Under certain conditions, contact between mutually intelligible dialects leads to linguistic focusing. This process of homogenization, which often involves the loss of local or stigmatized linguistic features, has been found to occur during the first two generations after contact (Trudgill 1986, Britain & Trudgill 2005). The role of demographic factors in producing a focused dialect has been studied in “new dialect” settings, including the new town of Milton Keynes (Kerswill & Williams 2000) and the early Anglo settlements in New Zealand (Trudgill 1998, Trudgill et al. 2000). However, very little research documents the first generations of dialect contact in the case of migration to a longstanding community with an established local dialect. Therefore, the social dynamics of linguistic focusing in these settings remain largely unknown.

This study closely examines the inception of dialect contact in the Southern U.S. city of Raleigh. Recent work has shown that in Raleigh, the front elements of the Southern Vowel Shift began reversing around 1960, when the local growth of technology industries motivated large-scale migration from outside the South. The front vowel system shows rapid change for approximately 20 years and then stabilizes for speakers born after 1980 (Dodsworth & Kohn 2012). The current study uses acoustic analysis of conversational data from 89 native Raleigh speakers in three generations: pre-contact (30 speakers), the first post-contact generation (40), and the second post-contact generation (19), with particular attention to the first post-contact generation. Speakers in this generation were born between 1952 and 1978, and were the first to have suburban high schools available. Two questions guide the analysis of vocalic variation at this early stage of dialect contact: 1) Are there significant demographic variables within this generation, including sex, social class, and neighborhood, as would be expected for typical linguistic changes from above or below (Labov 2001)? 2) Which individuals, if any, are outlying leaders or laggars in the reversal of the Southern Vowel Shift?

In separate mixed effects models for each of the five front vowels, year of birth is always significant within the first post contact generation. However, none of the other social variables shows significant effects within this generation (nor are they significant in the older or younger generations, with the exception of a sex effect for /e/ in the youngest generation). Therefore, as the SVS began to reverse during the first generation of dialect contact, no demographic group was significantly leading. However, the random intercepts for individual speakers from the mixed models were used to identify outliers. The least Southern speakers in this generation are those with graduate degrees (though not all speakers with graduate degrees are leaders), plus one speaker who grew up in a migrant-heavy neighborhood. By contrast, the speakers who most fully maintained Southern-shifted vowels were working class or lower middle class. The fact that class and neighborhood are significant only in comparing individuals, not in the aggregate, may indicate that the most prominent factors shaping early dialect contact outcomes differ somewhat from those that govern typical changes in progress.