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Short Front Vowel Lowering

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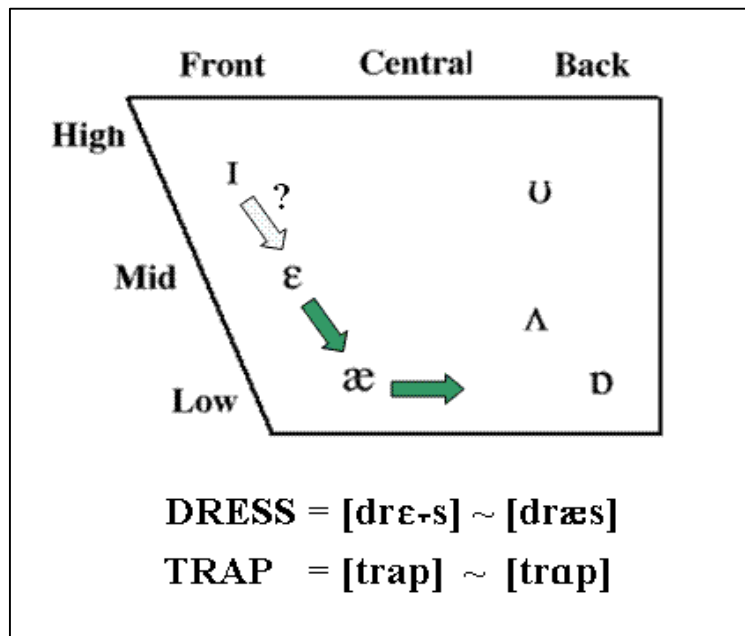


Introduction

The issue to be discussed in this paper is a widespread lowering of short front vowels which in its present form would seem to be a fairly recent phenomenon in the anglophone world. The shift has been described for California by Penelope Eckert and for Canada by Charles Boberg and a little earlier by Sandra Clarke and her colleagues. It would also seem to be spreading to the Southern Hemisphere, see the contribution by Alida Chevalier on South Africa at this conference and the recent work of Felicity Cox on Australian English.

The concern now is with how this shift manifests itself in present-day Dublin English and whether the vowel lowering attested there could be linked to that elsewhere.

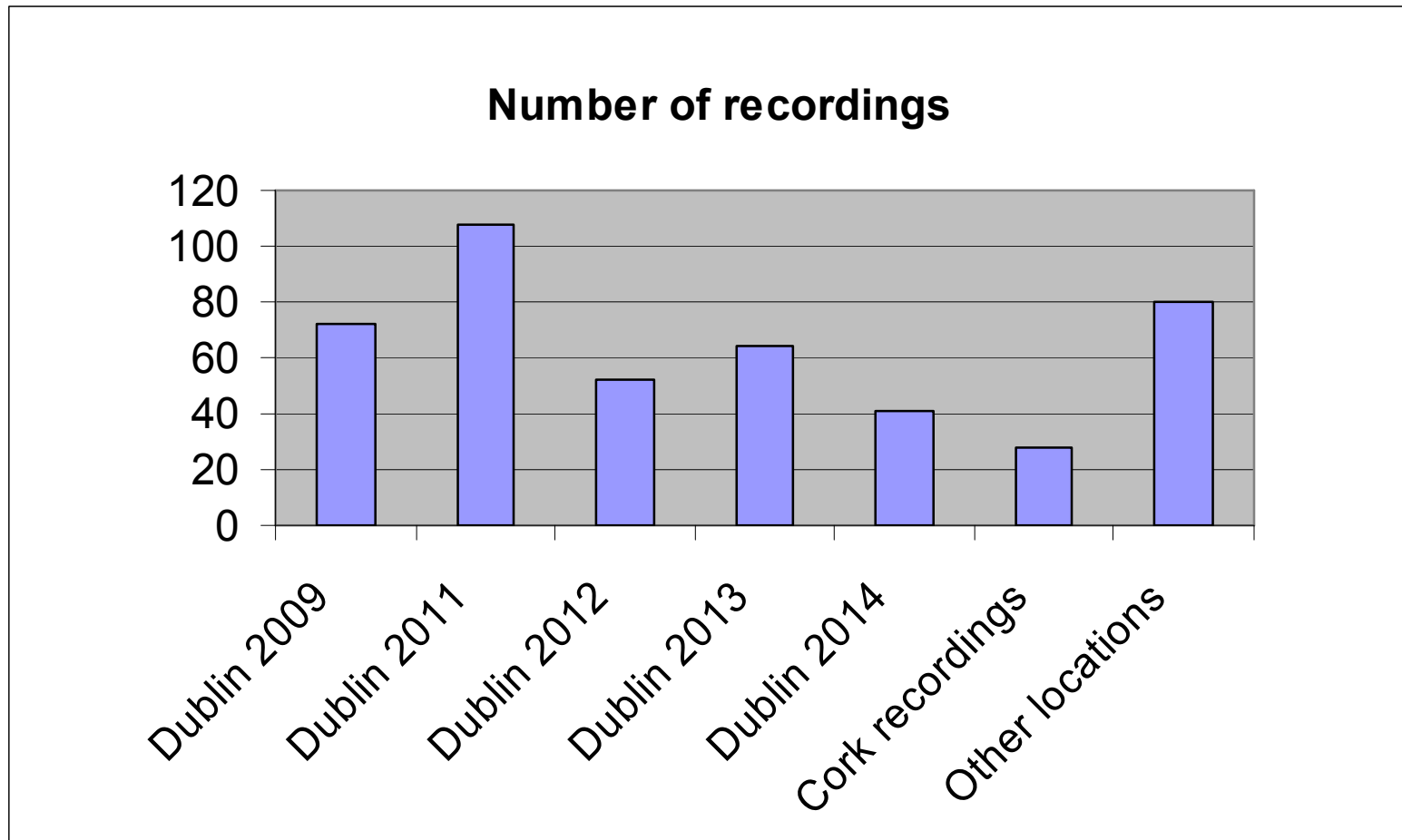
Short Front Vowel Lowering (SFVL) in Dublin English



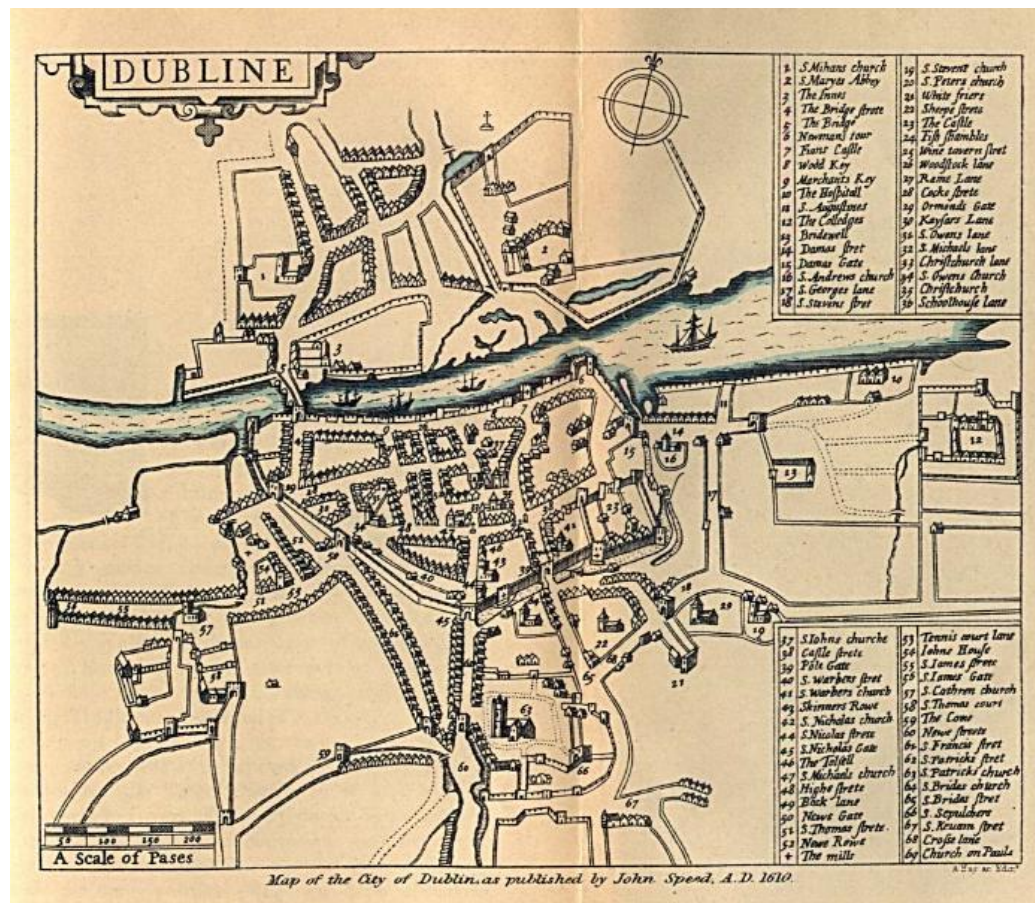
In recent years young female speakers of non-vernacular Dublin English have been showing a lowered vowel realisation, near [æ], in the DRESS lexical set and a centralised [a] in the TRAP set. The KIT vowel is rarely lowered and only in the environment of /r-/, e.g. *rid* [red]. The LOT and STRUT vowels are, as yet, unaffected by SFVL. Note that there is no *Don* ~ *dawn* merger in Irish English.

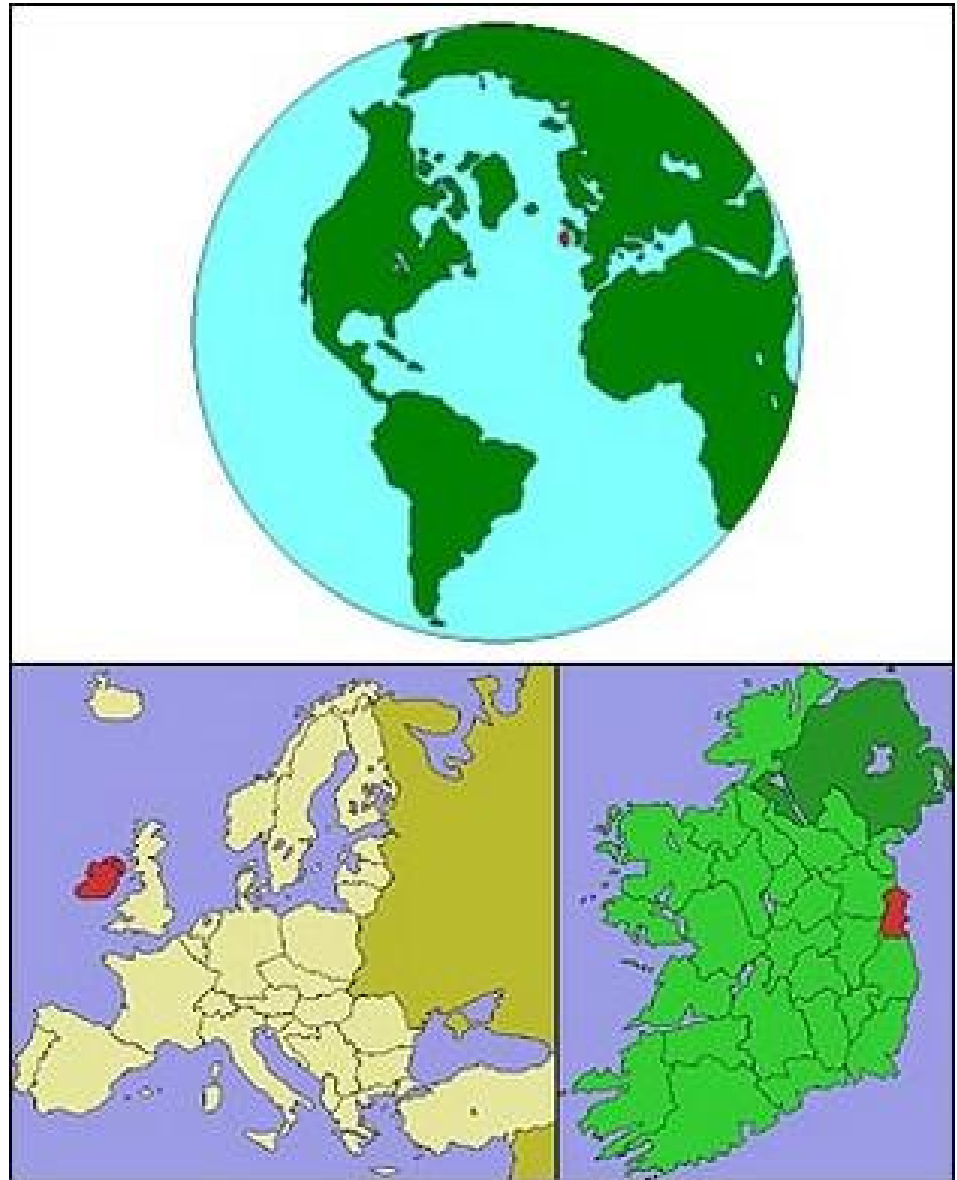


Recordings of English in Dublin (and some other locations) with reference to Short Front Vowel Lowering (SFVL), total: 445.



English was taken to Dublin in the late 12th century and has essentially developed separately from English in England since.







The Dublin metropolitan area is home to nearly 1.5m people and so contains a good third of the entire population of the Republic of Ireland.



Dublin is divided into a more working-class North Side where the local vernacular predominates and a more affluent South Side where non-vernacular forms of speech are used.





Local speaker [FARM_with_low_rhoticity.mp3]

Non-local speaker [FARM_with_retroflex_R.mp3]



Speaker group with Short Front Vowel Lowering

The group of speakers who show SFVL in Dublin do not use the local vernacular, a stable form of English which has existed for several centuries in the city.

Instead they are non-vernacular speakers who use general supraregional (southern) Irish English, but importantly with the changes being described here. The group consists at present entirely of young females but does not appear to encompass all members of this group. That is, not all young females engage in SFVL but certainly enough of them to make this an established feature among these speakers.



The details of Short Front Vowel Lowering in Dublin

There is practically no lowering of the KIT vowel except in the environment of /r/ as in *rid* [red].

There is little or no retraction of the short front vowels.

Nasals disfavour lowering, e.g. *friend* is [frɛnd], not [frænd].

SFVL lowering is especially common before /k/ and /s/, cf. *yes* [jæes] and *back* [bak]. In advanced Dublin English some speakers have an ejective here.

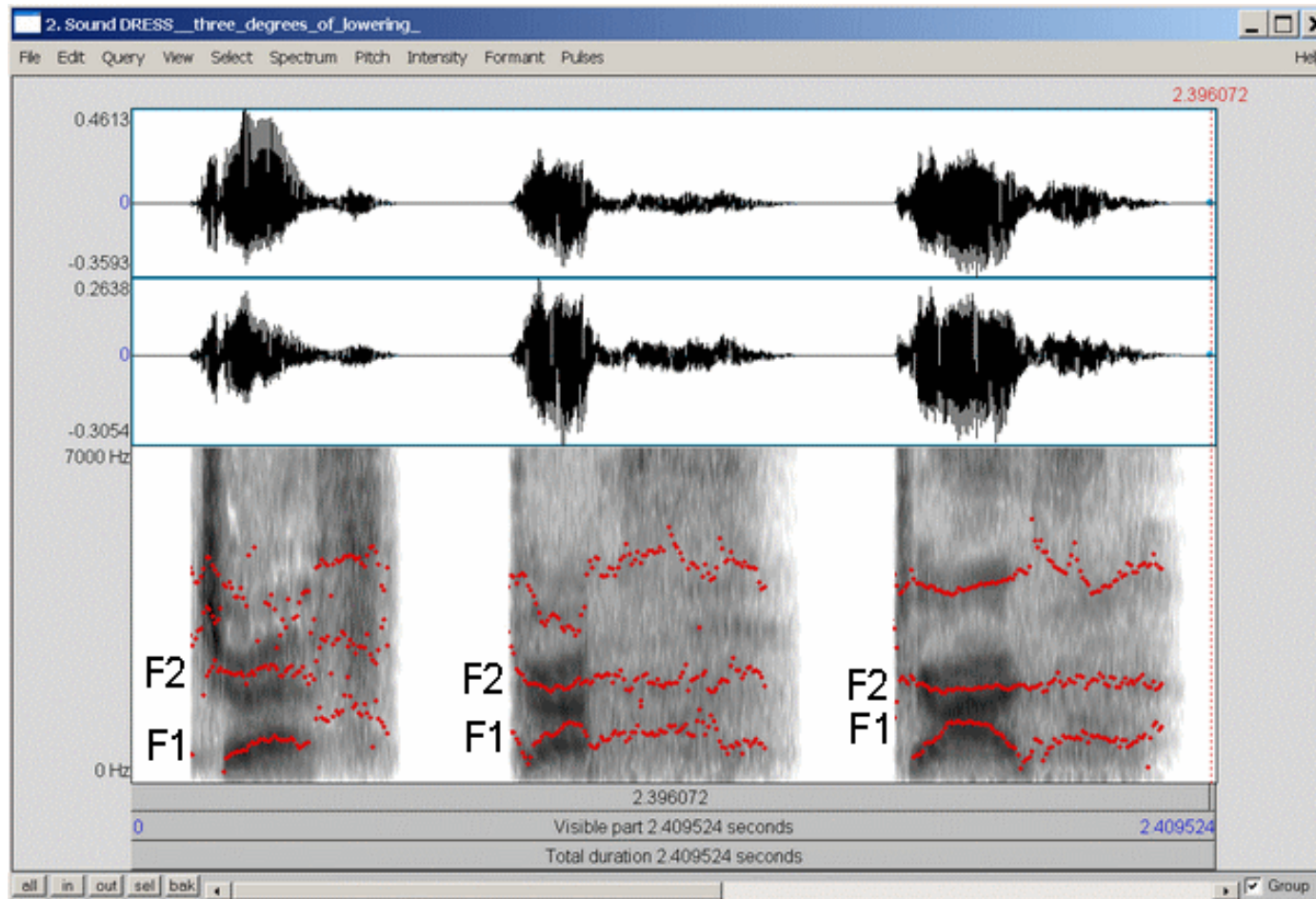
[SACK_(Dublin_female_with_ejective).mp3]

The articulation of the LOT and STRUT vowels have not (as yet) been affected by DRESS lowering and TRAP retraction.

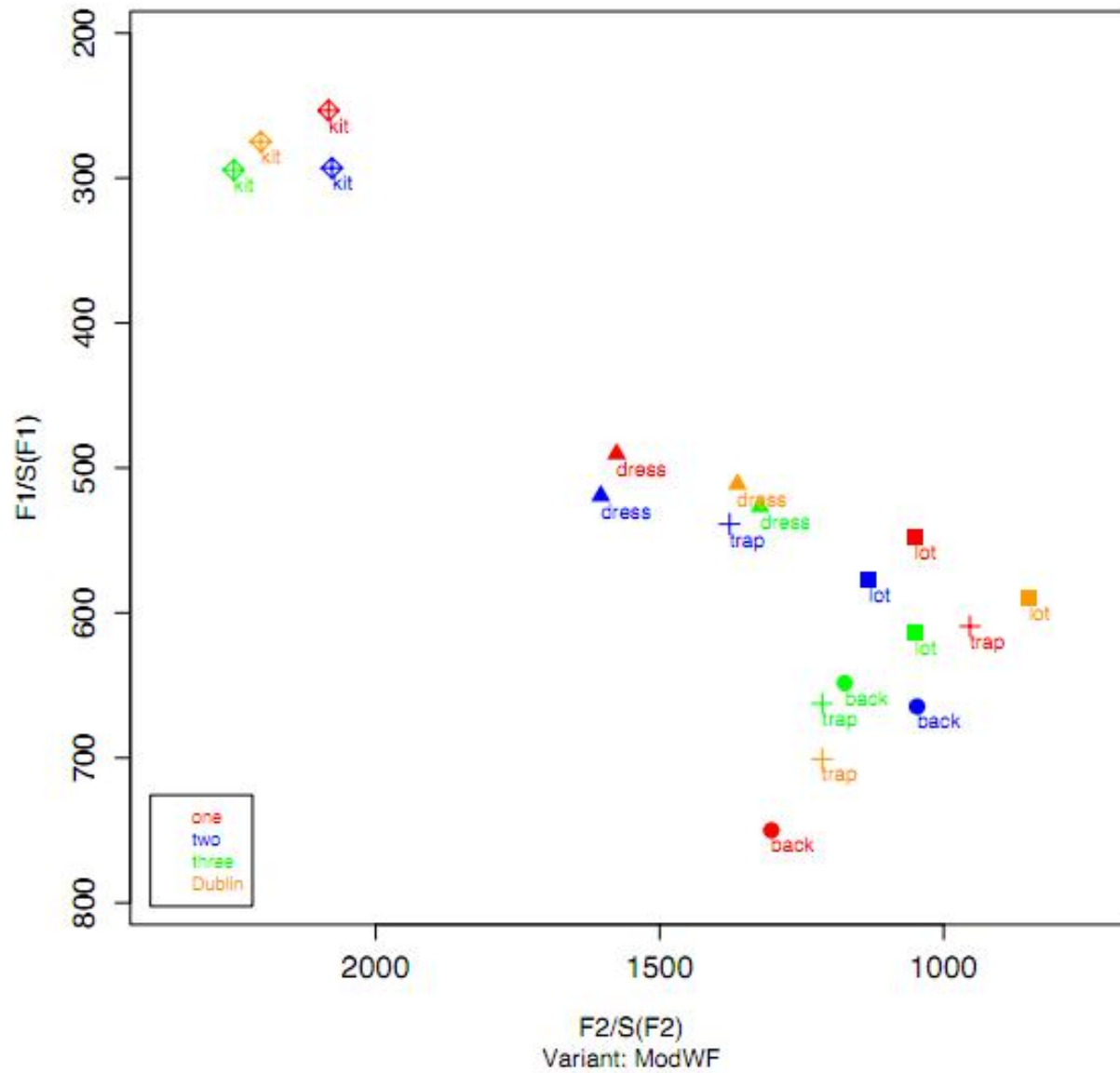


Sound samples of advanced Dublin English

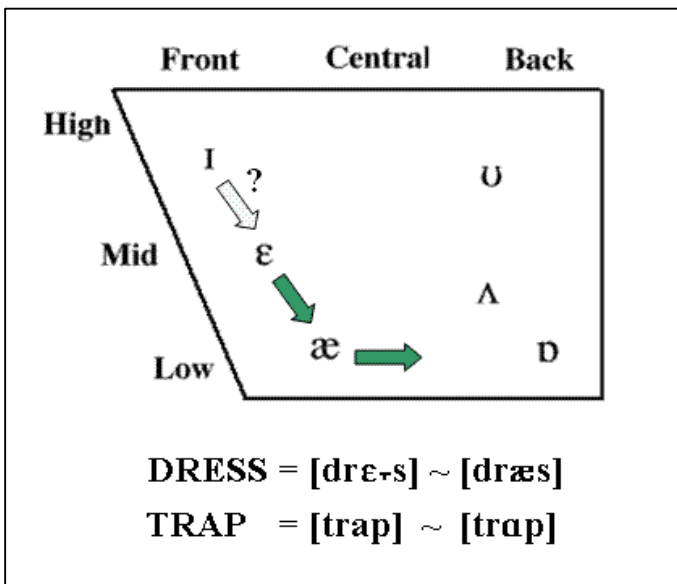
DRESS lowering	[DRESS_with_ASH.mp3]
TRAP retraction	[TRAP_with_A.mp3]
BACK retraction	[BACK_with_retracted_vowel.mp3]
STRUT centralisation	[STRUT_central_with_slight_rounding.mp3]
GOOSE fronting MOUTH fronting	[DO_DOWN_with_complete_fronting.mp3]
THOUGHT raising	[NORTH_with_raised_vowel.mp3]
CHOICE raising	[CHOICE_with_raised_onset.mp3]



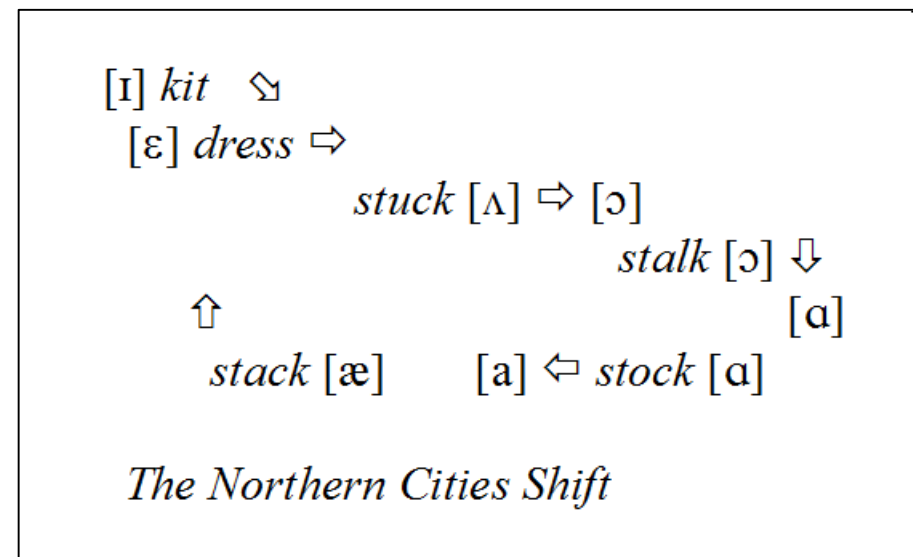
In the above spectrogram F1 and F2 are progressively closer to each other from left to right due to the raising of F1; this is a clear indication of increased lowering of the DRESS vowel from left to right for the three instances from the above three speakers (slight, moderate and extreme respectively).



Short front vowel lowering and other phonetic shifts



Short front vowel lowering





Short front vowel lowering and other phonetic shifts

Short Front Vowel Lowering would seem to run counter to the NCS as it involves TRAP lowering and retraction, not raising. A group of about 30 speakers were analysed by a student of mine, Anita Teichmann, during a stay in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, to ascertain if/how the NCS is spreading into this state. Her results show that female teenagers constitute the group with practically no TRAP raising which could point to their resistance to engaging in the NCS because of their intuitive recognition that SFVL is the cool and trendy pronunciation today.



Possible reasons for SFVL

1) Internal argument:

SFVL is favoured in the environment of liquids, i.e. post-/r/ and pre-/l/. /r/ would depress the third formant and hence favour vowel lowering, cf. *breakfast* [brækfəst]. In non-vernacular Dublin English syllable-final /l/ is pharyngealised and so would have a lowering effect on the preceding vowel, e.g. *hotel* [həʊtɛ_ræ̠l].



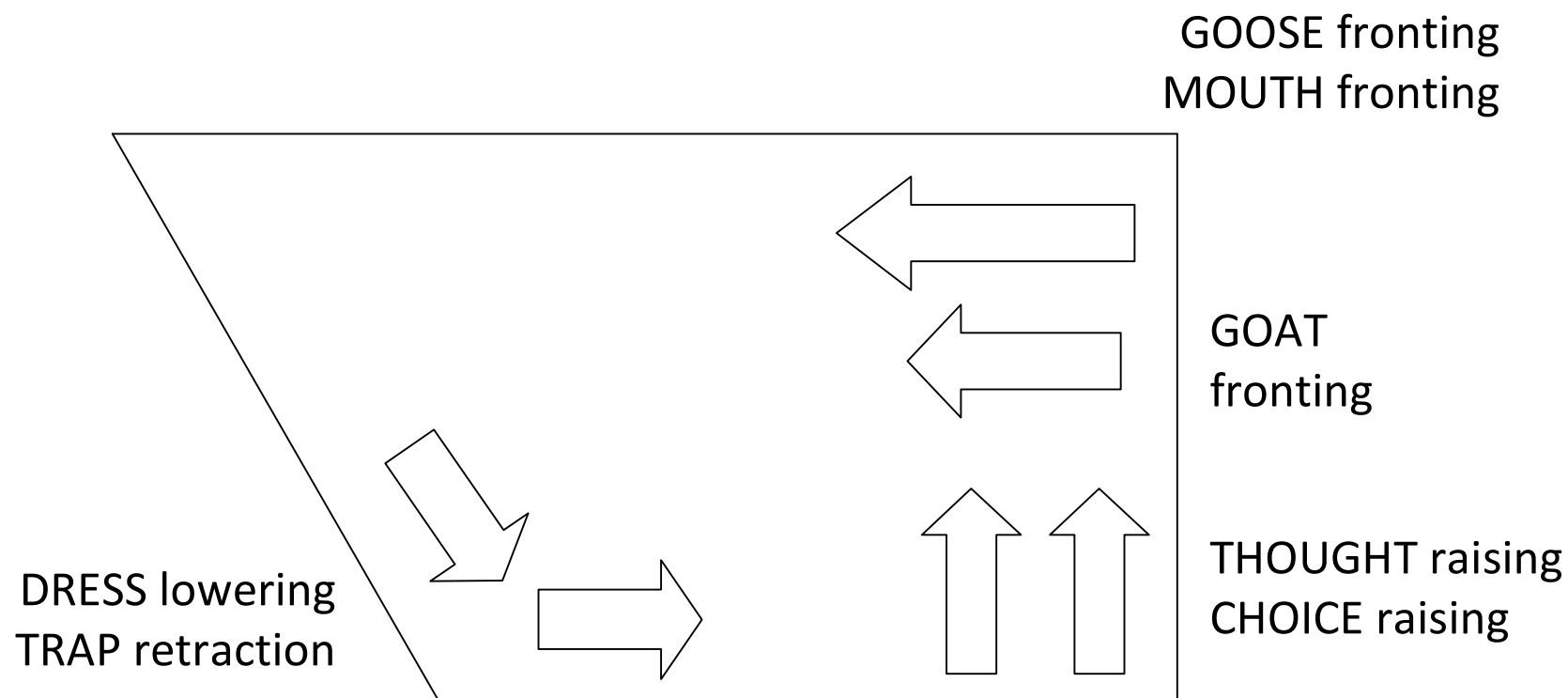
2) External argument:

Exposure in the media to young female speakers with SFVL. In Ireland young female broadcasters, weather forecasters and continuity announcers on Irish national radio and television do have SFVL. And it is also true that on local radio channels throughout the country young female broadcasters are now showing SFVL. [sound file]

But this suggestion would still leave the unanswered question: how did people in the media pick up SFVL to begin with? Did some young females speakers go to Canada / California and pick up the rudiments of SFVL there and then plant the seed of this shift back in Dublin with the shift then spreading throughout the city?

A possible explanation for Short Front Vowel Lowering

Rotation Principle: fronting of mid to high back vowels causes lowering and retraction of mid to low front vowels





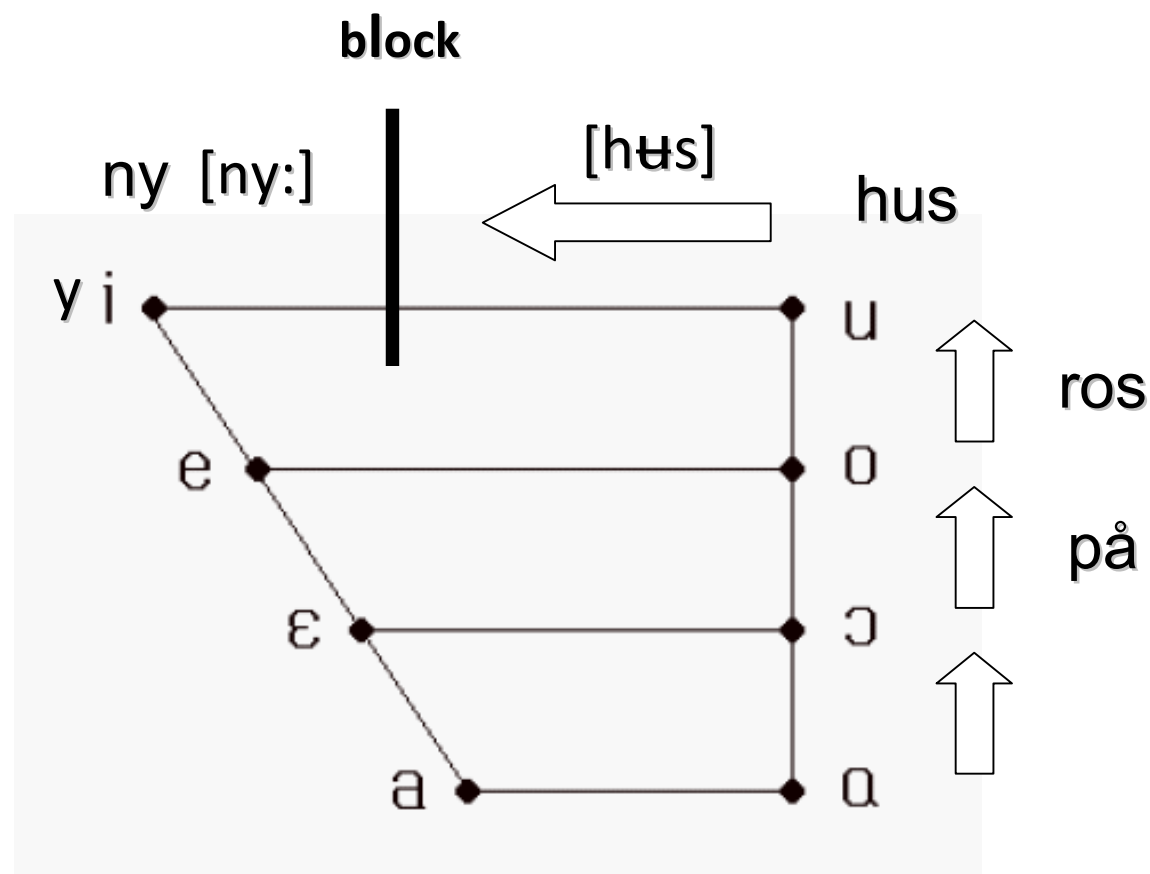
Arguments in favour of the Rotation Principle

- 1) All speakers with Short Front Vowel Lowering also have GOOSE-MOUTH-GOAT Fronting as well as THOUGHT-CHOICE Raising. The latter preceded the former and hence SFVL would be an example of a push-shift.
- 2) Push-shifts are supported by phonological evidence from the history of English, above all the Great Vowel Shift.

Possible arguments against the Rotation Principle

- 1) Vowels of various types are involved (long and short monophthongs as well as diphthongs).
- 2) The FLEECE, FACE and PRICE vowels, and possibly the KIT vowel, are not affected by these movements.

Central Scandinavian shift (Swedish and Norwegian)



Stable vowel configurations (Finnish and German)

	Front		Back	
	unrounded	rounded	unrounded	rounded
Close	i	y		u
Mid	e	ø		ɔ
Open	æ		ɑ	

Finnish

Languages with symmetrical distributions of vowels in space tend to be stable.

German

	Front				Central		Back	
	unrounded		rounded					
	short	long	short	long	short	long	short	long
Close	ɪ	i:	ʏ	y:			ʊ	u:
Close-mid		e:		ø:	ə			o:
Open-mid	ɛ	ɛ:	œ				ɔ	
Near-open					ɐ			
Open					a	a:		



Possible reasons for SFVL

Charles Boberg sees the *Don* – *dawn* merger in Canadian English as reducing the number of distinctions in the low back region of phonological space, triggering a movement of other vowels towards this area. The Dublin developments show an emptying of the low back area due to THOUGHT and CHOICE raising.

Both these developments constitute an **under-utilisation** of phonological space inducing other vowels, in this case short front vowels, to lower and retract, availing of an area with fewer vocalic distinctions than it can carry and hence reaching a more symmetrical distribution of vowels in phonological space.



Possible reasons for SFVL

The Rotation Principle of vowel movement has one further advantage: it renders the question of an exclusively external or internal motivation for Short Front Vowel Lowering less relevant. Rather it provides a pre-existing internal argument which, given an appropriate external stimulus, can manifest itself as a rotation in vowel space which, while it will not be identical to that found elsewhere in the anglophone world, will nonetheless show sufficient likeness to be classified as the same type of change.



Thank you for your attention.
Any questions?

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