

69: Changes in the Timber Industry as a Catalyst for Linguistic Change  
Joseph A. Stanley  
University of Georgia

Researchers have noticed the linguistic consequences of major social events in a community. Events that cause dramatic changes in demographics or sudden exposure to a new varieties such as World War II (Bailey et al. 1996), the rapid increase of island tourism (Wolfram, Hazen & Schilling-Estes 1999), or the start of daily trips to the mainland (Schilling 2017) often lead to the rapid spread of innovative linguistic variables and the recession of traditional features (cf. Herold 1990; Johnson 2010). The effects of these “catastrophic events” are typical of external factors in language change (Labov 2001). In this paper, I show that a catastrophic event in Longview, Washington led to sudden linguistic changes.

The timber industry was booming in mid 20<sup>th</sup> century Longview, Washington and provided employment for a significant portion of the local population. But starting in the mid 1970s, many of these jobs were contracted out and the mills began to be more automated, leading to closures and lay-offs. As people were forced to find employment elsewhere, the relatively autonomous community became more integrated with the surrounding region, exposing Cowlitz County residents to new linguistic variants.

For this paper, two variables are selected for study. The first, BAG-raising, is the conditioned raising of TRAP before voiced velars, which is characteristic of many Washingtonians (Wassink et al. 2009; Riebold 2012; Freeman 2014; Wassink 2014; 2015; 2016). The second, is diphthongization of GOAT, which has received less attention in research on the Pacific Northwest. Tokens of both of these variables are taken from sociolinguistic interviews with 54 residents of the Longview area. Linear mixed-effects models with were fit to formant measurements of BAG and GOAT tokens with generation as the predictor variable. In both cases, the best generational split was found to be around 1970. More specifically, the older group raises BAG and has a more monophthongal GOAT vowel, while the younger group raises BAG to a lesser degree and has a significantly more diphthongal GOAT vowel.

The timing of these abrupt generational changes corresponds to the changes in the timber industry and the following shift in the area’s insularity. As the younger generation was exposed to more linguistic variants, they adopted features characteristic of the Pacific coast and abandoned their parents’ more traditional forms. I argue that the older residents of the area see Longview more as a quintessential mill town and express this view with their choice of linguistic variants, while the younger generation does not see Longview in this way and adopts new forms to express this view.

This study supports the view that “such catastrophic changes are more common than previously believed” (Labov 1994:24) and that researchers must look to local events for insight into language change. Indeed, while change in time is ubiquitous in sociolinguistic research, it is important to uncover not just when the change occurred but also possible explanations for the underlying causes.