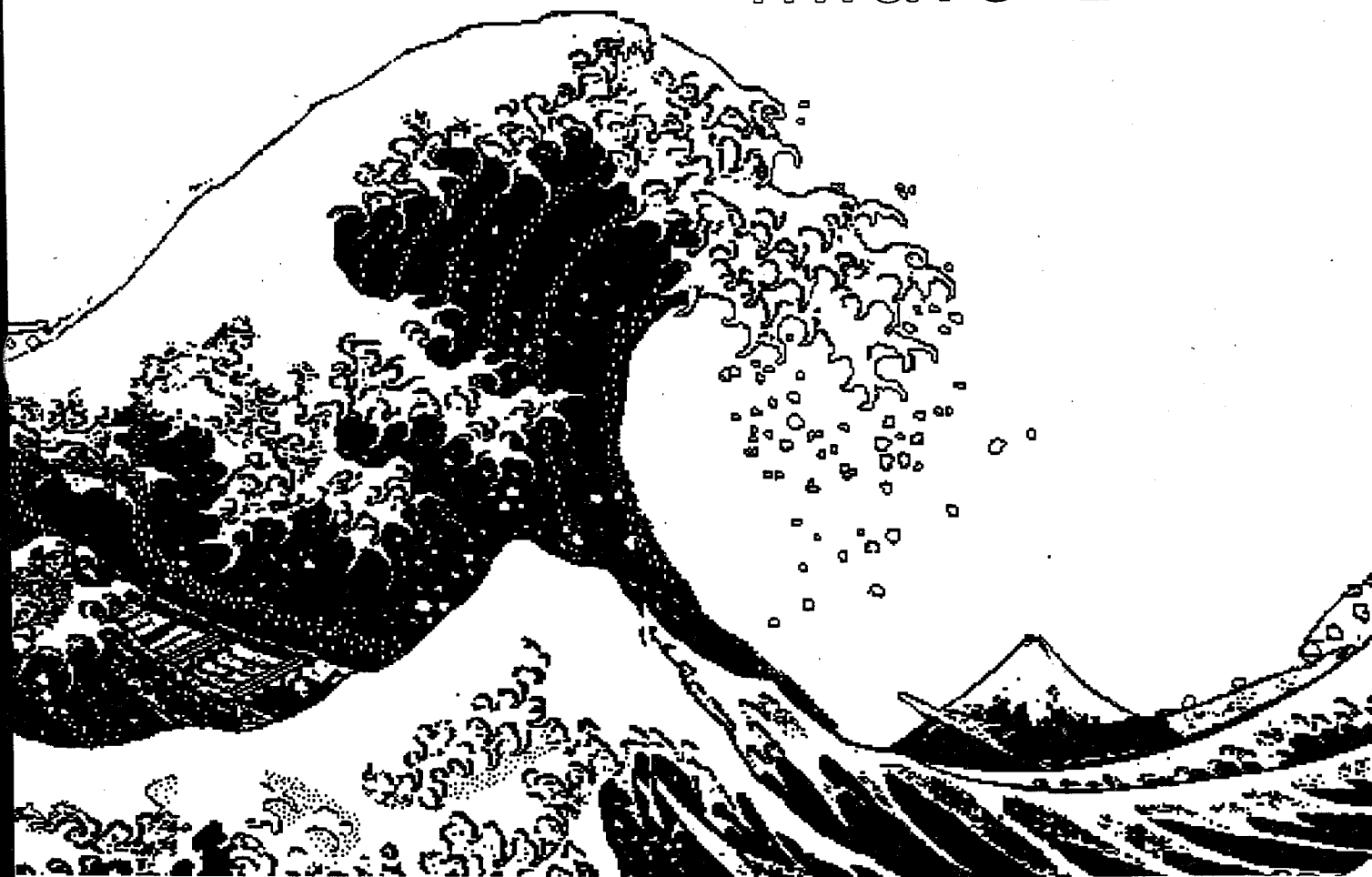


Abstracts

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University of Pennsylvania
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Reversal of near-merger
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Sat. 11:00-12:40 A

The work of Labov and DiPaolo and Faber on near mergers provides strong empirical support for the idea that mergers are irreversible by linguistic means. Labov (1994) is able to show that a number of mergers which were thought to have been reversed were actually just near mergers, while DiPaolo and Faber (1990) demonstrate how phonetic contrasts among vowels can sometimes be maintained even when F1/F2 distinctions are lost. While we now have firm evidence for the idea that mergers cannot be reversed by linguistic means, we have little evidence on the nonlinguistic means by which a merger can be unmerged.

This paper explores the nonlinguistic means by which mergers can be reversed by examining a reversal in progress in Oklahoma -- the reversal of the merger of /ε/ and /ɪ/ before nasals (or the *pen/pin* merger). Brown (1991) has shown that the *pen/pin* merger began to expand in the American South during the last quarter of the 19th century and went virtually to completion by the end of the 1930s. Data from a Survey of Oklahoma Dialects (SOD) shows that the *pen/pin* merger had gone virtually to completion by 1930 in Oklahoma too, but the data also suggests that over the last 50 years the distinction has begun to expand at the expense of the merger. In other words, SOD suggests that in Oklahoma we have the reversal of a merger in progress.

Our analysis of SOD data suggests that the convergence of a number of nonlinguistic factors probably account for this reversal. First, over the last 50 years Oklahoma has undergone dramatic changes in population. The establishment of military bases during WW II and escalating oil prices and the Sunbelt phenomena during the 1970s and 80s brought large numbers of people from other areas to Oklahoma. These new arrivals are significantly more likely than native Oklahomans to preserve the *pen/pin* distinction. Second, many of the new arrivals settled in the upper-middle class suburbs of Oklahoma City and Tulsa that serve as foci for the diffusion of linguistic innovations. Thus, the *pen/pin* distinction was well-positioned to expand along with other innovations. Finally, the fact that the *pen/pin* merger is a partial merger, that spelling is a reliable guide to the distinction, and that some teachers explicitly teach the distinction may have made the merger particularly reliable to reversal.

The *Pen/Pin* Merger in Tennessee (and Oklahoma)

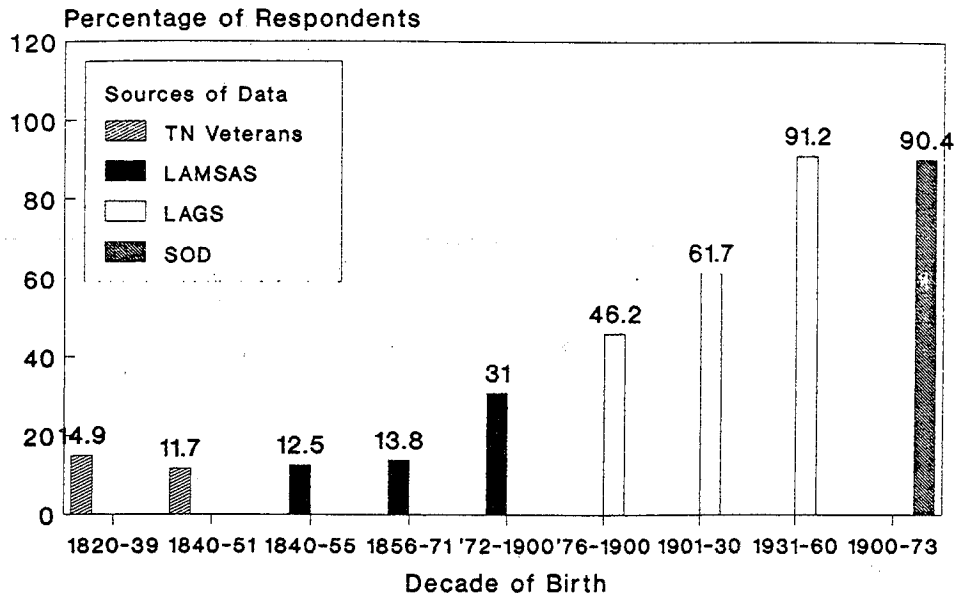


Figure 1. % of respondents with /i/ in words like *pen/ten* (Source: Brown, 1991; SOD Telephone Survey, 1991).

The *Pen/Pin* Merger in Oklahoma

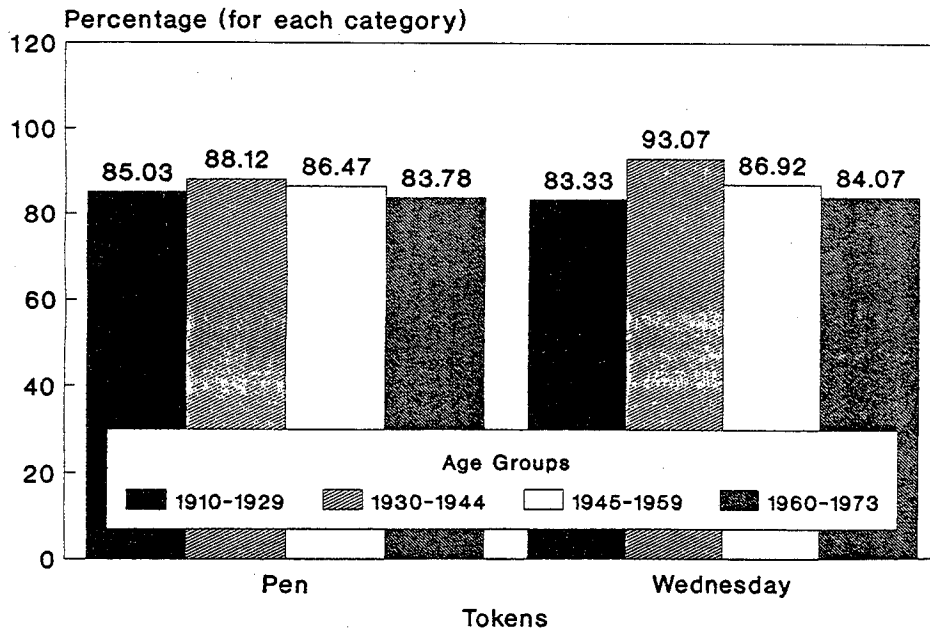


Fig. 2. Distribution of /i/ before nasals in apparent time (Source: SOD Telephone Survey).

The Pen/Pin Merger in Oklahoma

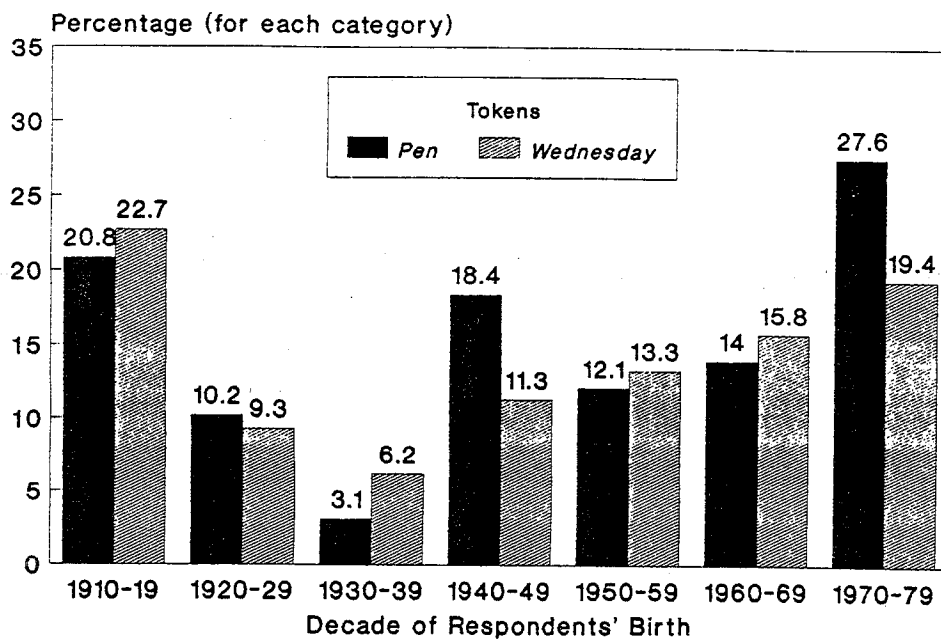


Fig. 3. Distribution of /E/ before nasals by decade of respondents' birth (Source: SOD Telephone Survey)

The Pen/Pin Merger in Oklahoma

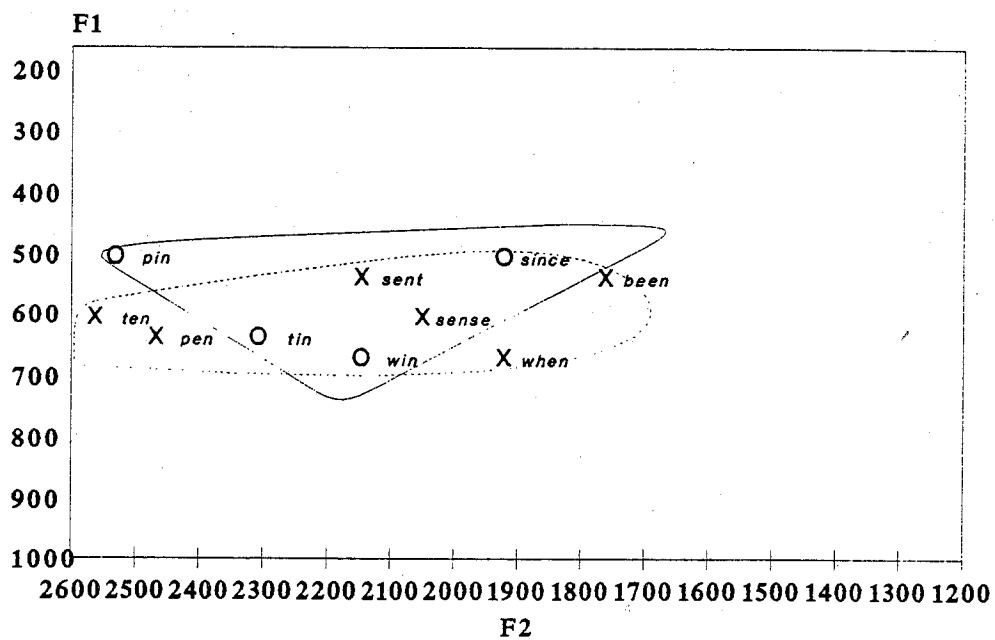


Fig. 5. Tokens of /E/ & /I/ before nasals in speech of 20-year-old white female from Weatherford, OK.

The *Pen/Pin* Merger in Oklahoma

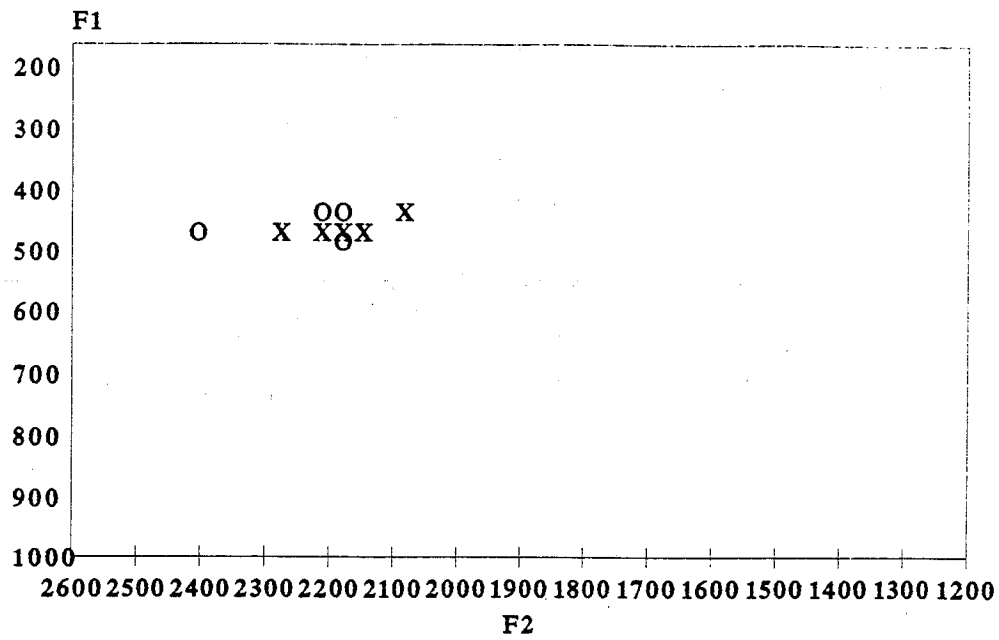


Fig. 6. Tokens of /E/ & /I/ before nasals in speech of 40-year-old white male from Weatherford, OK.

The *Pen/Pin* Merger in Oklahoma

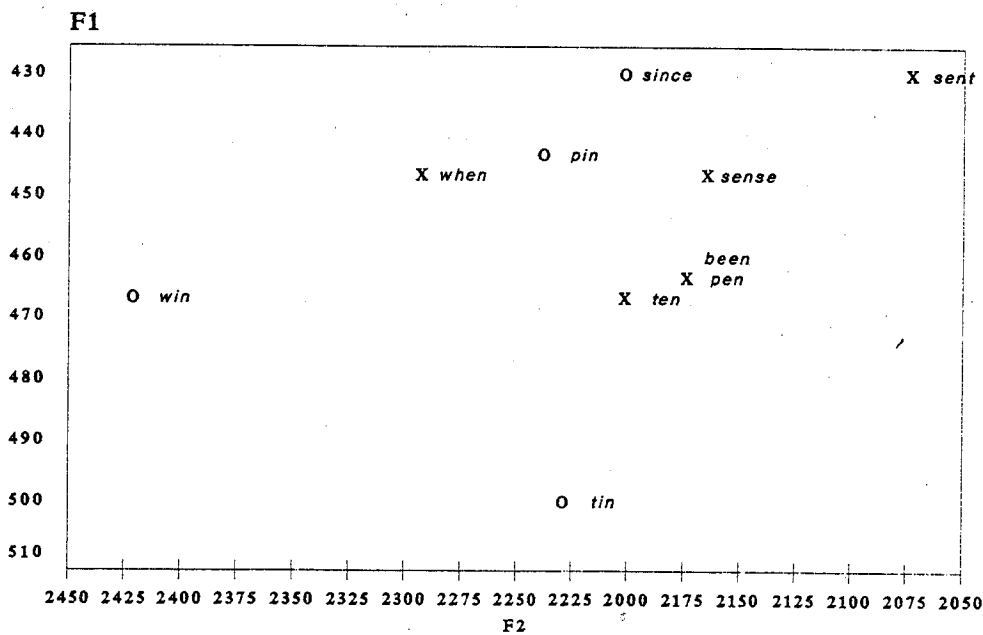


Fig. 7. Tokens of /E/ & /I/ before nasals in speech of 40-year-old white male from Weatherford, OK.

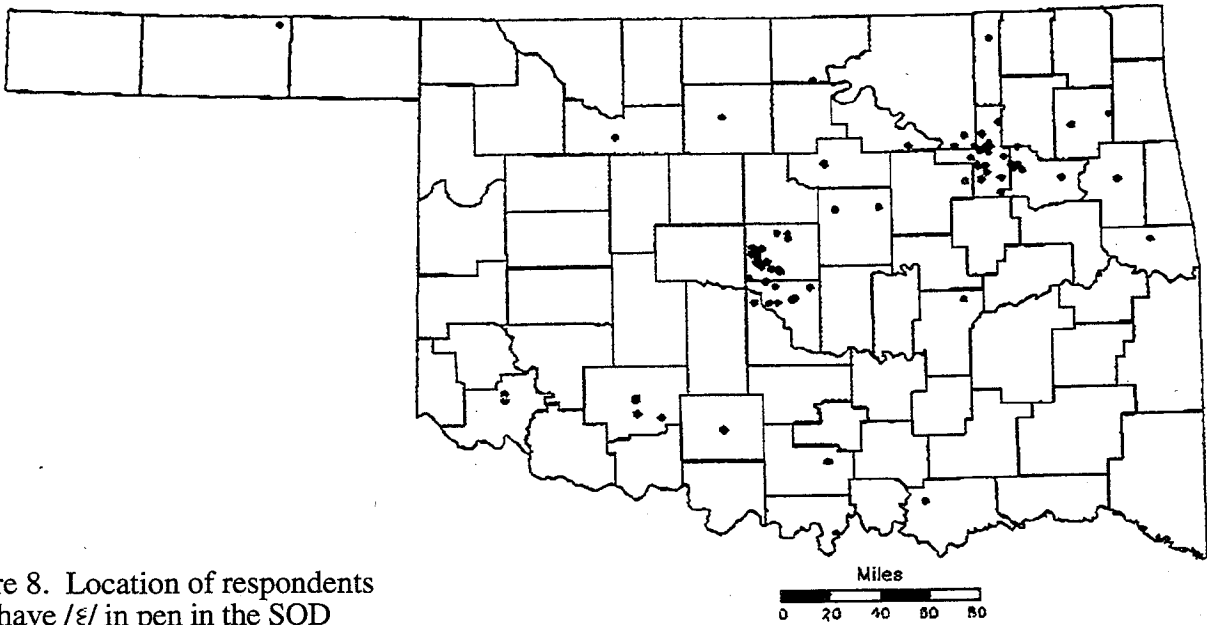


Figure 8. Location of respondents who have /ε/ in pen in the SOD Telephone Poll

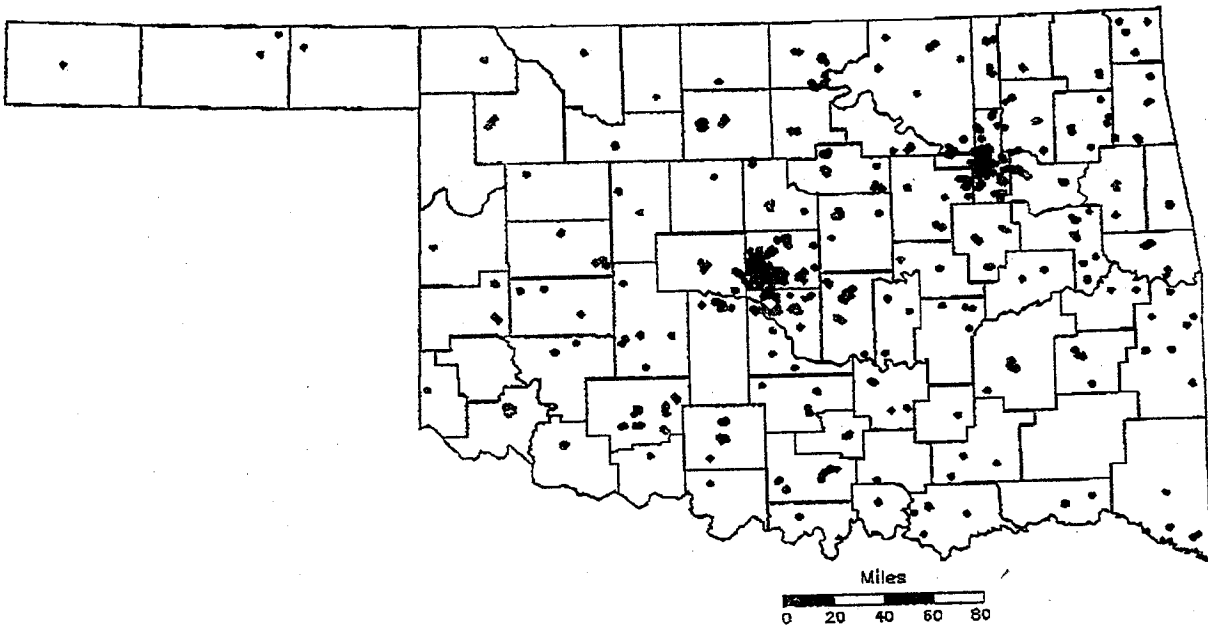


Figure 9. Location of all respondents in the SOD Telephone Poll