

## Variation and Change in New Hampshire English: The Decline of Local Distinctiveness

This paper provides a phonological description of the English spoken in central New Hampshire, a rural area within the Eastern New England dialect region of the United States. While the phonology of New Hampshire English has been studied in the past (Kurath 1939, Nagy 2001, Labov, Ash & Boberg 2006), these studies have not extensively examined age-based variation in the dialect. Using recorded interviews with local speakers of various ages, the data presented in this paper demonstrates significant variation in pronunciation across age groups. This variation is particularly evident in speakers' system of low vowels. Older speakers retain the conservative, so-called "broad a" or /a/ in words like *father*, *half*, and *car* that is characteristic of the Eastern New England dialect. However, this phoneme appears to be disappearing altogether in the area as younger speakers raise the vowel (as in *half*) or retract it (as in *father* and *car*), merging the vowels with /æ/ and /ɑ/, respectively. Consequently, younger speakers in New Hampshire have lost the distinction between *father* and *bother*, a distinction which has also been lost in most other American dialects. Another local sound change which appears to be more advanced is the merger of /ɑr/ and /ɔr/, as very few speakers still distinguish *horse* from *hoarse* or *morning* from *mourning*. These mergers are discussed in relation to other sound changes in the dialect, such as a decline in rates of r-vocalization, to show that the speech of young people in New Hampshire is becoming increasingly indistinct from that of other Americans. One possible counterexample to this trend is also discussed: the centralization of /au/ before voiceless consonants, as in *out* and *house*, which occurs with increasing frequency among younger speakers.