Monophthongization and Southern Appalachian Identity: Change over a lifetime
Paul Reed, The University of South Carolina

One of the most salient features of Southern American English is the monophthongization of the diphthong /ai/ (see e.g., Feagin 2000; McMillan and Montgomery 1989; Thomas 2001, 2003). The traditional view was that monophthongization occurred only before voiced segments or in open syllables (i.e. what Thomas (2003) termed PRIZE/PRY monophthongization). However, this phenomenon is not uniform across the entire South, as certain sub-regions and sub-groups extend the process to pre-voiceless environments (Fridland 2002, Thomas 2001, Wolfram and Christian 1976). One such region is Southern Appalachia (Hall 1942). There PRICE/PRIZE/PRY monophthongization has strong associations with Appalachian culture and is often a marker of Appalachian Identity (Greene 2010). From this, some questions arise: how would the rates/realization of monophthongization change as a person’s identity shifts away from Appalachia? When would such a shift begin? How would it be manifested, i.e. would it be quantitative, qualitative, or both? Answers to these questions can help more firmly define at what point and in what manner a linguistic shift reflects a shift in personal identity and shed light on the broader questions of how personal identity is reflected in linguistic variation.

This paper, a case study, will analyze the rates and realization of /ai/ monophthongization for one speaker (SAT) who was born and raised in a small Southern Appalachian town, but has since moved away and consequently shifted her attachment away from Appalachia. A preliminary examination of the current patterns of /ai/ monophthongization for SAT shows quantitative and qualitative distinctions from her siblings, PRM and HGR, whose identities and lives are more firmly rooted in Appalachia (see Fig. 1 and Table 1 below). What is unknown about SAT is exactly when this shift initiated and how it was manifested. An analysis of longitudinal data drawn from family recordings and videos over a twenty-year span (roughly from high school to the present) combined with participant observation and sociolinguistic interviews, suggests that the linguistic shift began in high school and stabilized in college. From the sociolinguistic interview, SAT related that college was when her attachment to Appalachia began to be less central to her idea of self, and a broader identity began, thus suggesting that the linguistic shift preceded the shift in personal identity, possibly reflecting a subconscious reduction in Appalachian connection. This work contributes to language and identity in the same vein as Johnstone (1996) by examining how an individual creates a unique linguistic voice, reflecting shifting allegiances, regions, and communities. In addition, it adds to the growing body of literature on language and aging (e.g. Bowie 2010, Sankoff 2004) helping to inform at what stage and in what manner adults continue to shift linguistic patterns across the lifespan.