In spite of its unique position as a fast-growing urban metropolis in the heart of the South, little research has been conducted to uncover the effects of Atlanta’s rapid growth on the speech of its native population. This paper reports on variation and change in the speech of Atlanta, Georgia which has occurred as a result of this growth, focusing on the current state of the Southern Shift. The evidence presented is limited to key vowel features, especially /aj/ monophthongization and the front chain shift. Drawing on regional data found in past projects (e.g. Labov, Ash, & Boberg, 2006; Montgomery & Nunnally, 2008; Feagin 2003) and utilizing a variety of sociolinguistic methods, this paper analyzes a data set in which both apparent-time changes and variation can be observed.

In order to more fully capture Atlantan speech, two different types of interview are presented. The first is a rapid and anonymous interview of 59 speakers which focuses on the pronunciation of /aj/ before voiced consonants, as well as providing data from 11 speakers concerning the pin/pen merger. These interviews show black speakers to have a significantly higher rate of /aj/ monophthongization than white speakers, and that overall rates of /aj/ monophthongization vary between different neighborhoods. The second type consists of a longer conversation-style interview followed by a reading passage, for which data from five white native Atlantans is presented. Acoustic analysis of these interviews shows that the older speakers use more features associated with the Southern Shift than the younger speakers, but that none of the speakers exhibit a fully-shifted vowel system.

References