Numerous English dialects variably and partially neutralize final laryngeal distinctions: \( \text{his}, \text{hiss} \approx \text{[hs]}, \ \text{hid}, \text{hit} \approx \text{[hɪt]} \). We investigate two proposed motivations of this salient feature within Wisconsin English: First, Salmons & Purnell (2010: 467-468) propose this as substratal influence in communities where many early settlers spoke neutralizing languages like German. Second, Chambers (2000) and José (2010) propose that final neutralization in English reflects a ‘vernacular universal’. We hypothesize that both substratal and ‘vernacular universal’ pressures are at work in this setting, but in significantly different geographical, socio-historical, phonetic and phonological ways.

To the first point, we compare heavily German eastern Wisconsin with heavily Anglo-American southwestern Wisconsin. We report real- and apparent-time data from speakers across Wisconsin born since 1880, with data from Cassidy’s Wisconsin English Language Survey (early 1950s), DARE (late 1960s) and our own fieldwork over recent years. We analyze this material, currently about 3,000 tokens, with standard acoustic measures of coda ‘devoicing’ (Nittrouer 2004), focusing on glottal pulsing and vowel-consonant ratio. (Assuming trading relations, these two features appear to capture the distinction for Wisconsin speakers.)

Results to date show differences over real and apparent time across the state, differences which are growing larger today especially between eastern/southeastern Wisconsin and southwestern Wisconsin. Young speakers in the southwest produce robust acoustic distinctions between \( \text{his} \) vs. \( \text{hiss} \) or \( \text{hid} \) vs. \( \text{hit} \), while those in eastern areas show far less distinction.

To the second, under laryngeal realism (e.g. Iverson & Salmons 2011), English contrasts fortis /\( \text{t}\)/ with lenis /\( \text{d}\)/, and the lenis series is phonologically unmarked for a laryngeal feature. This lack of a laryngeal feature means that voicing on the lenis series is ‘passive’ and can be predicted by the environment a phone occurs in. Word-final position is a voicing-unfriendly environment in English thus conditioning partial devoicing.

Results in both communities reflect this ‘passive’ nature of English voicing, where glottal pulsing is present primarily in favorable contexts, like intervocalic position, but relatively disfavored in codas. Southwestern (Anglo-American) regions show only this variable, sporadic devoicing predicted by laryngeal realism. In contrast, Southeastern (German settlement) areas attest less glottal pulsing on /\( z, \text{d}\)/ and at the same time more on final /\( s, \text{t}\)/. Current results indicate that these communities also produce less difference in VC ratio between the two series. Some evidence suggests incipient /\( s, z\)/ merger in some communities. We anticipate that these findings will be reflected in a perceptual test to be discussed during the talk.

Both hypotheses are thus supported. First, an immigrant heritage heavy in neutralizing languages correlates with apparent neutralization now in its beginning stages among young speakers, in line with a substrate account. Second, all communities attest the patterns predicted by laryngeal realism and consistent with devoicing as a vernacular universal. With koineization (Kerswill & Trudgill 2005), this acoustic characteristic has moved from being an ethnic-sourced variation to become a geographic variable and it appears to be phonologizing in southeastern Wisconsin.