The Emergence and Evolution of Linguistic Variation in a Transition Zone

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“Dialects as a Testing Ground for Theories of Language Change”

OVERVIEW…
EVOLVING, EVOLVED, & EVOLUTION

- “language change is anything but a paradox; it is rather the predictable consequence of alterations of the mechanism that combines, and modifies in context… forms expressed in basic units” (Robert King, 1972:929)

- Theories of…
  - Language Change
  - Social Categories
  - Linguistic Systems

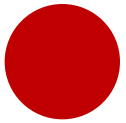
- Nothing makes sense except in light of evolution.

HOW IS IT THAT LANGUAGE CHANGES?
WHO IS IT THAT CHANGES LANGUAGE?

- Sounds have different *functional loads* (Martinet, 1933)
- Languages *drift* according to their composition (Trudgill, 2004)
- Listeners *misperceive* and reproduce *misperceptions* (Ohala, 1993)
- People hyper- and hypo-articulate as needed (*H&H Theory,* Lindblom, 1990)
- Vowels (& consonants) *adapt* as needed (Lindblom et al., 1995)
- People *accommodate* to each others' speech (Giles & Coupland, 1991)
- People of different social classes speak differently… people *hypercorrect* (Labov, 1972)
- People in different cliques use language to index their identities differently (Eckert, 2000)

NECESSARY & SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS

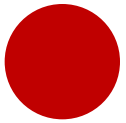
- Many theories, many possibilities… who's right?
- What are the Necessary & Sufficient conditions?
  - "…no change is ever necessary. If it were, it would already have happened…" (Lass, 1980:131)
  - "change can occur at any and all levels of the linguistic system" (Thomason & Kaufman, 1988)
  - "although it is often possible to state necessary conditions for change, it is never possible to state sufficient conditions for change" (Thomason, 2000)
- Any of the (reputable) causes can be found SUFFICIENT, but none are strictly NECESSARY
- An all-encompassing theory is needed.



WHAT IS LANGUAGE?
WHERE DOES IT COME FROM?

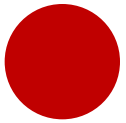
- LANGUAGE (all caps) is a product of evolution, specifically, the evolution of human beings
- Humans evolved to live in small bands, not large cities (Dawkins, 2004)
- Modern human cognitive capacities reflect the product of millions of years of evolution, not the needs or whims of the last 10,000 years (Buss, 2005)

- So what? Time to question our assumptions.



SOCIAL CATEGORIES, LINGUISTIC VARIATION, & "AGENCY" IN LANGUAGE CHANGE

- Shedding our platonic essentialist categories…
  - Age, Gender, Social Class, Region
  - How can any of these *really* influence language use?
- Social Category MEANINGS are locally constructed and reified (Eckert, 2000; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992)
  - Age & Social Class are just as "locally constructed" as gender… Region ("space")… even "Frequency"…
- Who constructs meaning? In relation to whom?
  - Friends. Cliques. Groups. Neighborhoods. Towns. (States? Countries?)



ACCOUNTS OF VARIATION & MECHANISMS OF CHANGE

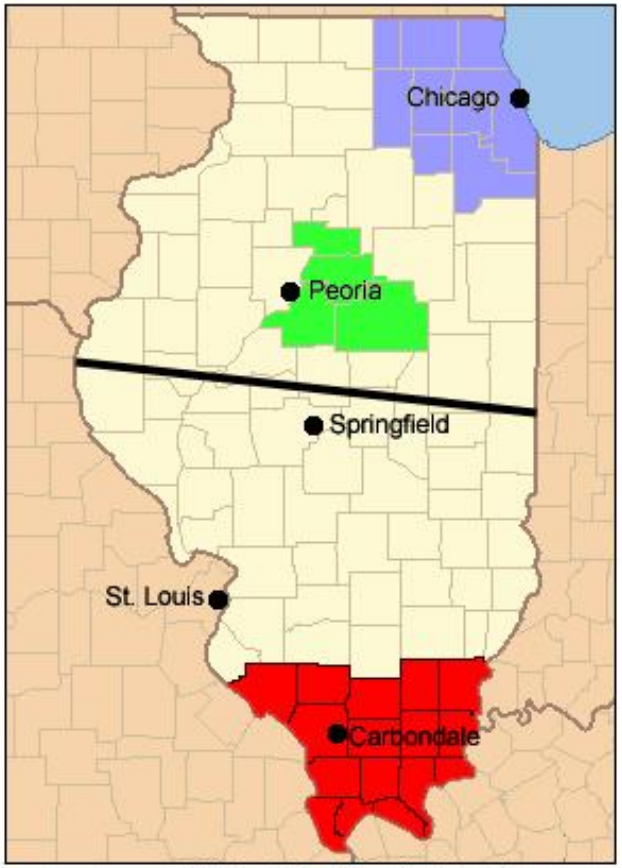
- Functionalist accounts: people talk according to their “internal linguistic systems”
  - Vowels shift according to “available space”
  - Why? Speakers usually *know* what they’re saying
- Social accounts: people talk to according to their “audience”
  - People are the agents, not social structures (after J. Milroy, 1992)
- Combined approach: people talk according to their “audience’s linguistic systems”
  - *People should speak/produce variants that are in accord with the category boundaries of their interlocutors, not their own.*

THE EVOLUTIONARY-EMERGENCE MODEL OF LANGUAGE CHANGE

- Language is not a structure, nor an organism, but a dynamic collection of properties, built from repeated & stored multiple single “utterances” (Croft, 2000)
  - Sentences > phrases > words > morphemes > phonologies > phones > gestures…
- Change is evolutionary… change comes from the differential success of reproduced forms & the fidelity of those reproductions (e.g., Croft, 2000)
- Every level of the Linguistic System interacts with, influences, and is influenced by every other level…
  - Syntax, lexicon, etc. can recover lost sounds
  - Sounds can recover lost syntax, lexicon, etc.

TESTING THE THEORY…
DIALECT CONTACT IN SOUTHERN ILLINOIS

- Dialect Contact
  - What happens when speakers of two different dialects interact with each other?
  - Trudgill, 1986; 2004
- University Students
  - Southern Illinois University – Carbondale (SIUC)
  - Close, persistent, intimate contact
  - Transient, dynamic, “anchored” populations
- Emerging Adulthood
  - Period between High School and a Career
  - Roughly age 18-26
  - Marked by exploration, self-discovery, and transience
  - J. Arnett, 2001

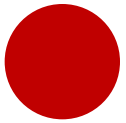


Dialect Regions in Illinois

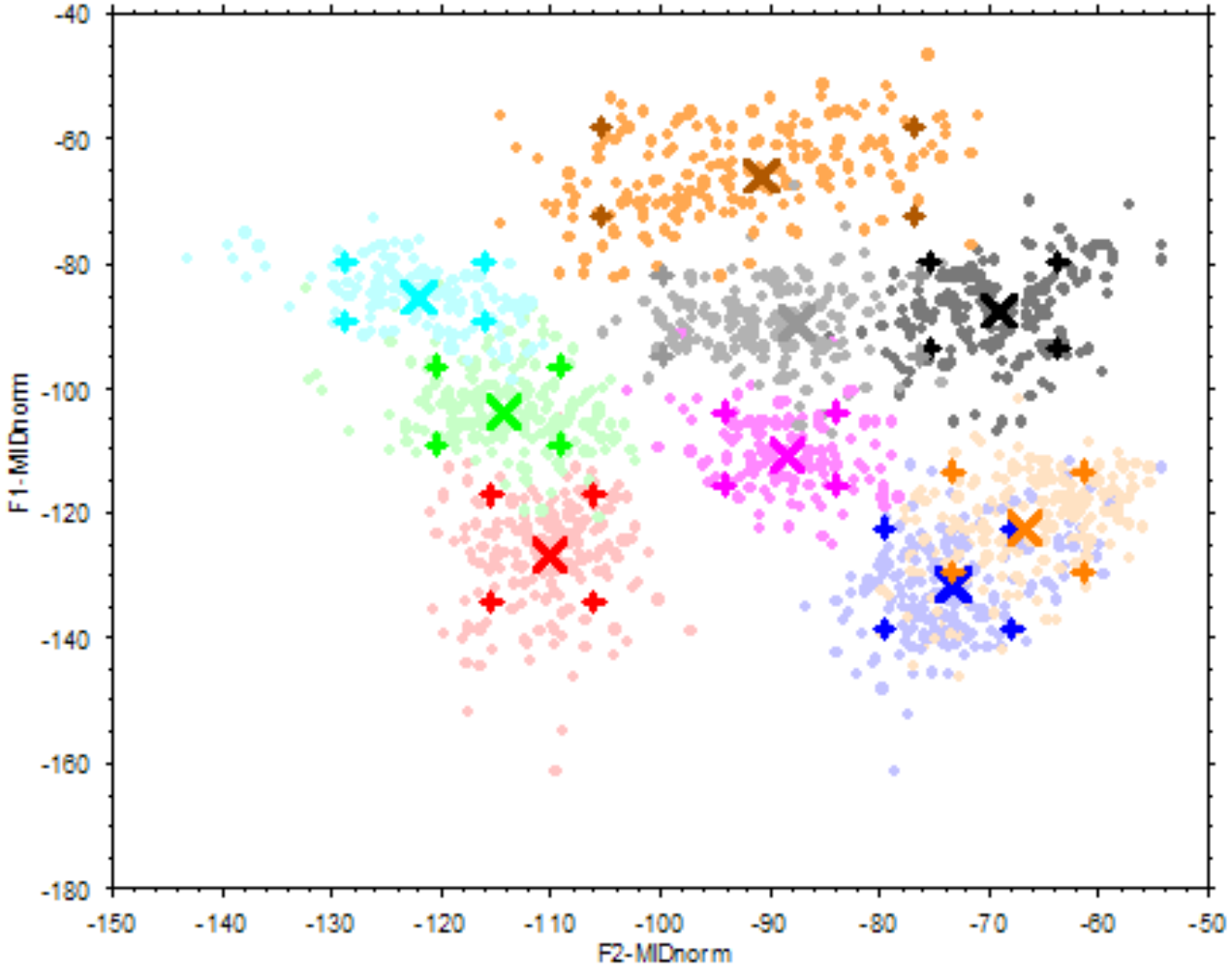
SPEAKER VARIABILITY

- Multiple repeated & stored “utterances”
- Variation is to be expected
- An individual’s variation will be constrained by “community norms” rather than “internal norms”
  - Individual vowel production can vary greatly, so long as community category boundaries are maintained

- H&H Theory (Lindblom, 1990)
  - Speakers are as “lazy” as they can be…

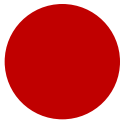


SOUTHERN ILLINOIS VOWEL VARIATION



CHANGE IS EVOLUTIONARY…

- Evolutionary change = differential success of forms being reproduced + fidelity of reproduction
- How "successful" is a variant? How faithfully is it reproduced?
- Successful variants…
  - …are phonologically "simple"
  - …do not create miscommunication
  - …do not violate community category boundaries
- Faithful reproductions…
  - …are "distinctive"
  - …are more "habitual" than not

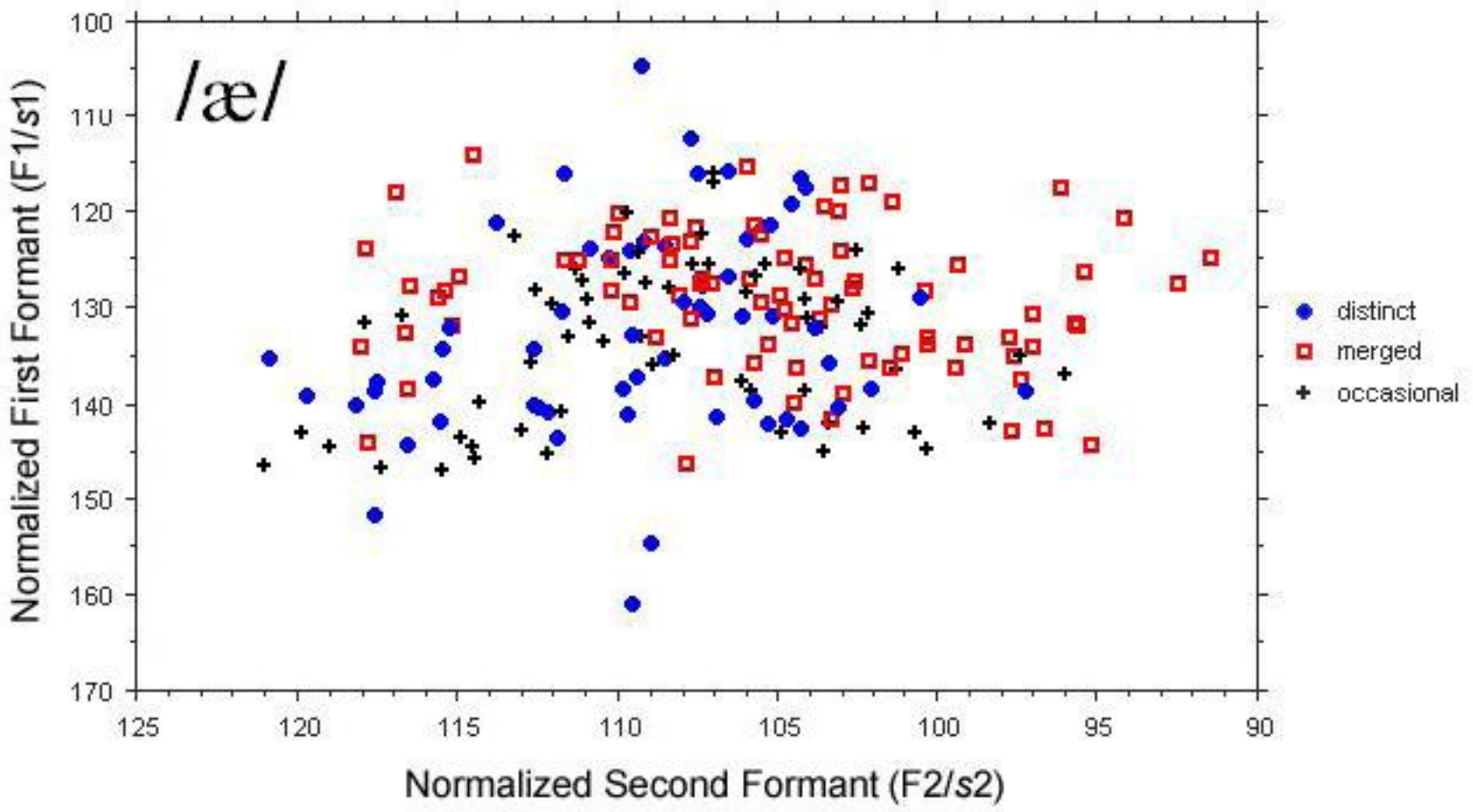


WITHIN A COMMUNITY: TRAP-RETRACTION & THE LOT / THOUGHT MERGER

- TRAP split: pre-nasal tokens raised, pre-oral token retracted
- TRAP retraction occurs as a response to the "availability" in the vowel space created by LOT/THOUGHT merger (Gordon, p.c.)

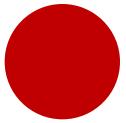
- What does the Evolutionary-Emergence Model predict?
  - Which forms will be more successful?
  - TRAP retracts according to the position of LOT in interlocutors' speech, not an individual's speech.

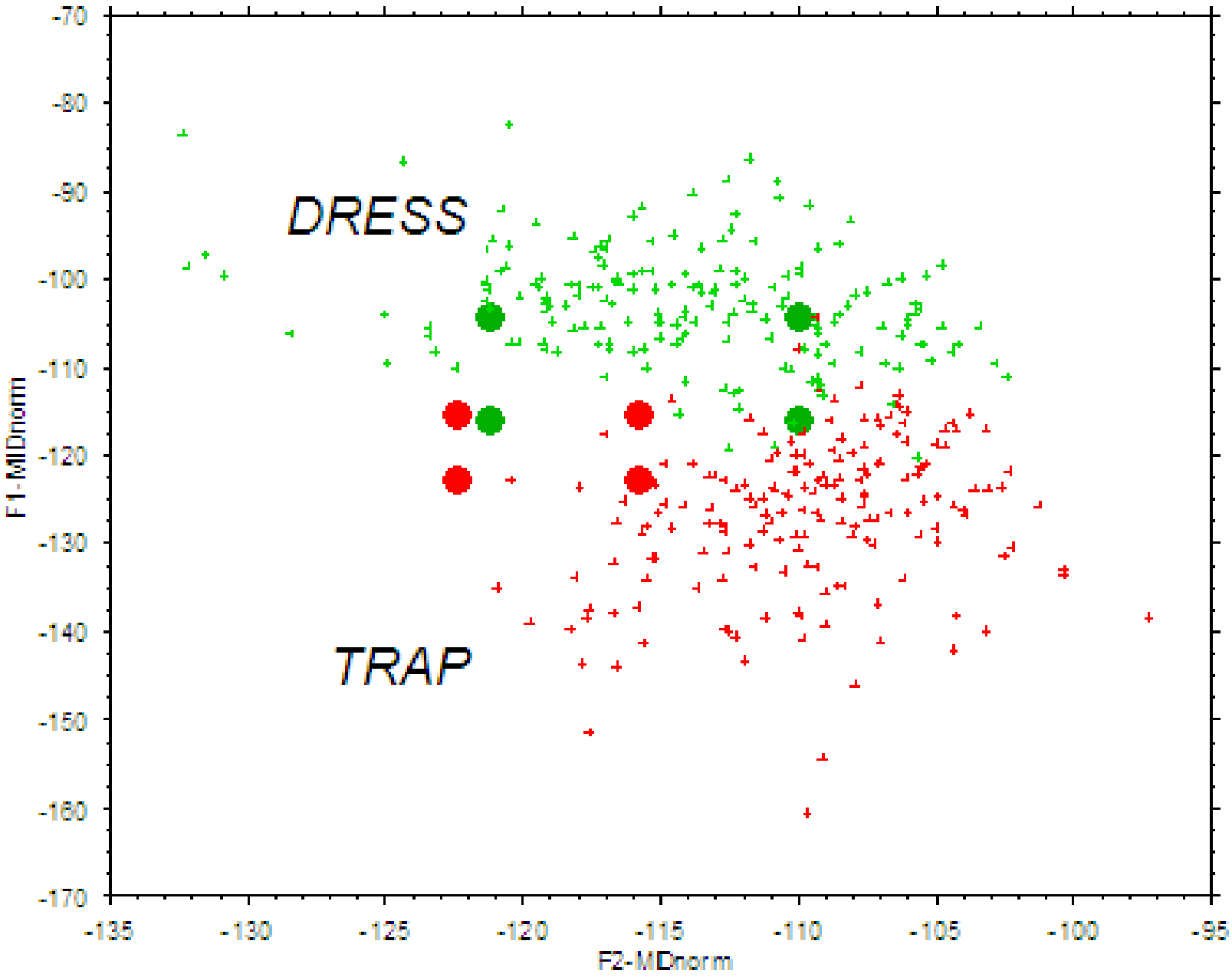
TRAP, LOT, & THOUGHT IN SOUTHERN ILLINOIS ENGLISH



CHANGE DURING DIALECT CONTACT: NOVEL VARIANTS VS. EXISTING FORMS

- What happens when speakers encounter a community with a new set of “norms”?
  - Speakers could adopt new production variants that fit the new norms
  - Speakers could create new production variants that are midway between the old and new “norms”
  - Speakers could use only those variants that match both “systems”
  - Speakers could use only those variants from the original “system” that do NOT cause category clashes with the new categories
- Why choose one option over another?




DRESS
TRAP
F1-MIDnorm
F2-MDnorm
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-115
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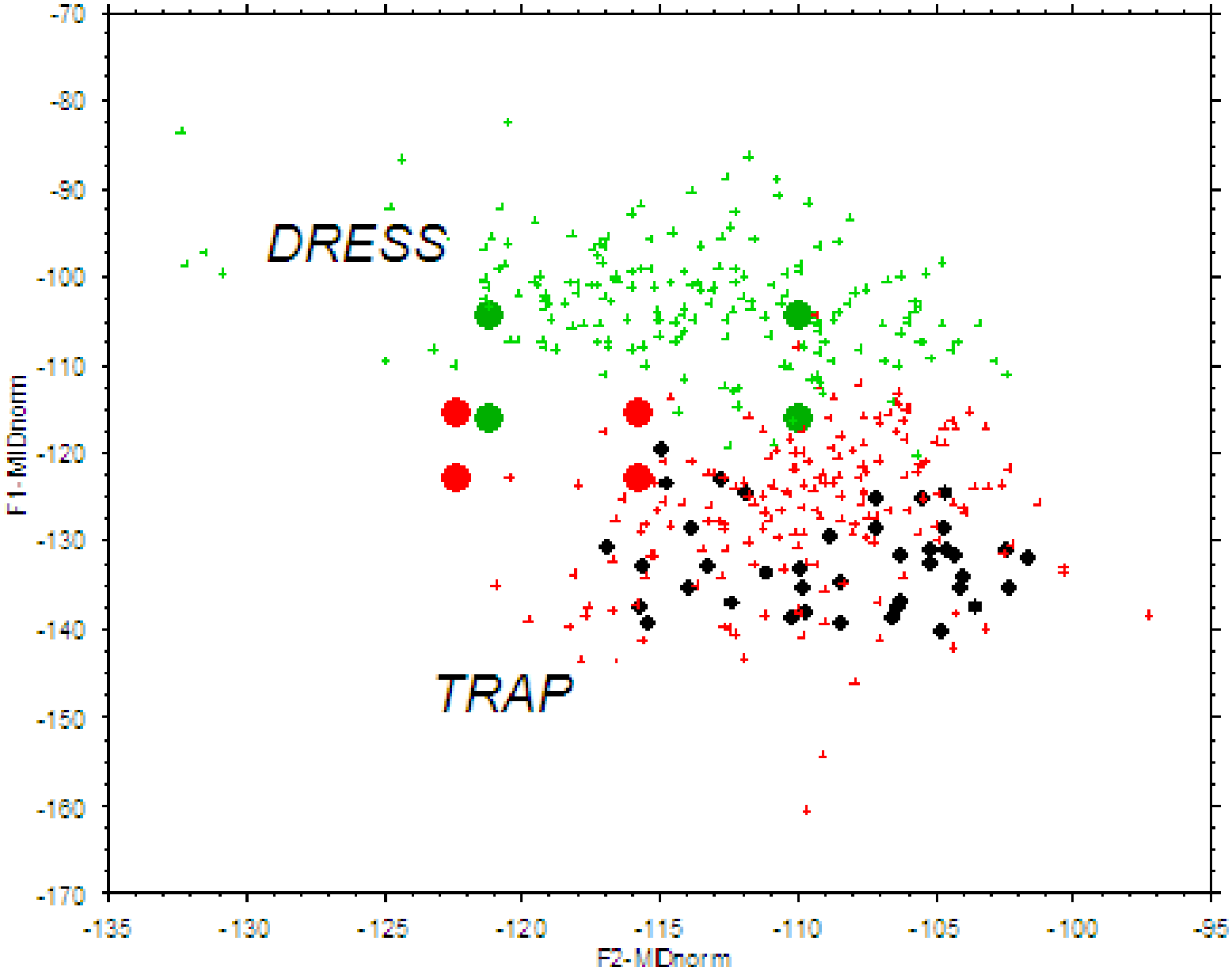
DRESS
TRAP
F1-MIDnorm
F2-MIDnorm
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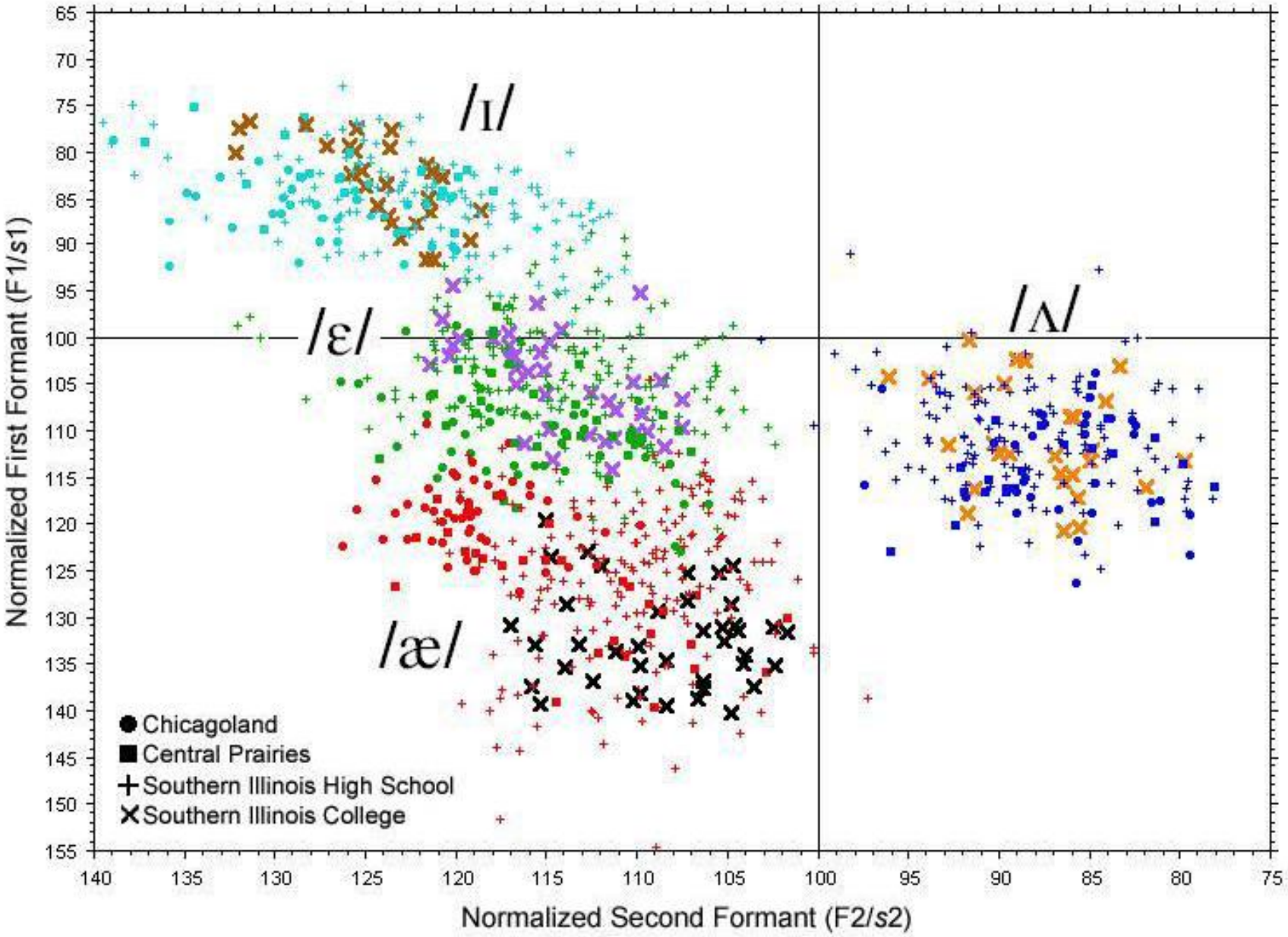
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Central Prairies
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Normalized First Formant (F1/s1)
Normalized Second Formant (F2/s2)
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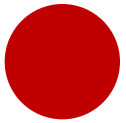
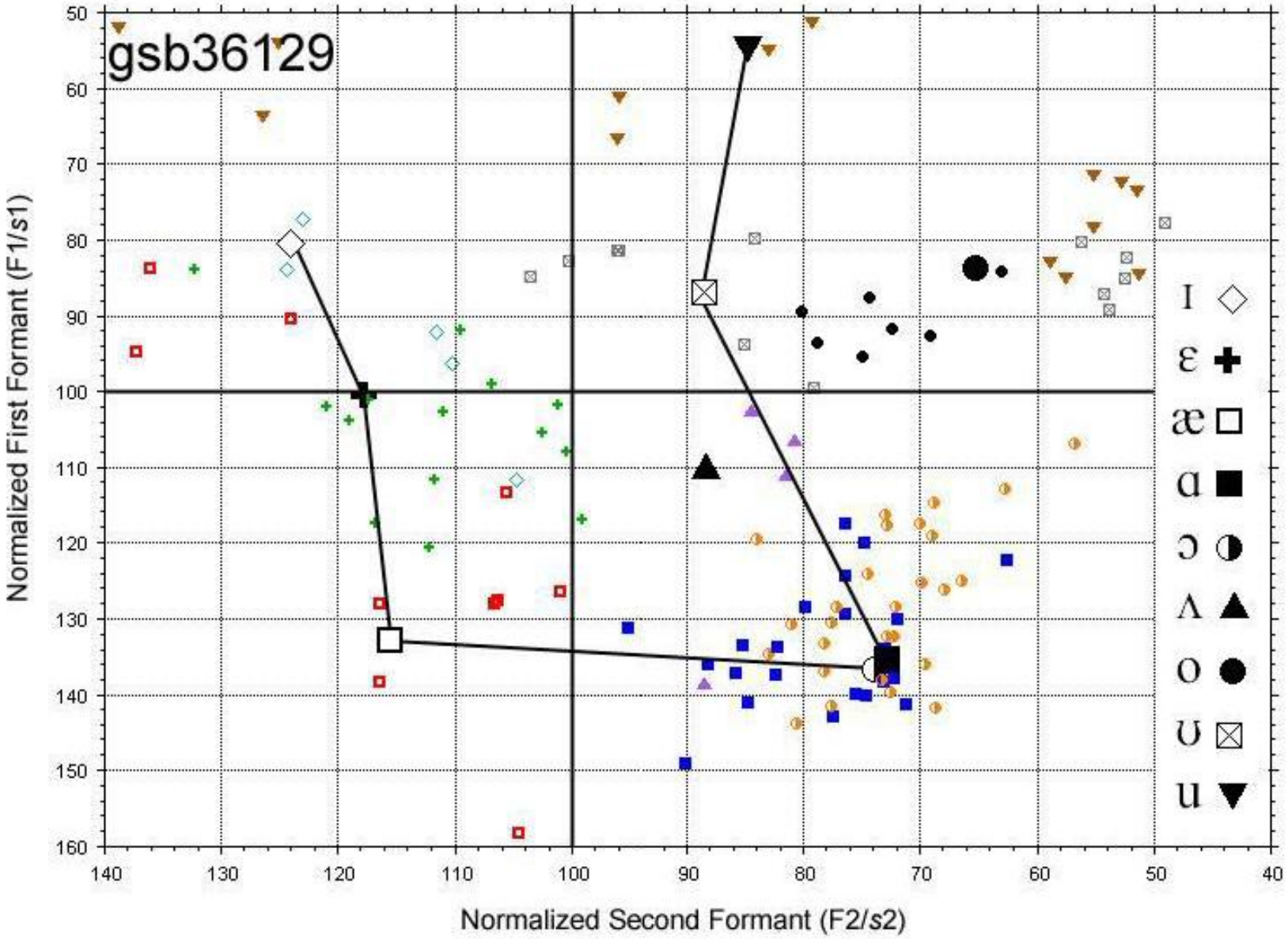
THE ENTIRE LANGUAGE SYSTEM

- Processing of the “language system” occurs at all levels: syntactic, semantic, lexical, phonological, etc.
- More “recoverable” words are more likely to change (after Lindblom et al., 1995)
- Recoverability…
  - semantic uncommon-ness
  - socially marked forms
  - semantic common-ness
- “pop” … “Chicago” … “bad”




gsb36129
Normalized First Formant (F1/s1)
Normalized Second Formant (F2/s2)
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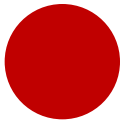
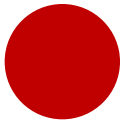
ADVANTAGES & PROBLEMS

- Functional vs. Anti-Functional (Social) accounts…
  - "Functional" is a function of social interaction
- Lexical Diffusion vs. Gradual Change
  - Change at all levels… "activation" at all levels
  - Lexical level is not separate from phonetic level
- Actuation vs. Development/Spread
  - Variability is constant… there is no "actuation"
- Social Categories across time & space
  - Social Categories are abstractions of GROUP interaction
- Problem: What's new?



LANGUAGE CHANGE, SPEAKER VARIATION, & DIALECT CONTACT

- “language change is anything but a paradox; it is rather the predictable consequence of alterations of the mechanism that combines, and modifies in context… forms expressed in basic units” (King, 1972:929)
- Speakers’ usage is constrained not by their own “systems”, but by the “systems” of their interlocutors… variants that cause the least problem for interlocutor perception will prevail (::Sexual Selection)
- Connectionist models…



Thank you!

Contact Info for References, Further Questions... job offers...

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