

“LIVE FREE OR DIE” AS A LINGUISTIC PRINCIPLE

NAOMI NAGY

University of New Hampshire

I knowed you wasn't Oklahomy folks. You talk queer kinda—That ain't no blame, you understan'. . . . Ever'body says words different, And we seen a lady from Massachusetts, an' she said 'em differentest of all. [Steinbeck 1939, 35²]

THE FIRST AIM OF THIS PAPER is to describe some ways in which the Massachusetts speech varieties are “differentest,” specifically with respect to the unmerged status of several vowels which are merged in most areas of the United States. The second aim is to explore how Boston has maintained its linguistic distinction—as a result of NON-BOSTON speakers, notably the New Hampshire neighbors of the Boston metropolis, not adopting the distinct features of the Boston accent. While it is popularly believed that regional dialects are being leveled, numerous studies have indicated that, in fact, cities retain distinct phonological patterns (cf. Labov 1994, 29). Rural varieties have received less sociolinguistic attention.

In order to determine how linguistic patterns evolve and diffuse outside the domain of a metropolitan center, this paper begins exploration of a rural and small-town region of the United States that has not been thoroughly studied since the 1930s. The findings contradict Trudgill's (1974) proposal that linguistic innovations diffuse from cities to the neighboring towns and villages, as Boston is the closest metropolis to all of New Hampshire. A social explanation is offered: the lack of appeal to New Hampshire residents of the “big city” life offered by Boston.

ATTITUDES AND IDENTITY IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

In order to interpret the linguistic data presented below, it is important to understand the local identities of New Hampshire (NH) residents and their attitudes toward those in Massachusetts (MA). The clearest evidence that I have observed in my four years of living in southern NH comes from state-issued vehicle license plates, which bear the slogan “Live Free or Die.” Residents use this slogan frequently in conversation as a means of explain-

ing why people do (or don't do) some particular thing in this rather libertarian state.

I have also been struck by the high percentage of personalized license plates in NH.¹ They are a readily available and affordable means of expressing one's identity, costing only \$25 more than a standard plate. Although some personalized license plates show just names, nicknames, or initials, many illustrate aspects of life in NH. Many show how people spend their free time (e.g., SKIERZ, NEIGE, KAYAK, SUNSEA, ESCAPE, SKIHSE 'ski house', NATUR, and PADDLE) or what they do for a living (e.g., DIGGA 'digger' and LUMBA-1 'lumber-one'). Some exhibit regional pronunciation patterns, providing "phonetic" transcriptions of common words (e.g., MAHNY for the name 'Marny'). Others more directly illustrate locally oriented identity (e.g., YANKEE and LOCAL). Some combine the attitude and the phonology (e.g., HEEYAH 'here', WUTEVA 'whatever' and DALIFE 'the life', a possible Franco-American pronunciation; see Ryback-Soucy and Nagy 2000). Their license plates suggest that people who have chosen to live in rural NH do not have "big-city" values, but rather appreciate the rural and small-town lifestyle offered in NH. Keeping this attitudinal focus in mind will allow us to interpret the data collected for this research project.

METHODS

The data presented here are a small subset of data being collected for a larger research project to learn how linguistic changes disseminate in nonmetropolitan areas. The McGill–New Hampshire–Vermont Dialect Survey, directed by Charles Boberg, Julie Roberts, and myself, is collecting data in this underdocumented area and examining the effects of social distinctions such as age, sex, ethnicity, and locally relevant factors.

DATA COLLECTION. An important component of the project is that we engage college students from New England in the research, further contributing to preservation of disappearing speech patterns by increasing interest at the grassroots level, as well as providing an opportunity for our students to gain experience in field research and data analysis. The data, collected by dialect survey and tape-recorded interviews, will be publicly available in the communities studied, aiding in the preservation of these "endangered" varieties.

The McGill–New Hampshire–Vermont Dialect Survey consists of four pages of questions about language attitudes, vocabulary, and pronuncia-

tion, plus material to establish a social profile for each respondent. The survey was constructed by the three project directors and their students in 1997. Some questions in it aim to elicit distinctive vocabulary and pronunciation believed to be current in the region, and some aim to determine the trajectory of items elicited in the *Linguistic Atlas of New England* (LANE 1939–43), the only large-scale study of the region that has been published to date.

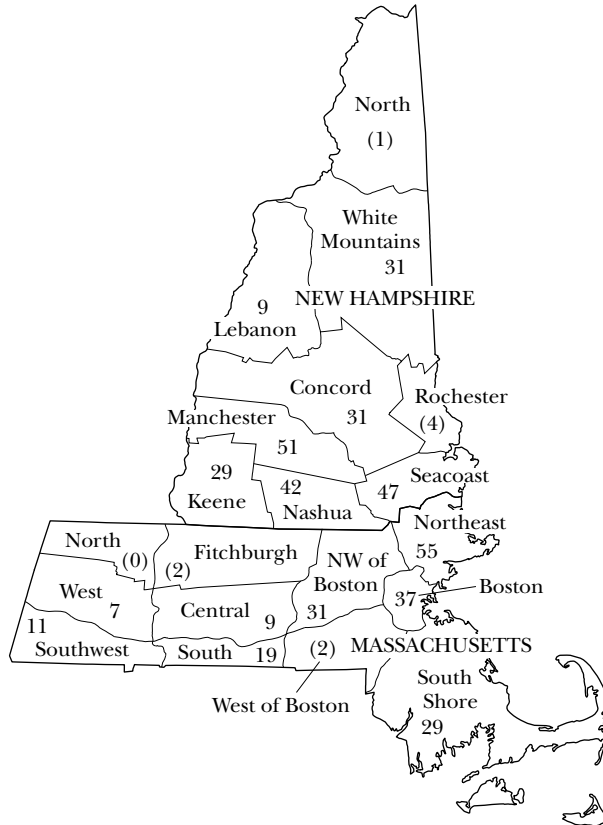
Linguistic students at McGill University, the University of Vermont, and the University of New Hampshire have collected survey responses from over 1,300 people in the last two years. The students are asked to collect 12 surveys from their hometown (or another town, if they prefer). Each student is asked to collect a sample that has four respondents younger than 30, four aged 30 to 60, and four older than 60, with each age group balanced for sex.

This method allows for the collection of data from a broader geographic region than would otherwise be possible (barring the option of telephone surveys, which are cost- and time-intensive and require more carefully trained researchers). The return on this method is fairly good: about half of the surveys from NH and MA are usable for our current research goals, having been filled out by people who (1) are native English speakers, (2) have lived their whole life in the same place, (3) do not focus on language professionally, and (4) responded to (almost) every question on the survey. The sample is not perfectly balanced for age because a disproportionate number of usable surveys come from the students and their peers, who fall into the 30 years and under category.

One caveat to keep in mind is that since these data are collected by questionnaire, the data indicate what people think they say or want us to think they say. We do not yet have sufficient speech data to test the conclusions drawn from these data, but that will come in the next stage of the research project. Nonetheless, the robust regional and age-correlated patterns found in these responses show that respondents are not answering randomly.

DATA ANALYSIS. For the portion of the study reported here, survey responses collected in 1997–99 from 447 lifetime residents of NH and MA are used. Respondents are divided by geographic regions determined by county lines and interstate highways. Figure 1 shows NH split into 9 regions and MA into 11, using input from local students regarding the validity of such regional divisions. The numbers indicate how many surveys from each region are included in this analysis. Within each region, responses are grouped by age and sex of the respondents.

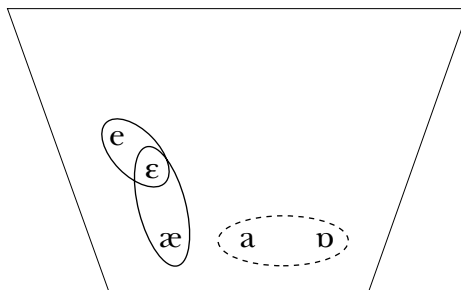
FIGURE 1
 Number of Respondents from Each of the Regions Examined (N = 447)



THE VARIABLES

Two sections of the survey concern the vowel mergers shown in figure 2.² The first to be discussed is the variable merger of low central /a/ and low back /ɒ/, enclosed in the dotted-line ellipse.³ Maintenance of the distinction between these two vowels is typical of eastern MA (and a few other areas on the eastern seaboard) but not of other parts of the country. The distinctive low central vowel is produced every time someone (accurately) performs the “pahk the cah in Hahvahd Yahd” routine to illustrate the Boston accent. While the focus of the performance is usually on the *r*-lessness, these words also contain the low central vowel /a/, distinct from the /ɒ/ phoneme produced in words such as *dog* or *hot*. Here I refer to the variable as the *father/bother* merger. For many Boston speakers, *father* contains the low central vowel /a/ and *bother* the low back vowel /ɒ/.

FIGURE 2
The Vowel Mergers under Investigation



The second variable is the merger of mid and low front vowels before /r/, shown by the solid-line ellipses in figure 2. This *Mary/merry/marry* merger has been the subject of heated debate in linguistics classes at the University of New Hampshire. Some students (primarily those from Boston) cannot imagine that those words are homonyms in anybody's speech, and other students (from NH) cannot imagine how they would be pronounced differently from each other. Very similar patterns are found for all the relevant word pairs included in the survey, suggesting a phonological, not lexical, variable.

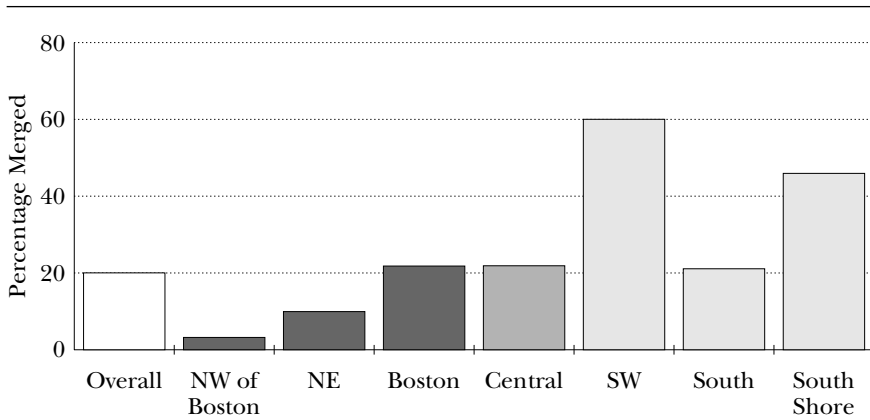
THE FATHER/BOTHER MERGER. To investigate the presence or absence of the merger of the low central and low back vowels, the following question was included in the survey:

1. When you say 'father' and 'bother', do they rhyme, like 'feather' and 'weather'? Yes No

Speakers who mark yes to this question are indicating that the vowels in these words are identical, that is, that they do not have the distinctive /a/ in their phonemic inventory. Speakers who mark no are indicating that they have two different phonemes, that is, that central /a/ differs from back /ɒ/.

The regional distribution for MA is shown in figure 3. The geographic pattern is clear. Overall, only 20% of the MA respondents said those words rhyme, indicating the perceived existence of /a/ in the phonemic inventory of the other 80%. Within MA, the regions closest to Boston (shown by darker shading in fig. 3) show the highest rate of the /a/ phoneme, ranging from only 5 to 15% yes (merged) responses. The percentage of merged responses is 20% or less for all regions around Boston but is higher in other parts of the state (shown by lighter shading).

FIGURE 3
Percentage of *father/bother* Merger in Massachusetts



In contrast, more than 40% of NH respondents marked yes, indicating a lack of perceived distinction (see fig. 4). More tellingly, the NH regions CLOSEST to Boston (shown by darker bars) have the highest numbers of yes (merged) responses (40–60%), while those regions farther away from Boston (shown by lighter shading) show a lower range, from 20–30%. In NH, physical proximity to Boston (within a two-hour drive of the city) engenders greater linguistic distinction from Boston.

Furthermore, comparison of older and younger speakers indicates that this trend is on the rise, not disappearing. Table 1 breaks the speakers down

FIGURE 4
Percentage of *father/bother* Merger in New Hampshire

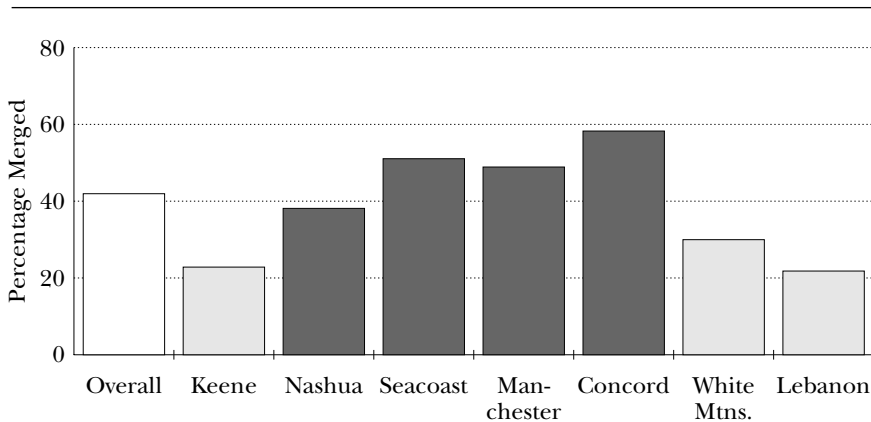


TABLE 1
 Percentage of *father/bother* Merger in Three Regions by Age

| <i>Region</i> | <i>Older than 50</i> | | <i>Younger than 50</i> | <i>N</i> | χ^2 | <i>Significance</i> |
|----------------|----------------------|---|------------------------|----------|----------|---------------------|
| Northern NH | | | | | | |
| White Mountain | 18% | = | 37% | 60 | 1.192 | n.s. |
| Lebanon | 0% | | 25% | 18 | 0.392 | n.s. |
| Southern NH | | | | | | |
| Keene | 0% | < | 79% | 25 | 11.842 | $p < .005$ |
| Manchester | 0% | | 62% | 49 | 13.026 | $p < .005$ |
| Eastern MA | | | | | | |
| NW of Boston | 0% | | 4% | 30 | 0.582 | n.s. |
| Northeast | 14% | = | 9% | 51 | 0.300 | n.s. |
| Boston | 12% | | 35% | 37 | 7.066 | $p < .01$ |

into two age groups (older and younger than 50) and shows a marked contrast between the MA regions close to Boston and the NH regions close to Boston. In eastern MA, almost all respondents claim the distinctive /a/ for their inventory. There is no significant difference between old and young speakers, indicating a stable variable. A significant difference between the two age groups in Boston proper is not as great a difference as for the southern NH speakers. In contrast, there is a marked difference between the older and younger speakers in southern NH, near Boston. While older speakers categorically indicate having the distinction, the younger speakers are mixed, with more than half indicating a merger. Interestingly, farther north in NH, outside Boston's influence, too distant for frequent contact with Boston, let alone commuting, there is no significant age difference—northern New Hampshire show the same patterns as Bostonians with respect to the low, central vowel.

In a Goldvarb binomial analysis including age and region as independent variables, age is selected as significant, and the factor weights increase by decade, showing the incremental effect of age on perception of this merger.⁴ Region is also significant with high factor weights for the Boston area and for the northern part of NH (White Mountains), but low weights for southern NH. Southwestern MA and the South Shore (Cape Cod) area also do not share the Boston pattern.

There is no apparent effect of sex for this change in progress: 29% of men and 29% of women reported having the *father/bother* merger. The sex factor did not emerge as significant in any Goldvarb analysis. However, the intersections of sex and age and also sex and social status remain to be examined.

PRERHOTIC FRONT VOWEL MERGERS (e.g., *Mary/merry/marry*). The second linguistic variable consists of the mergers of lax /ɛ/ and tense /e/ and of lax /ɛ/ and low front /æ/. These are examined via the question shown in (2) comparing the pairs listed in (3) and (4) and mixed in among other word pairs in the survey instrument.

2. Do _____ and _____ sound the same or different?
3. /e/ ~ /ɛ/: *Mary* ~ *merry* [Question B3]
fairly ~ *ferry* [Question B23]
4. /e/ ~ /æ/: *merry* ~ *marry* [Question B7]
berry ~ *Barry* [Question B11]
herald ~ *Harold* [Question B16]

The two mergers show very similar sociolinguistic patterns, so I will discuss them together. For all the word pairs in (3) and (4), about half of the NH respondents said that the members of each pair sound the same. In contrast, fewer than 10% of the MA respondents indicated that the prerhotic vowels sound the same (see figs. 5–9).

In contrast to the *father/bother* data, the difference between NH and MA for front vowel merges before /r/ indicates stable variation rather than a change currently in progress. There is no consistent pattern of increase or decrease related to age. Interpretation of this variable as stable is also supported by the lack of a sex effect among the young (and amply represented) respondents. Comparison of the number of perceived mergers for different decades of survey respondents shows a very consistent difference between MA and NH speakers, even though we lack sufficient data to see a clear picture of the behavior of the oldest speakers (see figs. 10 and 11).

FIGURE 5
 Percentage of Prerhotic Merger of /e/ and /ɛ/ in *Mary/merry*

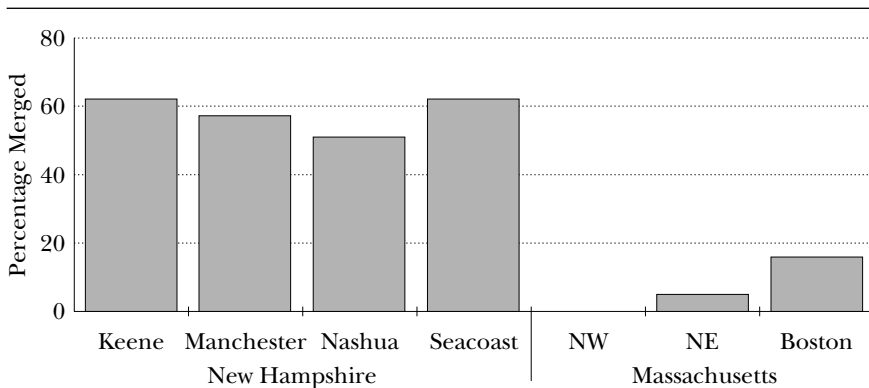


FIGURE 6
Percentage of Prerhotic Merger of /e/ and /ɛ/ in *fairy/ferry*

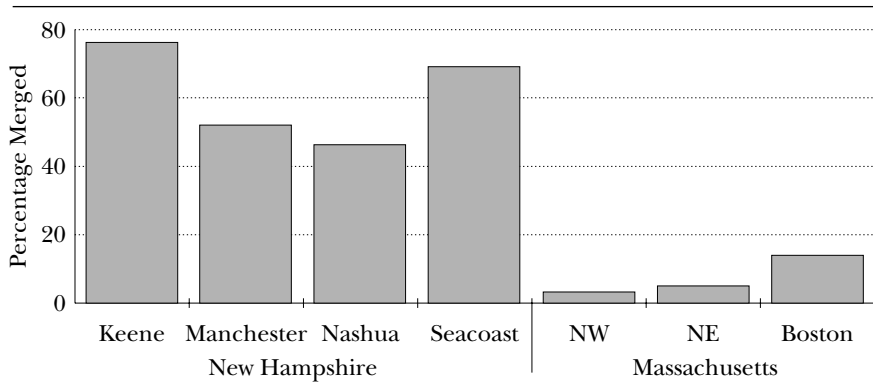


FIGURE 7
Percentage of Prerhotic Merger of /e/ and /æ/ in *merry/marry*

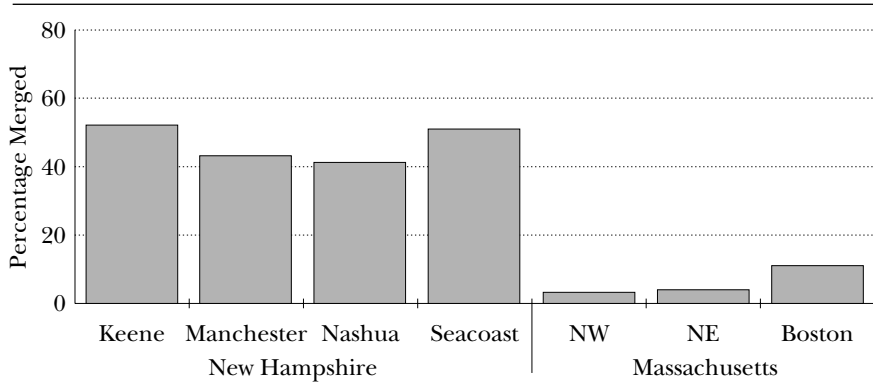


FIGURE 8
Percentage of Prerhotic Merger of /e/ and /æ/ in *berry/Barry*

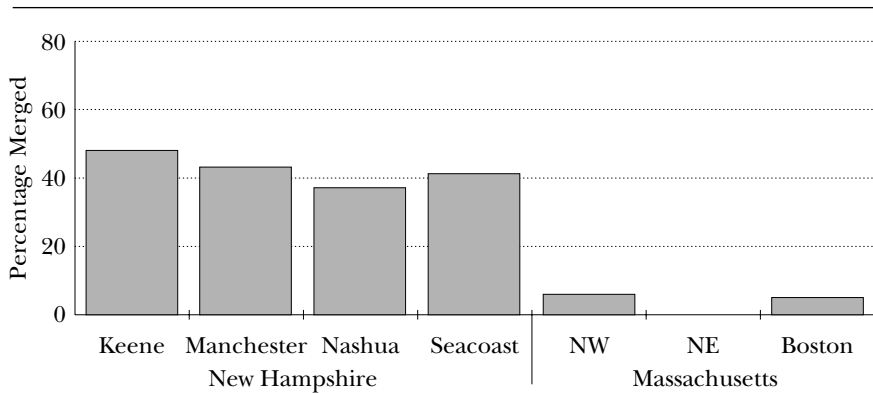


FIGURE 9
Percentage of Prerhotic Merger of /ɛ/ and /æ/ in *herald/Harold*

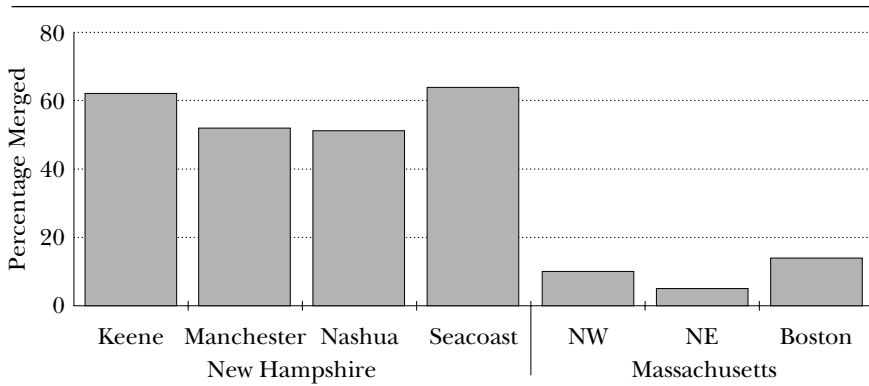
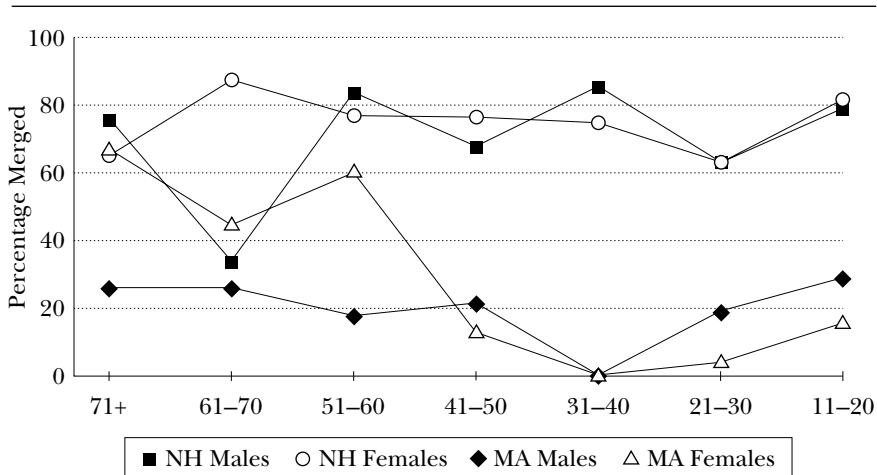


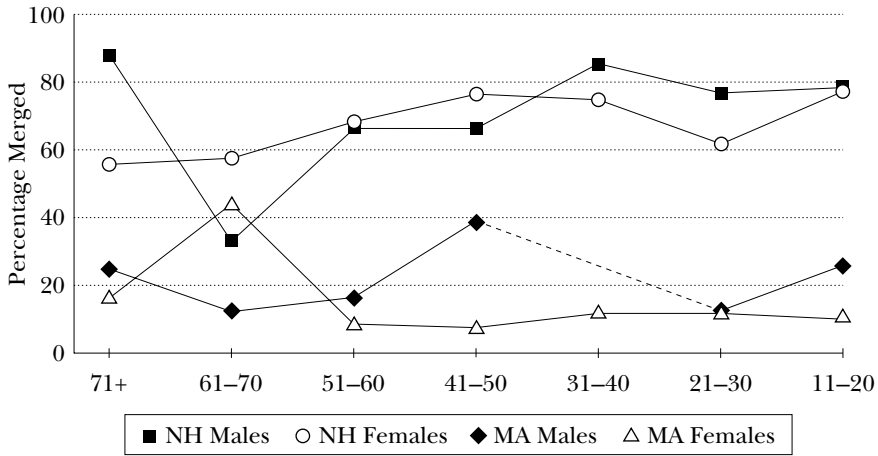
FIGURE 10
Stable Variation of Prerhotic Merger of /e/ and /ɛ/ in *Mary/merry*



DISCUSSION

Introducing an attitudinal component to models of linguistic diffusion helps to account for the divergences that have been observed between MA respondents and those in neighboring NH, who have opted against a big city, liberal (read locally as “high taxation”) lifestyle. Frequent scornful reference to *Taxachusetts* and *Massholes* and subconscious use of linguistic features demonstrate their independence from the nearby metropolis.

FIGURE 11
Stable Variation of Prerhotic Merger of /ɛ/ and /æ/ in *merry/marry*



My understanding of this prevailing attitude comes in part from the personalized license plates described above. Many plates illustrate a fondness for activities that cannot be done in the city (e.g., KAYAK, SKIERZ, LUMBA) or express a positive local identification (e.g., LOCAL, HEEYAH). I have observed no NH plates that could be interpreted as reflecting “big city” values.

For the *father/bother* merger, the difference is INCREASING as contact with Bostonians increases due to more people settling in NH from elsewhere, particularly from the Boston area. This allows the “locals” to mark their local identity as distinct from the closest and thus most threatening urban center, much as was suggested in Labov’s (1963) study of Martha’s Vineyard. For the merger of front vowels before /r/, the distinction between the two states is clear, but no active process of increased distinction is indicated by the data.

While the data examined here show that southern NH’s vowel phonology is not being influenced by Boston, the closest large city, as would be predicted by Trudgill’s (1974) Gravity Model, it is the case that the changes that NH is undergoing bring it more in line with other American varieties. Perhaps other cities, though more distant from Boston, are having an effect on the speech of NH.

While interstate distinctions are clear for the phonological variables presented here, none of the survey questions about vocabulary that have been examined to date reveal clear regional patterns. It is generally held

that new vocabulary items spread more quickly than phonological patterns and that people may be more conscious of adopting new lexical items than new pronunciations. This perception, perhaps, is what is responsible for the popular view that regional dialects are dying out—vocabulary may spread through the media, but pronunciation, apparently, does not. Thus, New Hampshire’s phonology lives free in spite of, or perhaps even because of, its proximity to Boston. Heeyah! Heeyah!

NOTES

1. One employee at the NH Department of Motor Vehicles reported reading that NH has more vanity plates per capita than any other state. Whether more people have them because they spend so much time in their cars or I just notice them more because I spend more time in my car than ever before is unclear, but irrelevant.
2. Preliminary findings for these two variables were presented in Nagy and Roberts (1998).
3. The phonetic detail of the two phonemes cannot be accurately described until speech data are available.
4. Region is also selected as significant, indicating that the current division of the states into regions is valid.

REFERENCES

- Labov, William. 1963. “The Social Motivation of a Sound Change.” *Word* 19: 273–309.
- . 1994. *Principles of Linguistic Change*. Cambridge: Blackwell.
- LANE. *Linguistic Atlas of New England*. 1939–43. Ed. Hans Kurath. 3 vols. Providence, R.I.: Brown Univ.
- Nagy, Naomi, and Julie Roberts. 1998. “Yankee Doodles in Dialectography: Updating New England.” Poster presented at the 27th annual meeting on New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English (NWAVE 27), Athens, Ga., 1–4 Oct.
- Ryback-Soucy, Wendy, and Naomi Nagy. 2000. “Exploring the Dialect of the Franco-Americans of Manchester, New Hampshire.” *Journal of English Linguistics* 28: 249–64.
- Steinbeck, John. 1939. *The Grapes of Wrath and Other Writings*. New York: Library of America.
- Trudgill, Peter. 1974. “Linguistic Change and Diffusion: Description and Explanation in Sociolinguistic Dialect Geography.” *Language in Society* 3: 215–46.