The fronting of velar (-ING) is the prototypical “stable” phonetic variable in English. Rather than moving toward completion, it shows consistent internal factors: Labov (1994) posits the hierarchy of verb > adjective > gerund > noun, with verb forms showing the highest rates of fronting, for historical reasons. While it is normally shown not to be changing over time, Hazen (2008) finds some regional variation in (-ING), and (Campbell-Kibler 2008) offers evidence that fronted variants are perceived as being associated with Southern identity. However, Southern urbanization has led to the partial loss of both traditional Southern linguistic variants and Southern identity in recent decades (Fridland 2000, 2001; Labov et al. 2006). In this context, (-ING) may be losing ground or developing new social meaning(s).

This study explores velar nasal fronting across apparent time in an urban Southern setting undergoing rapid growth. Three questions are addressed. First, are rates of (-ING) fronting decreasing over time as Southern identity fades? Second, does Labov’s hierarchy remain a consistent and significant factor in this community across age groups? Third, does (-ING) show significant social factors, such as sex or class effects, among younger speakers that were not significant among older speakers?

The data are drawn from a preexisting corpus of conversational interviews conducted with native residents of this urban setting. The sample of 30 speakers is balanced for sex and generation. The tokens of (-ING), about 90 per speaker, were impressionistically coded as velar vs. fronted. Internal factors are phonetic environment, lexical category, and syntactic role. The data were analyzed using logistic regression mixed models with speaker as a random factor.

Initial results show that, surprisingly, there is no significant difference in the rates of the fronted variant between the older and younger generation, despite the fact that most of the younger speakers do not self-identify as “southern” while the older speakers do. Further, there are no significant class or sex effects. However, there are two outliers in the data, both male. The first is an upper-class male of the older generation who has only four fronted tokens, unlike the more balanced rates found in other speakers of his generation, and the second is a young working-class speaker with nearly 80% fronted tokens, where most speakers of his age group have decidedly fewer fronted realizations. Significantly, when compared with Labov’s hierarchy, speakers favor fronting of gerunds over adjectives, resulting in a verb > gerund > adjective > noun hierarchy. This pattern holds true for both generations of speakers, possibly suggesting a different usage among speakers in the South, despite urbanization.