

# Language change over the lifespan

## A test of the apparent time construct

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Do individuals really remain linguistically constant throughout their lives?

If not, what are the ramifications for the apparent time construct?

### Lifelong constancy: A crucial assumption

In order for the apparent time construct to work, certain assumptions must hold. Among these is an assumption of lifelong linguistic constancy—that is, in order for individuals of different ages at the same point in time to accurately reflect the state of a particular variety at different points in real time, their linguistic system must remain fixed throughout their (at least adult) lifespans. If this is not true, apparent time is less reliable than it would be otherwise.

### Change over the lifespan

Previous studies are in conflict over whether there is constancy or change in linguistic behavior over the lifespan. Among others, Ashby (2001), Bailey (2002), Bailey, Wikle, Tillery, and Sand (1991), Bhat (1970), and Nahkola & Saanilahti (2004) have found that individuals remain linguistically constant throughout their lives, while Blondeau (2001), Callou, Moraes, & Leite (1998), Morillo-Velarde Perez (2001), and Trudgill (1992) have found evidence of age-grading or other such changes over individuals' lifespans.

### Problems testing language change in real time

There are several problems in testing for linguistic change over the lifespan. Possible confounding factors include:

- Interviewer effects
- Sampling differences
- Changes in physical surroundings
- Interview instrument and style differences
- Physical and mental issues (e.g., strokes, throat cancer)

Any test for language changes in real time during the lifespan needs to be able to avoid these.

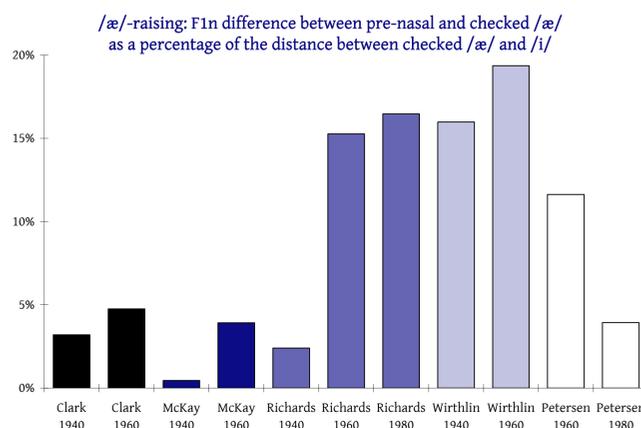
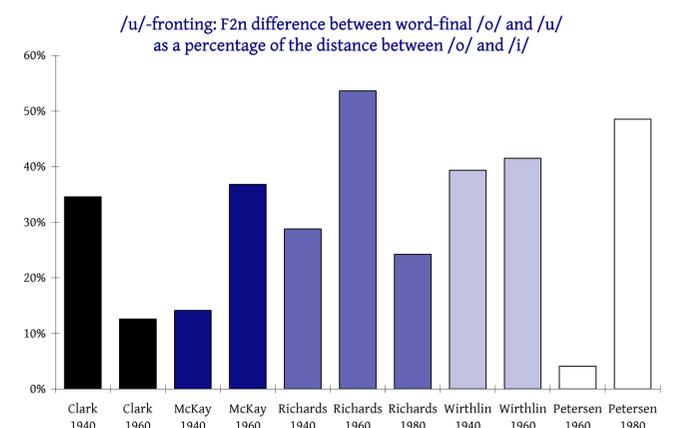
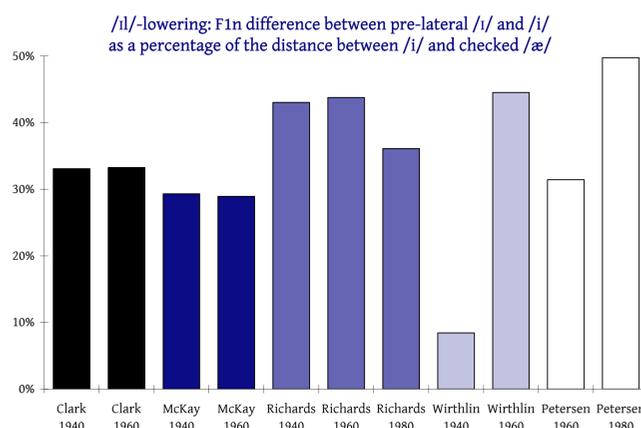
### The sample: Maintaining uniformity

This study uses recordings from an archive of religious addresses. All of the addresses were delivered in the same place, and all had the same social context. Because there was no survey, there are no interviewer or instrument differences to deal with. Individuals were tracked so there would be no sampling problems to contend with, and only individuals who were lifelong residents of the area near where the addresses were given were sampled. Individuals with pathologies affecting speech were not analyzed.

### The sample: The individuals

Name	Birth year	Years recorded
J. Reuben Clark, Jr.	1870	1940, 1960
David O. McKay	1873	1940, 1960
LeGrand Richards	1886	1940, 1960, 1980
Joseph L. Wirthlin	1893	1940, 1960
Mark E. Petersen	1900	1960, 1980

### For vowel charts



### Pre-nasal /æ/-raising

Raising of pre-nasal /æ/ above checked /æ/ for each speaker and year recorded (✓=significant, ✗=insignificant):

Speaker	1940	1960	1980
J. Reuben Clark, Jr.	✗	✗	
David O. McKay	✗	✗	
LeGrand Richards	✗	✓	✓
Joseph L. Wirthlin	✓	✓	
Mark E. Petersen		✓	✗

### For handouts

### So what?

Individuals change linguistically during their lifespans. This occurs with variables that are socially salient in the community (/ɪ/-lowering), but it isn't limited to those. Further, an individual doesn't progress along a clear path of change during their lives (cf. L. Richards's /u/-fronting).

The so what? Basically, we need to be much more careful in our use of the apparent time construct. While it is useful, we have to make sure it doesn't lead us astray.

### Acknowledgements and selected references

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I would like to express my appreciation to the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah for the use of their archive of addresses given in General Conferences of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.