many, of these presumably have completely rhotic idiolects.

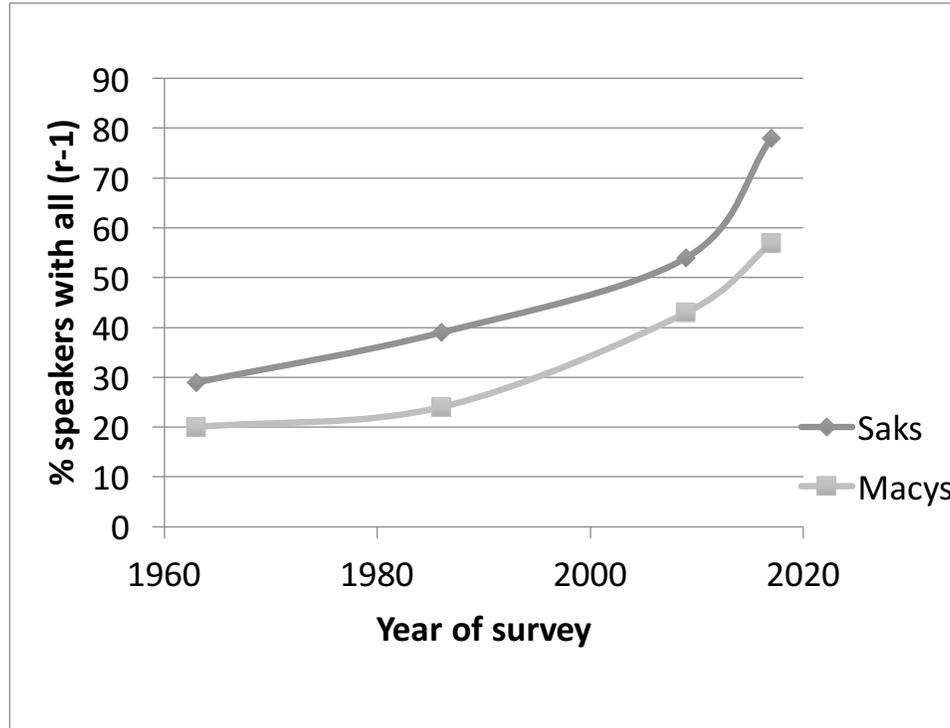


Figure 6. (r-1) use in real time.

However, the status of the (r-1) variant as superposed is no longer evident. Both stores now show (r-1) use increasing with year of birth, which is the conventional age distribution of a change in progress acquired in childhood and incremented in adolescence. The shift from an asymmetrical age-by-class distribution to a symmetrical one occurred between the Fowler 1986 study and the Mather 2012 study.

Another difference that is evident in the present study is the evident attenuation of the linguistic constraints on the process. In our Macys data, the linguistic conditioning observed by Labov (and replicated by Fowler and Mather) is still evident, but at a lower magnitude. Word-finally (in *floor*), there is more (r-1) use than word-internally (in *fourth*), and the emphatic repetitions of these words also have higher (r-1) rates. But these differences are smaller in our data than any of the previous studies, and they are hardly evident at all in the Saks data. Overall, these constraints appear to be weakening as the change approaches completion. This is consistent with the weakening of constraints reported by Guy & Zilles (2008) as vernacular speakers adopt more standard norms, which is another case of change from above. However, this is inconsistent with Kroch’s (1989) constant rate hypothesis, which states that constraint effects are constant throughout the course of a change. The data here are insufficient for a statistical test, but this raises the possibility that the ‘constant rate’ effect is operative only in spontaneous innovations, uninfluenced by dialect contact.

Finally, there is an important methodological point that emerges from this series of replications. Each of the studies was a rapid anonymous survey, providing a snapshot of one point in time. In

isolation, such snapshots are not necessarily very informative about diachrony, which is most definitively examined using real time data, ideally trend studies that follow a particular variable in a particular community across time with the same methodology and well-controlled speaker samples. Such studies are invaluable, but very difficult to plan prospectively and to carry out. The approach used here yields many of the positive features of a trend study with much greater efficiency. The methodology, the research settings, and the discourse context are all standardized and easy to replicate, which maximizes the comparability of the results from different points in time. The retrospective approach permits the construction of a *de facto* trend corpus wherever and whenever replications of previous studies are possible. To facilitate future studies of this sort, sociolinguistics would be well advised to begin undertaking such rapid anonymous surveys wherever possible, and making the results available in open source forums, laying down the starting points for future real-time comparisons.

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