DIACHRONIC REVERSAL OF /ɪ/-TENSING IN HONG KONG ENGLISH

A result of dialect contact with non-local English varieties?



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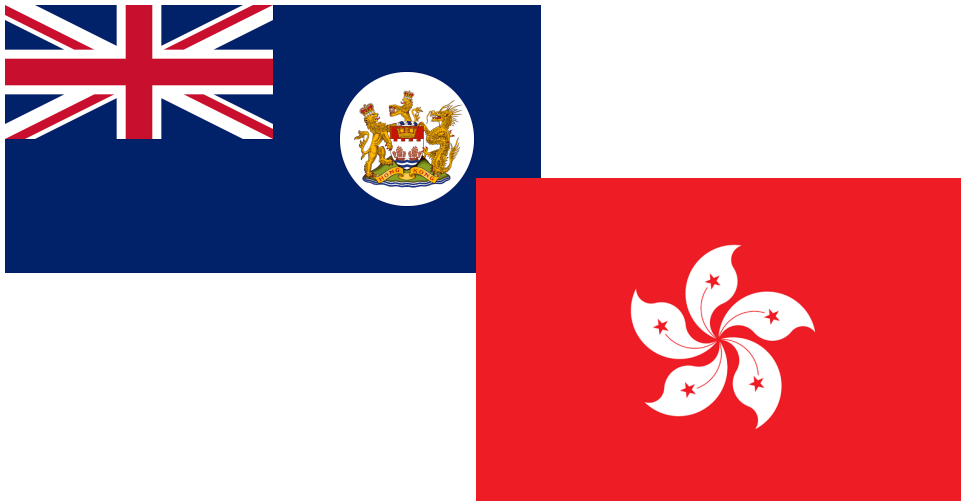
Background

- **Hong Kong:** Special Administrative Region of China, former British colony
- Official languages: English & Chinese
- 51.9% of population speaks English, most are Cantonese-English-Mandarin trilinguals (Census and Statistics Department 2017)



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hong_Kong_Location.svg



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hong_Kong

Background

English widely used in educational, governmental, business & judiciary sectors, formal & informal written communication

(Bacon-Shone et al. 2015; Hansen Edwards 2018; Sewell 2016)



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hong_Kong_Harbour_Night_2019-06-11.jpg



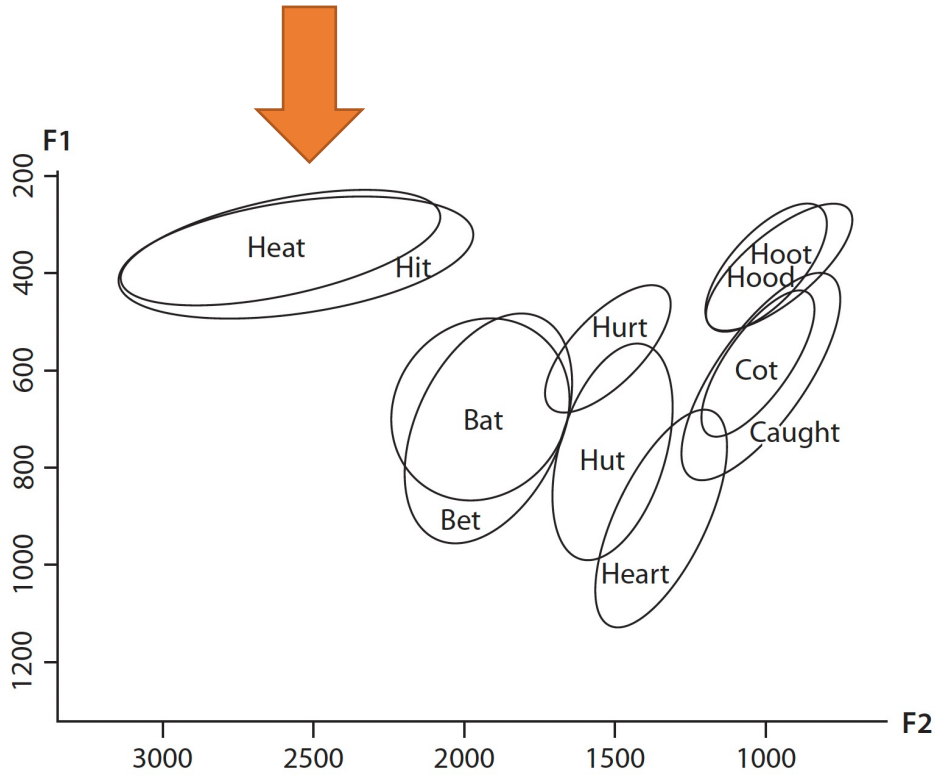
https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/article/1825528/add-oil-evolution-hong-kong-english-and-where-our-unique



https://www.coronavirus.gov.hk/eng/social_distancing.html

What is Hong Kong English (HKE)

- Indigenized variety of English spoken in Hong Kong
- Unique phonological, syntactic and lexical features (Cummings & Wolf 2011; Deterding et al. 2008; Hung 2000; Li 2000; Sung 2015)

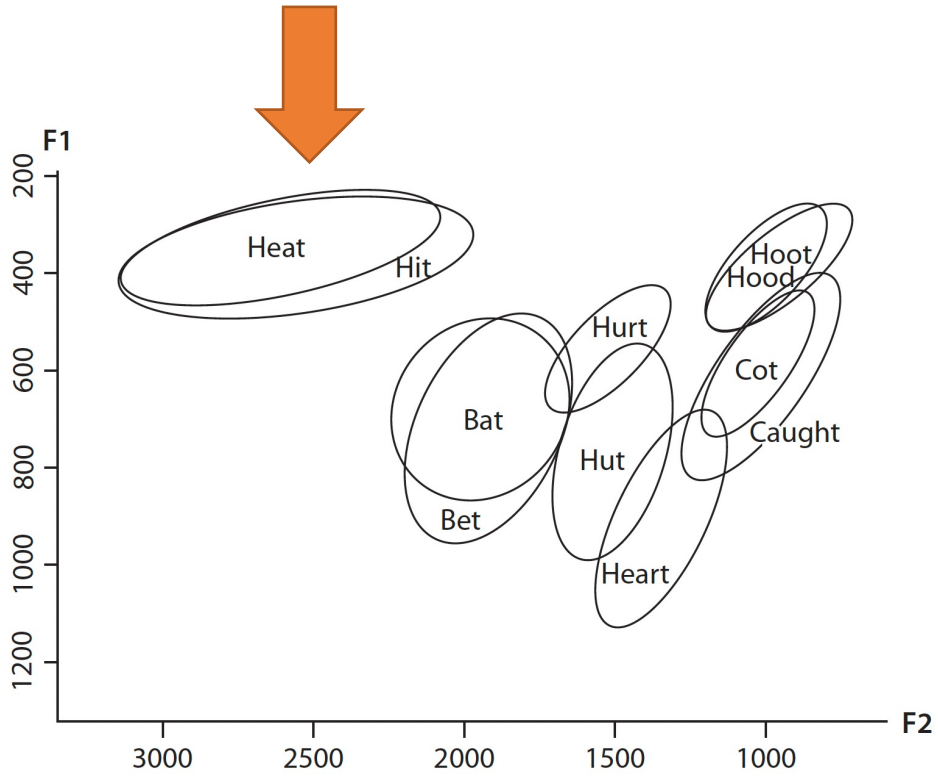


From Hung (2012)

What is Hong Kong English (HKE)

Variable in question:

- Merger of KIT vowel to FLEECE vowel, i.e. [I]-tensing
  - *E.g., heat-hit* [hit] (Hung 2000, 2012; Deterding et al. 2008)



From Hung (2012)

Objectives

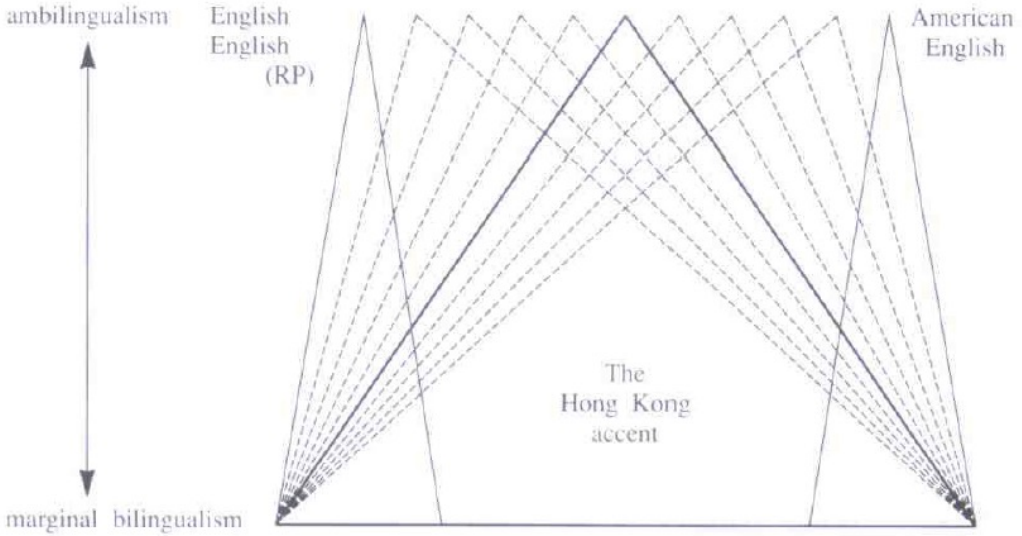
- Is there **diachronic change** in the production of **FLEECE** and **KIT vowels** in HKE?
- Can the change be attributed to **dialect contact** with other varieties of English?
- Revisit the current analysis of HKE vowel system, broaden our understanding of HKE phonology

Variationist studies on HKE

- Both inter-speaker and intra-speaker variation were found (Bolton & Kwok 1990; Sewell 2012, 2022; Lam 2017, 2020; Hansen Edwards 2018)
- Consonantal and suprasegmental variation (Sewell & Chan 2010; Lam 2017, 2020; Hansen Edwards 2018; Sewell 2022)
- Factors affecting variation:
    1. Intra-speaker style-shifting (Sewell 2012; Lam 2017, 2020)
    2. Language proficiency and language aptitude (Bolton & Kwok 1990; Lam 2017, 2020; Hansen Edwards 2018)
    3. Education level (Bolton & Kwok 1990)

Variationist studies on HKE

- A continuum from prototypical "HKE" to "American" or "British" English

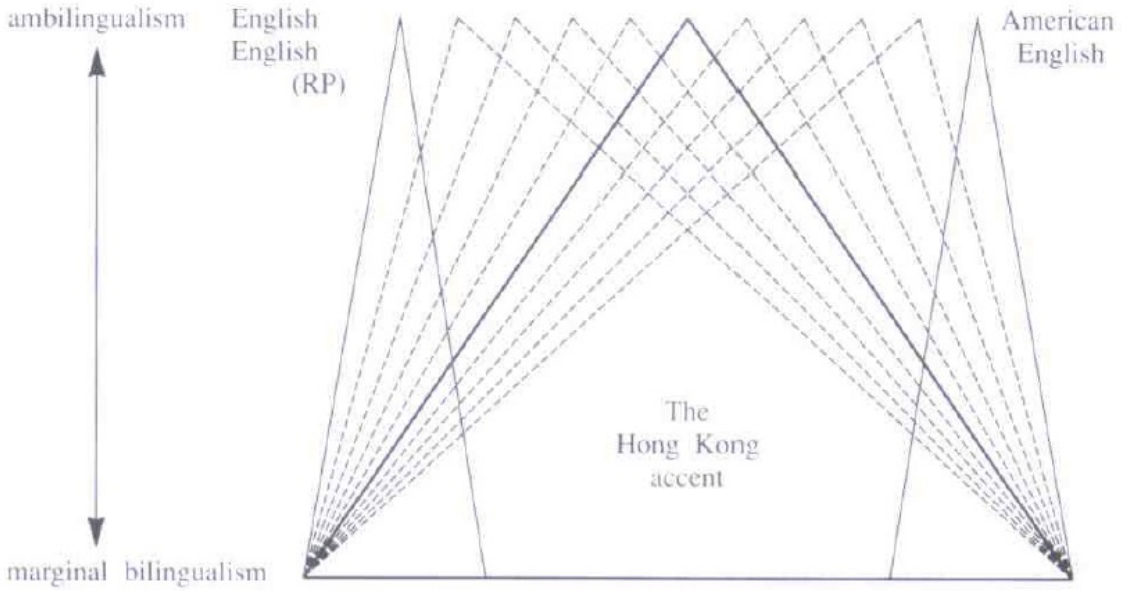


From Bolton and Kwok (1990)

1. Informal speech
2. Low English proficiency
3. Low language aptitude
4. Low education level

More features of HKE

Variationist studies on HKE



From Bolton and Kwok (1990)

1. Formal speech
2. High English proficiency
3. High language aptitude
4. High education level

Fewer features of HKE
More features of "American" or "British" English

Variationist studies on HKE

- Proficiency and aptitude might not be the only factors
- Not all L2 English speakers in Hong Kong aim for "native speaker English"
  - Hansen Edwards (2019): 36% of respondents chose HKE to be their preferred English variety
- Features of HKE not always equal to poor language aptitude or low proficiency

Variationist studies on HKE

- Dialect contact might contribute to variation too!
- Globalization and Americanization of English (Meyerhoff & Niedzielski 2003; Gonçalves et al. 2018)
  - Internet, media, international travel → increasing dialect contact → convergence?

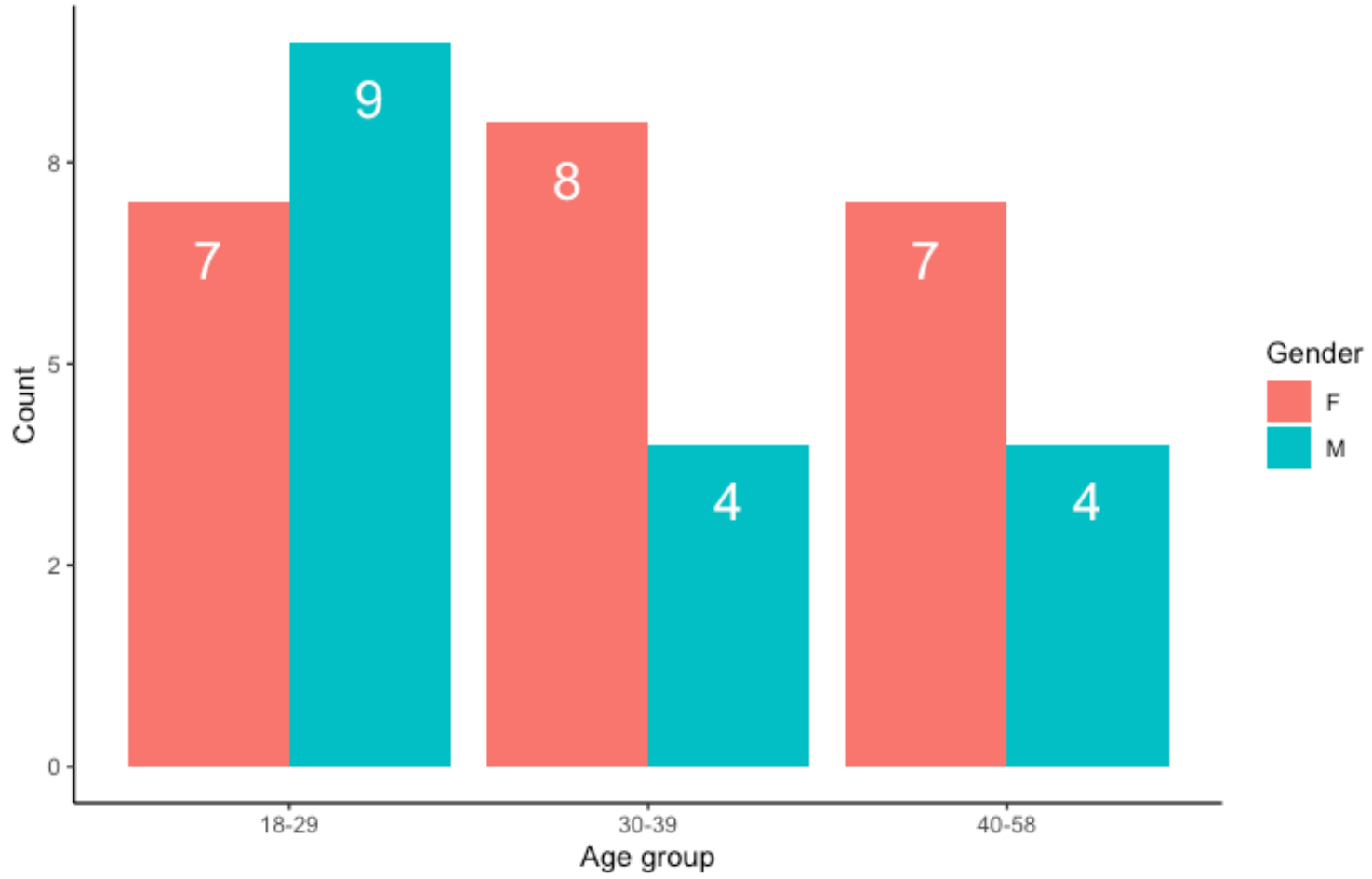
Variationist studies on HKE

- Global hegemony of English: American and British English continue to carry prestige over local varieties in many post-colonial societies
  - e.g., India (Bernaisch & Koch 2015), Malaysia (Crismore et al. 1996), Singapore (Foo & Tan 2019)
- Do these factors motivate convergence to Inner Circle Englishes?

Methodology

- 39 speakers, aged 18-58 (22 F, 17 M)
- All Cantonese-English bilinguals, born and raised in Hong Kong
- Interview schedule:
    1. Sociolinguistic interview (~75 mins)
    2. Word list (~20 mins)
    3. Minimal pair (~10 mins)
- Demographic & attitudinal info: sociolinguistic interview
- Vowel production data: word list reading

Methodology



Wide range of age and gender groups represented

Methodology

Information collected during sociolinguistic interview:

- Age and gender
- Exposure to other varieties of English
  - Social network (Do I interact with speakers of other varieties of English?)
  - Living abroad (Have I ever lived outside of Hong Kong?)

Methodology

Other social information collected:

- Language affiliation and orientation
- Attitudes towards HKE
- Education level

Methodology

	[+velar]	[-velar]
FLEECE	5	5
KIT	10	10

[+velar]	[-velar]
seek	**seat**
sick	**sit**

- 30 monosyllabic words with FLEECE and KIT vowels in velar vs. non-velar environments extracted from the word list reading task
- 3 repetitions for each word: 30 X 3 = 90 tokens/speaker
- Embedded in carrier phrase "Say ___ again."
- Word presented in a pseudo-random order

Methodology: Data analysis

- Recordings of the word list task transcribed in ELAN (ELAN 2022) and aligned using Montreal Forced Aligner (McAuliffe et al. 2017)
- Vowel boundaries adjusted in Praat (Boersma & Weenink 2022)
- Vowel formants extracted at the 1/3 point of vowel duration
- Tokens of all monophthongs in the word list extracted
  - 155 words from 14 vowels * 3 repetitions = 465 tokens/speaker
- Vowel formants normalized using Lobanov method (Lobanov 1971)

Methodology: Data analysis

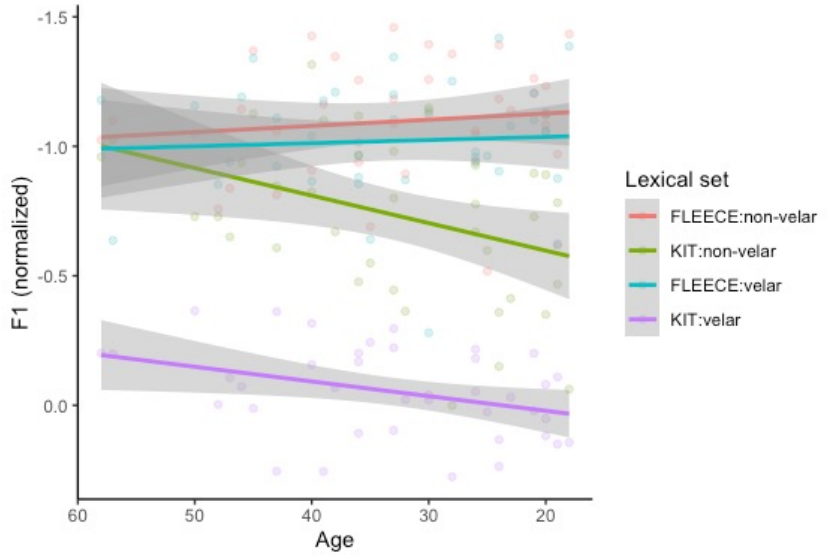
- **Mixed-effect regression models**: examine whether the normalized F1and F2 of the two vowels varied with age
- **Pillai scores**: derived from by-speaker MANOVAs fits, access degree of overlap between the two vowels (Nycz & Hall-Lew 2013)
- **Spearman's rank correlation coefficients**: test significance of correlation between Pillai scores and age, examine whether age co-variated with other social variables

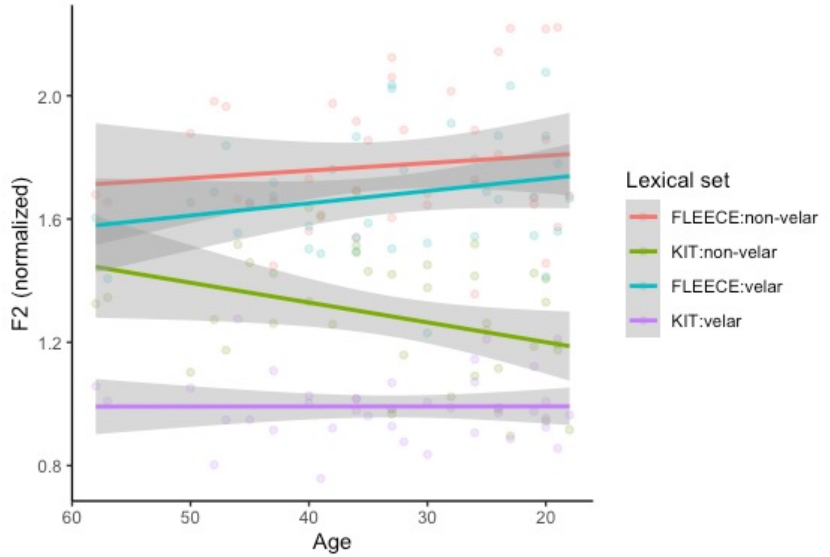
Results: Effect of linguistic environment

Significant effect of following phonological environment on **KIT** vowel

Higher F1 (p=0.001) before **velar** consonants across all speakers, no significant effect on F2 (p>0.05)

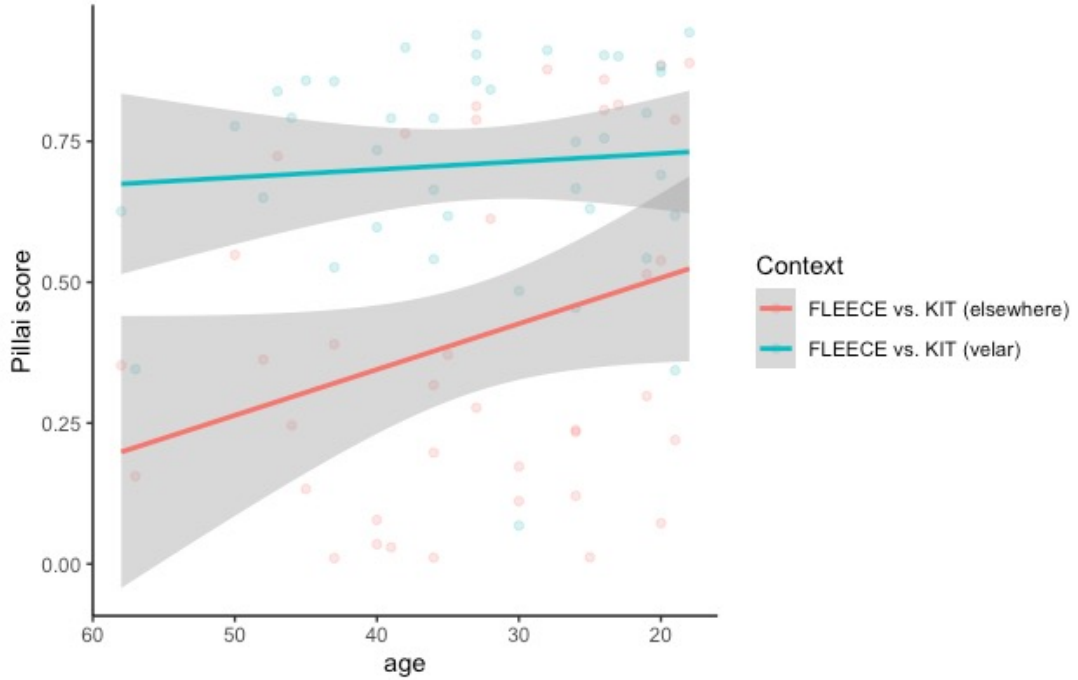
No effect of following environment on FLEECE vowel (p>0.05)





Results: Effect of linguistic environment

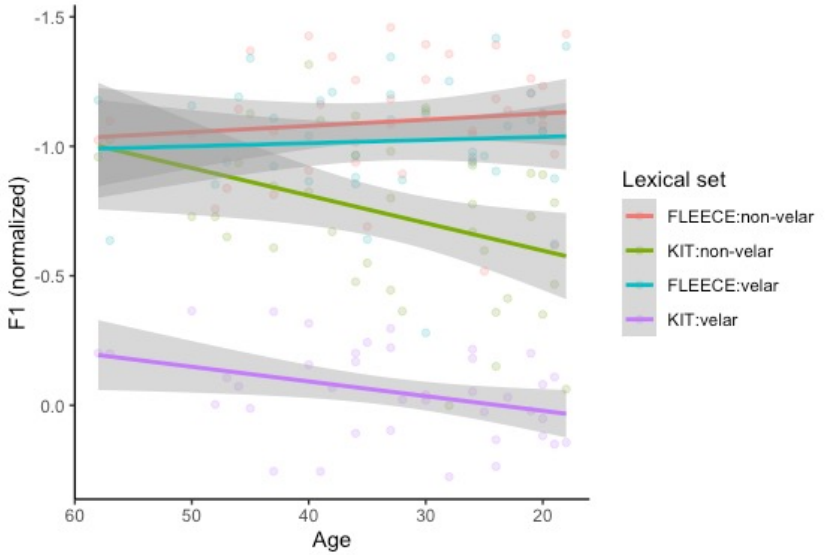
- Significantly **lower** Pillai score between KIT and FLEECE vowels in non-velar context than in velar context ($p<0.001$)
- The two vowels are significantly more overlapped before non-velar consonants

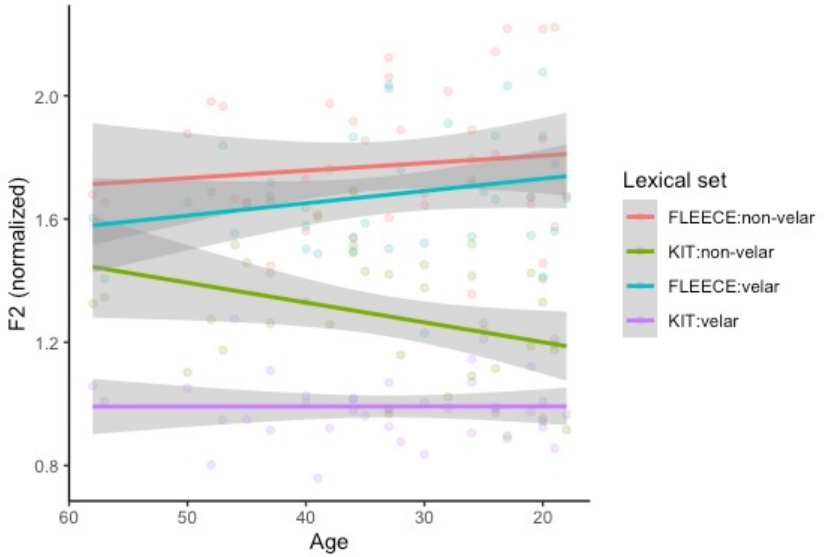


Results: Effect of age

FLEECE vowel: no significant effect of age ($p>0.05$)

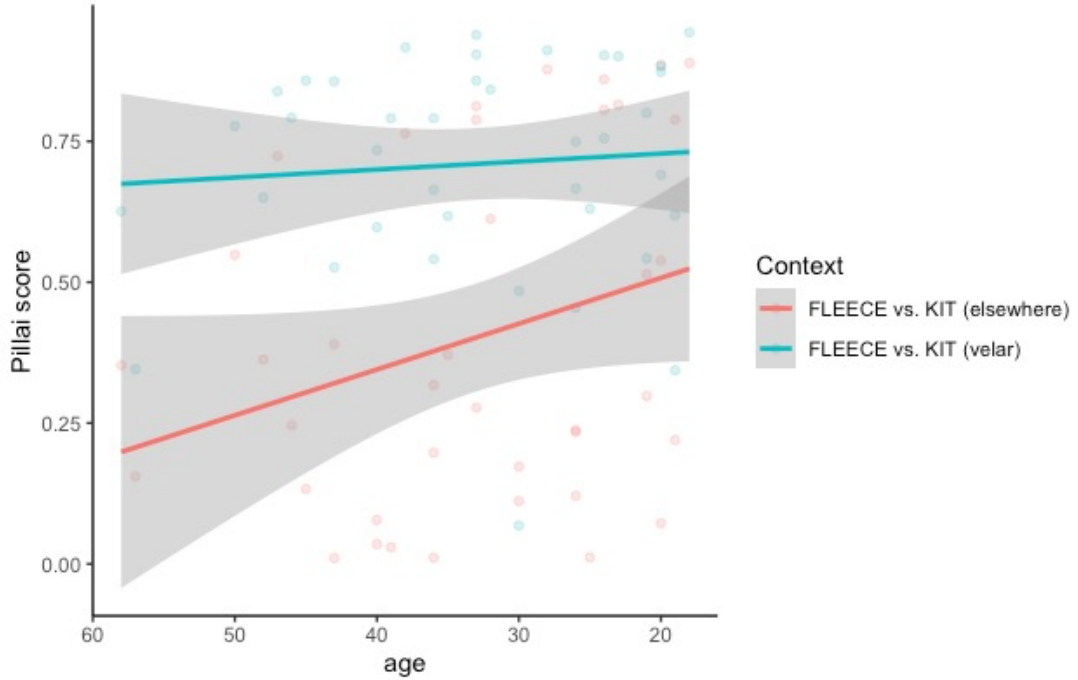
KIT vowel: **younger** speakers have significantly **higher F1** and **lower F2** in both velar (F1: $p=0.022$, F2: $p=0.033$) and non-velar context (F1: $p<0.001$, F2: $p<0.001$)





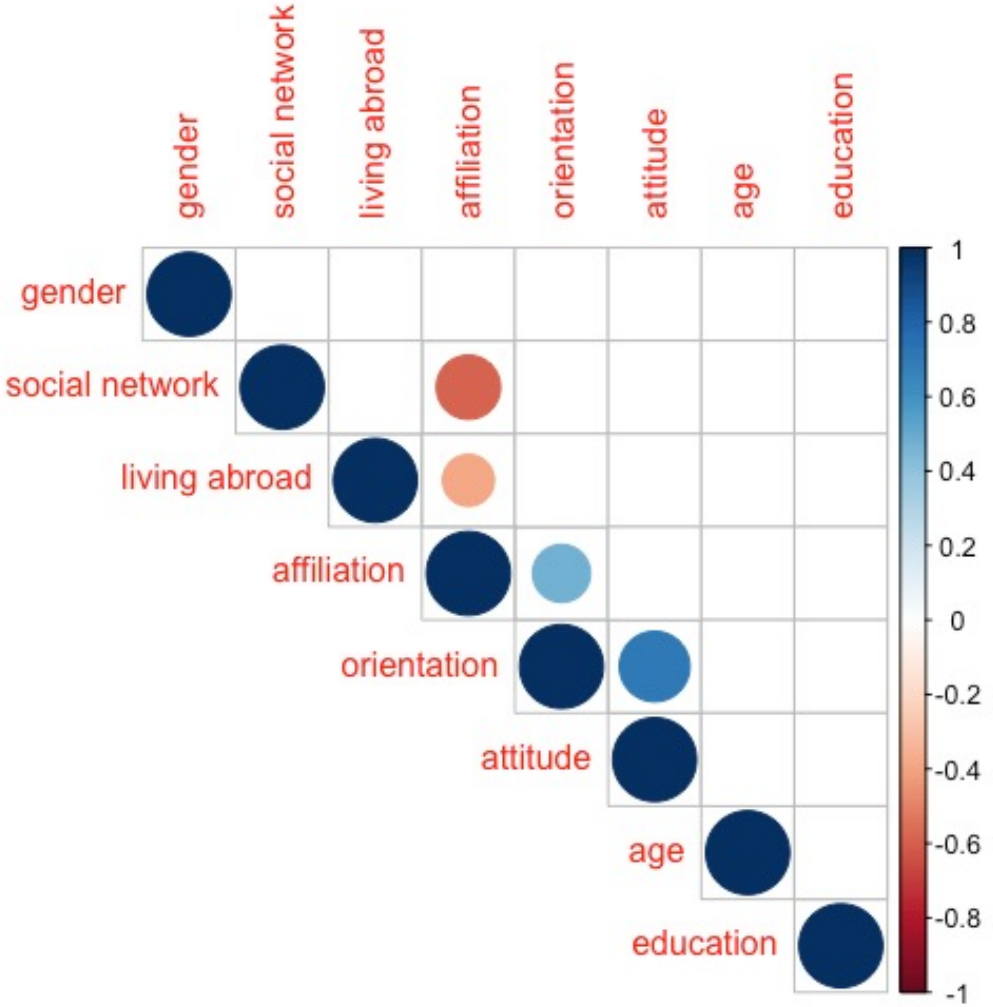
Results: Effect of age

- Age has no significant effect on Pillai score between KIT and FLEECE vowels in either velar or non-velar contexts ($p>0.05$)
- Degree of overlap between the two vowels do not differ significantly across generations



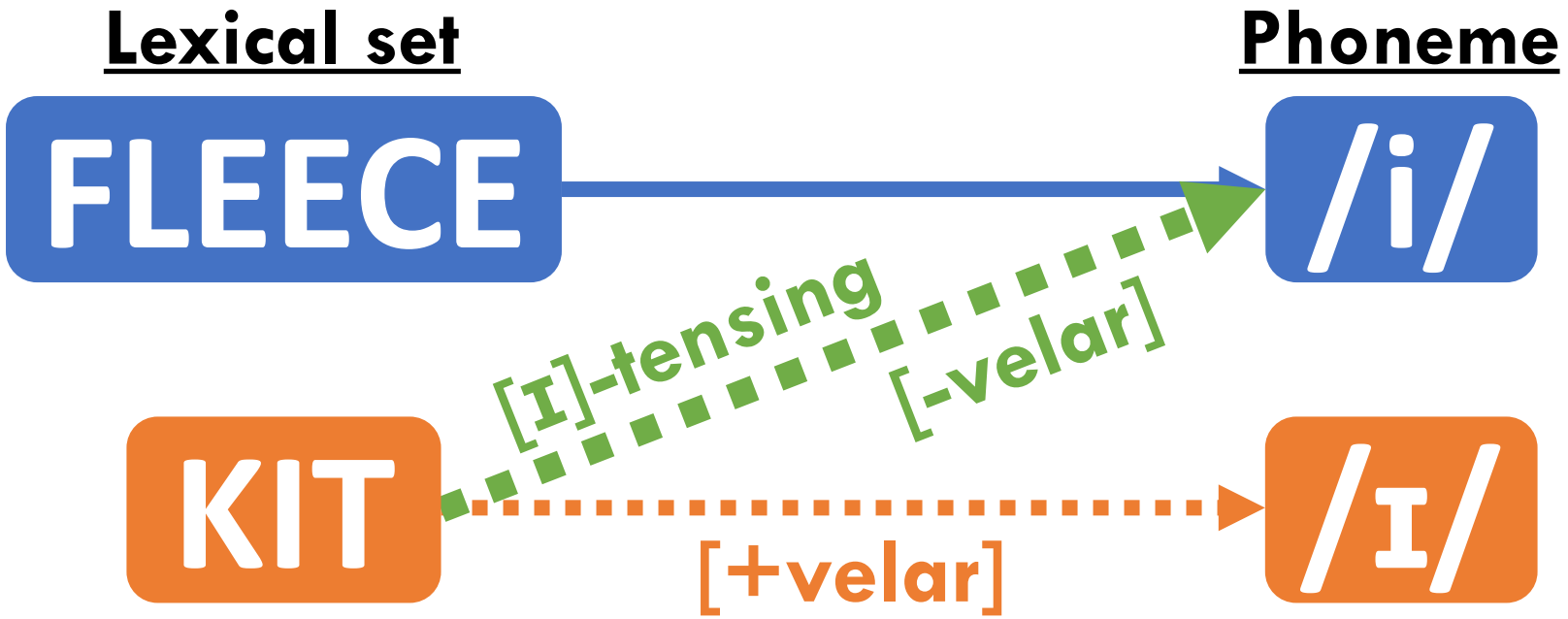
Results

- Age does **not** co-variate with any other social variables
  - Younger speakers were **not** more likely to interact with speakers of other varieties
  - Younger speakers were **not** more likely to live abroad



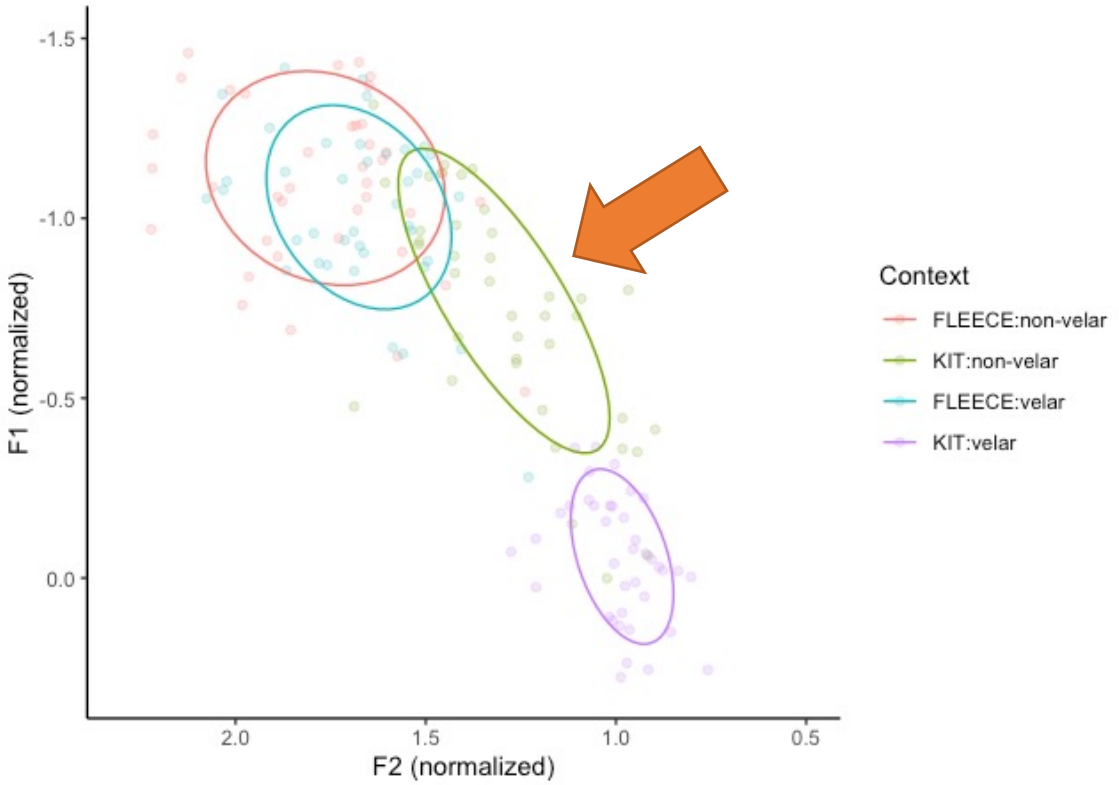
Discussion

- [I]-tensing only occurs before non-velar sounds, not before velars
- The change is phonologically conditioned by the place of articulation of the following segment



Discussion

- Variants of KIT vowel in non-velar context are gradient in nature
- Variably realized along a continuum of [i]~[ɪ], not categorical [i] or [ɪ]
- Great inter-speaker variation



Comparison of normalized F1 and F2 of FLEECE and KIT vowels in velar and non-velar contexts. Each dot represents one speaker.

Discussion

Lexical set	HKE	AmE
FLEECE	[i]	[i]
KIT (elsewhere)	[i]~[ɪ]	[ɪ]
KIT (pre-velar)	[ɪ]	

Realization of FLEECE and KIT vowels in HKE and American English (AmE)

Discussion

- Younger speakers showed a significantly lesser degree of /I/-tensing than older speakers
  - Diachronic reversal of /I/-tensing in HKE
- Yet, older and younger speakers did not differ in their level of contact with non-local speakers
  - The reversal is unlikely to be caused by direct social contact

Discussion

Alternative explanations for the reversal of /I/-tensing

- Are younger speakers adopting features of Inner Circle Englishes?
  - Media consumption
  - Prescriptive language instruction
  - Exonormative ideals of English
- Independent development?

Discussion

- Consumption of American and British media
- Deliberate imitation of non-local accent

"*When I'm watching the movies, or the soap, uh the soap dramas from Britain, I followed what they say. Like I do some kind of uh like* ***shadowing*** *is it? Yeah, uh* ***follow their speech.*** *Yeah, yeah,* ***to train my accent.***" (21M)



Discussion

- Prescriptive language instruction
- A quote from a mother about her son's English classes:

"*I used to put him to Bri- uh to – uh the* ***phonetics class in British Council****, but eh when he was in kindergarten.* […] *And right now, we are joining a online Zoom class* ***with a teacher from London.***" (43F)

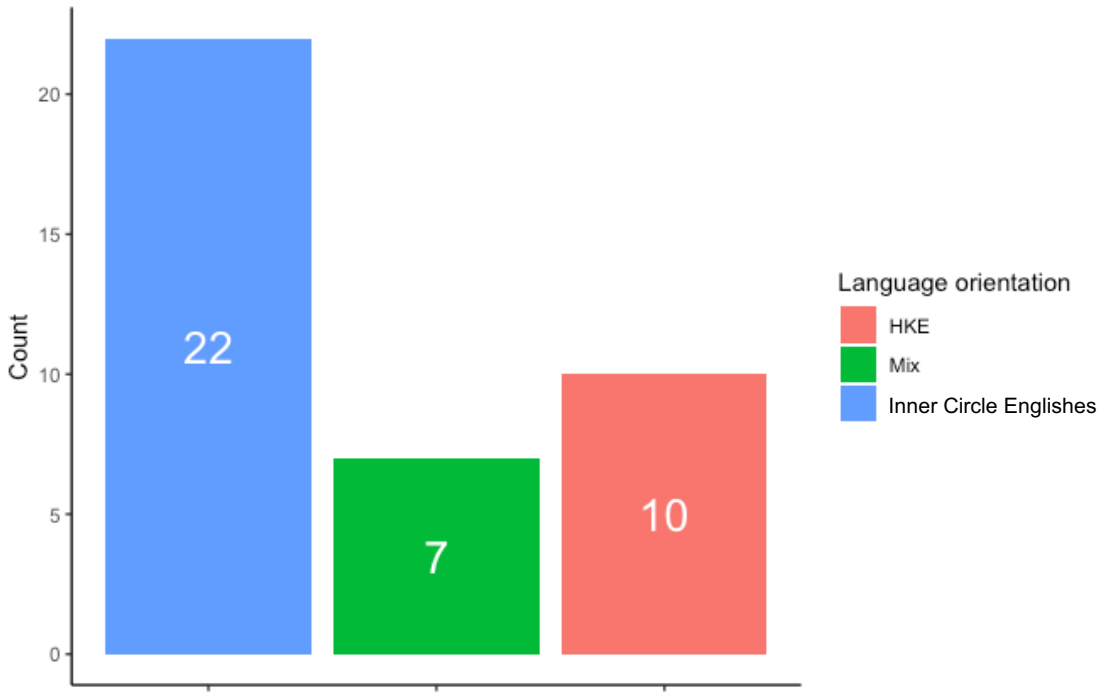


Discussion

Exonormative ideals of English among the participants

- **56%** consider Inner Circle Englishes as the ideal
- 18% consider a mix of HKE and Inner Circle Englishes as the ideal
- 26% consider HKE as the ideal

Younger speakers are equally as exonormative as older speakers



Discussion

- Independent development?
- Example: Starr (2021) argues that increasing rhoticity in Singaporean English is not caused by American influence
- Instead, complex social meanings are constructed through local community practices
- Influence of orthography, consistency of pronunciation with spelling
  → rhoticity seen as more "correct"
- Is it the same case for HKE?

THANK YOU!



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