De-evolution of Urban Markedness in Nigerian English Accent(s)

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Abstract
While variation in Nigerian English (NigE) accents has been linked to speakers' ethnicity and education, the effects of corresponding factors such as urbanity and age await assessment. Towards defining their areal implications, this paper investigates the predictive dimensions of age and urban membership in lectal differentiation within the NigE systems. Based on variationist paradigm, patterns of contrast between typically non-contrastive vowels in the system are assessed for speakers living in major municipals. Results support the preservation of fusion between GOOSE and FOOT by younger generation, whereas both age groups are unanimous in the achievement of contrast between FLEECE and KIT, USE and GOOSE, and TRAP and lettER. The patterns thus suggest a budding feature distinction and an urban-driven convergence. More importantly, the near evenness in vocalic trajectories, despite differences in the speakers' age and cities, confirms the levelling force of Nigeria's metrolingual climates in dialect emergence.

Keywords: Nigerian English; age; vowel behaviour; urban accents; sociophonetics.

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1. Introduction

The accents of Nigerian English (NigE), as spoken across the urban regions in the country, set an interesting ground for social definitions of the variety. Nigerian English does exist (Gut 2004:813-30; Jolayemi 2006; Bobda 2007; Oladipupo 2015), and its forms have been attested as heterogeneous across regional, ethnic, and social divides (Awonusi 2004; Jowitt 2006). However, the questions of its internal trajectories of change, as well as the social conditioning factors within the system still await clear answers. At the core of previous studies on NigE accents are underpinnings of social factors, some of which correlate strongly with speakers' formal education, ethnic backgrounds, and measure of exposure to day-to-day communication in English (Udofot 2004; Josiah 2012; etc.). With regard to ethnic dimension on the variation continuum, the substrate power of speakers' L1 has often been held significant (Gut 2004:815-16). Regrettably, majority of subsequent efforts in addressing this correlation have been largely impressionistic, and in most cases, non-aligned.

For a fast evolving variety as NigE, predictors of variation or change are conceivably unstable – thus foregrounding the plausible effects of often-ignored variables such as municipality and age. Notwithstanding this prospect, reports on NigE phonology have mostly relied on the speakers' levels of education and ethnicity as chiefly predictive, while other variables including speakers' age and urbanity have rarely been assessed. As highlighted in §1.2 below, the budding efforts in the analysis of African urban languages also appear to have largely ignored the phonological nuances of such practices. This study proposes that paying further attention to the phonological indices of urbanisation can faithfully expand its linguistic enquiries and broaden the general understanding of its lectal definitions and change. More importantly, such commitment would enrich the rapidly increasing spectrum of geolinguistic appraisals of English varieties in which speakers' regions have been strongly predictive.

As an offshoot of the literature on vocalic variation in Nigerian English, this paper analyses the interplay of speakers'

age as well as metropolitan space with their ethnic membership in the realisation of some historically fused vowels of NigE. With specific focus on patterns of phonemic differentiation or coalescence between FLEECE and KIT, USE and GOOSE, FOOT and GOOSE, and TRAP and lettER, the correlation between the speakers' cities of residence and their accents is assessed; and the prospect of the outcomes for the broader NigE system weighed.

2. Related Studies

A major upshot of increase in youth population in major African cities is the emergence of *new vernaculars* and *youth languages* which invariably have been dominating the linguistic market (Kiessling & Mous 2004; McLaughlin, 2009 & Rose Marie 2010). The urban setting, on the whole, is a creative vortex with capacities to structure and propagate its verbal predilections at the expense of other varieties. For the most part, the core of linguistic innovation and change in urban areas are the youths' practices, while the older generation tend to do more of enriching the conservative pools. As a result, temporary structures and casual styles among city youths are increasingly becoming gateways for shifts or change, modifications or completely fresh innovations. It is possibly against this backdrop that the assumption of linguistic homogeneity has been recommended for a theoretical review (Rose Marie 2010:13).

In Africa, for instance, the urban cities are spheres of economic opportunities and possibilities. Most youths, on reaching the employment age migrate to the cities for better life or cosmopolitan feel. Often upon arrival, they maintain their local residue, i.e. fragments of their provincial norms. But as the structuring (particularly linguistic) forces of the city gradually bears on these speakers, they tend to absorb the city norms and commence the journey towards acquiring the urban variety as a result of which emergent varieties with the barge of their host cities continue to spread. The interesting thing to observe about this development is the departure of the variants from typical norms, which essentially may not modify or completely shift the entire system of source structures; but distinct enough as mark of urbanity. Urban features are not all structurally similar. Each

region is distinguished by peculiar linguistic features (Githinji 2006); as the case is in Nigeria where the accents of English acquired and used throughout the Northern cities vary in terms of lectal formations from those in Southern and Eastern parts.

Since the majority of urban folks are of different linguistic and social backgrounds, they "differ from one city to the next in terms of languages actually spoken, the social, cultural, and economic value judgements associated with these languages"; and have intrinsic ways of patterning "both the city-dwellers' urbanity and the individuality of the respective city" (Rose Marie 2010:15). However, possibilities are that they equally share some underlying features – some universal tendencies that disconnect them from those of rural provinces.

Sociolinguistic research has recently been looking into what is now dubbed as "metrolingualism" across African major cities (Githinji 2006; Adeniran 2009; Rose Marie 2010; Mesthrie & Hurst 2013). Exploratory works are also ongoing towards defining emerging varieties in urban cities and their communicative goals among the youth population. Part of these efforts is the African Urban Youth Language project – which commits its conferences and academic discussions to the vast understanding of syntactic and socio-discursive complexities of these "new forms" (e.g. Abdulaziz & Osinde 1997; Bosire 2006; Githinji 2006; Hurst 2015). It is surprising however, that the nature of urban communication in Nigeria, for the most part, lacks the forms and contents of those found in South, East and even some parts of West Africa. Instead, what has been referred to as NigE, albeit reductively, is the Nigerian Pidgin English (Mann 1996:94; Osoba 2015:132). Unlike some notable urban languages in African cities, the Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) as widely spoken across the country is linguistically dependent on English as its major lexifier. Given such cross-structural interaction(s), the concept of *metrodialect* in Nigerian cities remains a complex one – and in many forms different from the novelty often reported for other African cities:

> [A]lthough there are some generalizations that can be made about the languages of urban Africa [, …]

each city is unique, and the particular linguistic outcome is the result of a complex variety of factors, including the ethnic and linguistic make-up of the city, the history and pattern of urbanization, the legacy of colonial policies, and numerous other factors (McLaughlin 2009:2), as cited in Rose Marie (2010:14)

Among Nigerians, however, sounding city-like is chiefly phonological – in formal, informal, corporate, urbane and slummy domains. In addition to "happening" *vibes* or *asa* often rendered as street voices, *area boys* in big cities and provincial townships alike are prone to showing off insolence or badness by sounding throaty and creaky (Isiaka, forthcoming). The trend is similarly often the case for corporate workers and some of the elite folks who markedly prefer certain diction for suaveness. Given these implications of urban membership, I evaluate its overriding effects vis-à-vis the odds of homogeneity between different age groups across the regions.

2.1. Accents of Nigerian English

The categorisation of NigE accents along regional divides is not new. In what seems to be a variationist approach, Brosnahan (1958) *English in Southern Nigeria* notes the speakers' level of formal education as chiefly predictive. Gauged against the school system of the time, he bands up the *lects* into four major groups, which roughly correspond to speakers' tiers of education. The designs however include a mass range of speakers who never had any formal training with the language but use it in their daily routines. In group one are basilectal speakers, i.e. those who picked the language outside the formal school walls while group two comprises population of speakers who had not gone beyond the elementary school. Those in the third and fourth groups already had secondary and tertiary education. Subsequent studies have however dismissed this model as faulty, querying the place of Nigerian Pidgin English among the varieties (Mafeni 1971; Banjo 1971; Elugbe & Omamor 1991).

Unfortunately, the grouping of NigE into Variety I-IV remains largely impressionist and, as such, difficult to assess against successive studies which used similar variables. Going forward, the pick of education as chiefly indexical of variation has also been disputed, especially in the light of other confounding factors external to formal school trainings (Udofot 2003:96; Gut 2004). In a further attempt, Banjo (1971) proposes a parallel categorisation that is rather based on linguistic variables than speakers' level of literacy. He observes that the entire gamut of NigE comprises four accents. While Variety I is mostly spoken by menial workers "whose knowledge of the language is very imperfect", and for whom "English is in effect a foreign language", Variety II is mainly intelligible to fellow Nigerians and foreigners as well. The third variety is spoken by 10% of Nigerians who have the near native speaker flavour at the "deep structures but 'Nigerian' surface features", while Variety IV is heard among mainly "handful of Nigerians who have either acquired English native accent or have lived in English native environments". He notes that this variety suffers social stigma among wider audience, as many perceive it to be cosmetic or noticeably different from what is typical.

Given the complexity of formal education and ethnicity – as outlined in previous studies, opting for mainly linguistic variables seems more promising, particularly when the focus is not on factors external to language structures, and the intent is to describe their distinct features. But the literature on NigE has, so far, dealt differently. Varietal classification is often tied to few ethnic sources – especially the *decamillionaires*, namely Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo English (Brann 2004:9). There are a few reasons this is so: first, the three groups have represented Nigeria's geopolitical strata since the amalgamation of 1914[1] ; and second, they have continued to remain notably dominant over other ethnics in their respective regions. While Yoruba speakers lead in the whole of South West, Hausa is ubiquitous

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[1] In 1914, the Southern and Northern Protectorates were brought together as one colony under Sir Lord Lugard, forming a sole administrative unit for the regions.

throughout the North and Igbo in South Central and East. Following these stratifications, studies have repeatedly narrowed down on regional classifications of NigE in attempts to describe its features. Based on Wells' lexical set, Table 1 is a précis of ethnic variation among educated Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa speakers – as previously reported in NigE literature (Gut, 2004).

Lexical Set	ENE	ESE	Lexical Set	ENE	ESE	Lexical Set	ENE
KIT	i	iː	FLEECE	iː	iː	NEAR	ia
DRESS	ɘ,a	ɛ,e	FACE	ɛ	ɛ	SQUARE	ɛa
TRAP	ɑ	ɑ	PALM	ɑː	ɑ	START	ɑ
LOT	ɑ	ɔ	THOUGHT	oː	ɔ	NORTH	ɔ
STRUT	ɑ,ʊ	ɔ	GOAT	oː	o,ɔ	FORCE	o, oa
FOOT	ʊ	uː	GOOSE	uː	U	CURE	ʊa
BATH	ɑː	ɑ	PRICE	ɑi,ɘi	ɑi	happy	iː
CLOTH	ɔ	ɔ	CHOICE	ɔi	ɔi	letter	ɑ
NURSE	aː	ɛ,ɔ,a	MOUTH	au,ɘu	ɑu	Comma	ɑ

Table 1: Accounts of vocalic variations in Educated Northern English (ENE) & Educated Southern English (ESE) as in Gut (2004:819)

Very generally, non-differentiation between lax and tense KIT/FLEECE and GOOSE/FOOT classes among peripheral vowels is widely attested for Southern varieties but distinguished by some educated Northern speakers. Both regions have monophthongal realisation for FACE, thus homophonous with DRESS. The diphthongal glide in GOAT appears truncated and its nucleus lowered to THOUGHT in mostly Northern accents. Though the status of NEAR and SQUARE is undefined for Northerners, the two are completely 'merged' in the South. A general tendency towards *yod* /j/ deletion "in the sequences of /j/+/u/ in words like *news, tube, etc.*" is however typical – a

consequence of which would be the overlap of USE with GOOSE and FOOT in F2.

3. Speakers and Regions

The study was designed to allow the coverage of major cities in the South and North of Nigeria. Vowel tokens from 38 speakers were analysed. Since urban influence on speakers' sound patterns was the main predictor, ethnicity and gender were not foregrounded; nonetheless, both age groups consist of male and female speakers. 14 speakers of the older generation were between 35 and 55 years who had mostly lived in the major Nigerian cities selected. 4 males and 3 females lived in the Northern cities while 3 males and 4 females live in the South. 24 younger speakers who were between 19 and 25 years from these regions were also interviewed. They consist of 12 speakers in gender ratio 6:6 in the South; and the other 12 (same gender ratio) in the Northern cities. All Southern speakers of the older generation mostly live in Lagos and Ibadan. Both cities have similar records of cosmopolitanism – the former being the most populated West African city and second in Africa, while the latter ranks as the biggest West African city till date. The older speakers were mainly civil servants and business persons who live in Lagos, Ibadan, and Akure (South); Zaria, Okene, Jos, Kano, and Lokoja (North). Younger participants were undergraduates who had been living and studying in the same cities. Two of them (both male in Okene) had graduated from the university as of the time of recording but still live in the city.

3.1. Elicitation and Measurement

Sociolinguistic interview, reading passage and wordlist were used to capture different styles of respondents' speech from which tokens were averaged (Brato 2012:73; Hofmann, 2015:120 - 27). A total of 132 words drawn across Lexical Sets

were used to extract tokens from the wordlist (Wells, 1982:26-8). *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* (Deterding 2006: 187-96) was read by each speaker before informal conversations. This style was however privileged over structured ones so as to maximise the pooling of sufficient tokens from speakers' vernaculars.

Speech was collected with a ZoomH4n Handy Recorder in small windowless rooms and quiet offices. Sampling frequency was set at 44,000Hz, with the outcome of 11,000Hz. For ease, audio files and transcriptions were fed into Munich Automatic Segmentation System (MAUS) package and exported onto Praat for boundary adjustment. Segmentation and formant extraction was also done with Praat scripts of Boersma & Weenink (2013). Formant values were taken at mid-point, i.e. 50%. All vowels in unstressed environment and function words were excluded. Tokens in liquid or approximant contexts such as /r/, /w/ & /y/ were left out, due to their noticeably skewing effects on neighbouring vowels. Bandwidths for tokens with atypical values were checked at their corresponding points of measurements to determine instances of faulty reading by PRAAT or inspected on the spectrograms for wrong coding (Hoffman, 2015:196). After cleaning, tokens were Lobanov-normalised (Lobanov 1971) for mixed effects regression analysis in Rbul (Johnson 2009).

4. Analysis
Figure 1a below is a graphical overview of vocalic trajectories for the older and younger speakers in Northern and Southern cities. Visually, the hub of variation between both generations is most apparent for the high vowels, especially in KIT, USE and FOOT. Across the mid-high region, differentiation is also signalled between the groups in NEAR, GOAT and CURE. Apart from the difference shown for commA in the low central region,

vocalic realisation appears considerably stable in apparent time for this data.

However, to plausibly explore the effect of urbanity on phonological behaviours in both regions and age groups, I examined only the classes of vowels historically attested as socially indexical for NigE (Eka & Udofot 1996; Ugorji 2010). Consequently, the gradience of contrast between the tense/lax pairs of FLEECE and KIT, USE and GOOSE, FOOT and GOOSE as well as TRAP and lettER was subjected to visual and statistical assessment. Since the pairs belong to the categories of non-contrasted phonemes in the wider NigE inventory, the aim therefore was to investigate the extent of deviation from the 'merger' phenomenon among younger and older speakers living in the Nigerian municipals.

Table 1a below presents the mixed effects regression results for older speakers in Northern cities. The high front vowels: KIT and FLEECE were examined in the height dimension, i.e. F1 as dependent variable, as well as for TRAP and lettER. The pair of frontish high back (USE) and
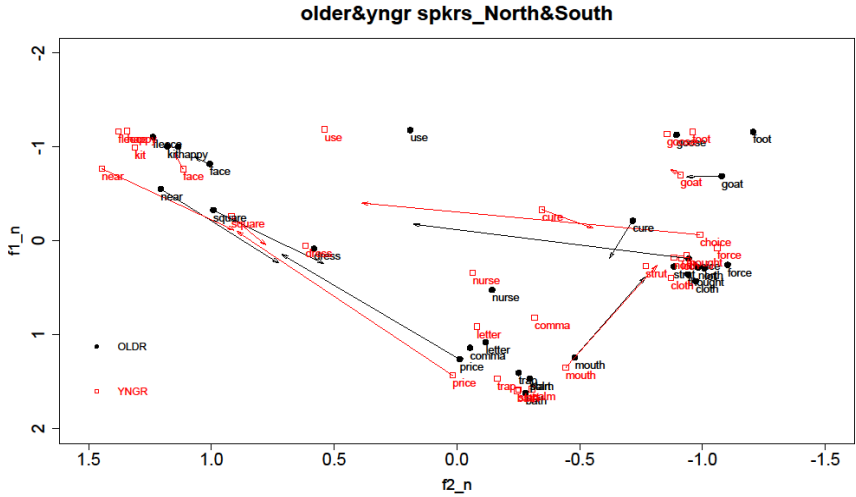
older&yngr spkrs_North&South

Figure. 1a: Rplot for speakers in both regions, showing realisation
patterns across the Lexical Sets.
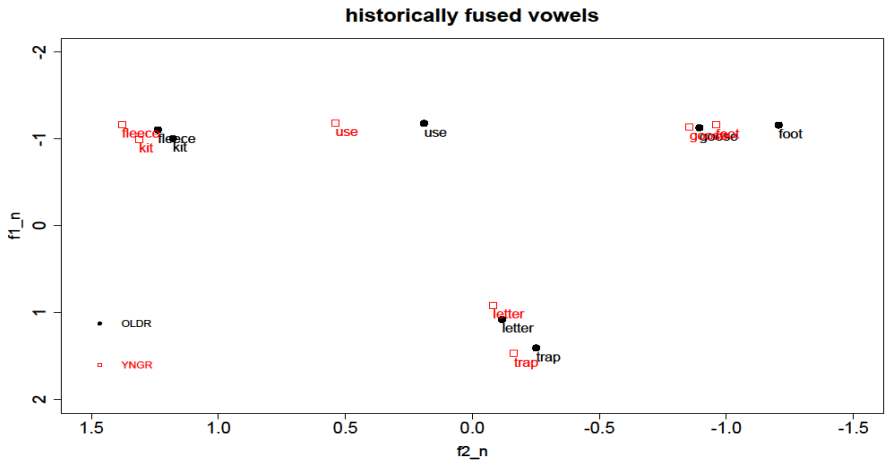
historically fused vowels

Figure 1b. Realisation patterns for older and younger generations in both
regions (n = 6957

Older_North

Predictor	coefficient	tokens	Mean	effect
GOOSE & FOOT				R^2=0.14 p=0.00118
Goose	0.375	122	-0.710	
Foot	-0.375	128	-1.144	
Deviance = - 280	*df = 4*	*Mean = -0.93*	*AIC = 537*	*Intercept = -0.80*
USE & GOOSE				R^2= 0.12 p=0.000562
Use	0.376	115	0.336	
Goose	-0.376	122	-0.710	
Deviance = - 319	*df = 4*	*Mean = -0.20*	*AIC = 652*	*Intercept = -0.10*
FLEECE & KIT				
Kit	0.039	425	-1.110	R^2= 0.10 p=0.0355
Fleece	-0.039	384	-1.195	
Deviance = - 263	*df = 4*	*Mean = -1.14*	*AIC = 547*	*Intercept = -1.15*
TRAP & lettER				R^2= 0.36 p=0.00107
Trap	0.12	372	1.440	
Letter	-0.12	165	1.132	
Deviance = -440	*df = 4*	*Mean = -1.34*	*AIC = 899*	*Intercept = -1.24*

Table 2a: Rbrul results for older speakers in the Northern metropolis. The effect of phone label in each pair was significant, thus indicating phonemic contrast between the pairs.

GOOSE were however assessed in F2 (Gorman & Johnson 2013:232; Hofmann 2015:273). Given the goal of analysis – which was to assess the phonemic status among the pairs, only the principal effect of phone labels was considered. The effect of individual word item from which tokens were drawn was held as random, so as to forestall the odds of spurious outcomes

triggered by mainly co-textual influences (Nycz & Hall-Lew 2014:5).

Based on the statistical assessment in Table 4a & b, the trend of differentiation between the vowel classes was consistent for older speakers across North and South. Barring the fusion of high back GOOSE with FOOT: North (R^2=0.022 p= 0.123), South (R^2=0.032 p= 0.415), a similar tendency generally held for younger speakers in both regions. The basis of these measurements was however weakened by low R^2 fixed values, which effectively reflect the weak effects of fixed predictors assessed in the model. The values of phone label between the cluster of USE and GOOSE: North (R^2=0.27 p= 6.56e-10) and South (R^2=0.20 p= 0.000476); FLEECE and KIT: North (R^2=0.10 p= 0.000729) and South (R^2=0.08 p= 0.0138); and TRAP and lettER: North (R^2=0.36 p= 1.32e-05) were highly significant. These outcomes thus corroborate the inter-group realisation patterns signalled in Figure 4b. In terms of GOOSE and FOOT, while younger speakers apparently have both classes as allophones, a differentiation was supported for older speakers living in both regions.

Older_South

predictor	coefficient	tokens	Mean	effect
GOOSE &				R^2=0.041
FOOT				p=0.023
Goose	0.124	121	-0.081	
Foot	-0.124	132	-1.265	
Deviance = -219	*df = 4*	*Mean = -1.17*	*AIC = 455*	*Intercept = -1.13*
USE & GOOSE				R^2= 0.27
				p=1.05e-07
Use	0.533	102	0.025	
Goose	-0.533	121	-1.080	
Deviance = -216	*df = 4*	*Mean = -0.57*	*AIC = 566*	*Intercept = -0.46*
FLEECE & KIT				R^2= 0.19
				p=0.0482
Kit	0.044	476	-0.906	
Fleece	-0.044	368	-1.013	
Deviance = -490	*df = 4*	*Mean = -0.95*	*AIC = 999*	*Intercept = -1*
TRAP & lettER				R^2= 0.24
				p=0.000292
Trap	0.155	379	1.374	
Letter	-0.155	155	1.023	
Deviance = -514	*df = 4*	*Mean = -1.27*	*AIC = 1046*	*Intercept = -1.18*

Table 2b: Results for older speakers in the Southern cities showing differentiation between the vowel pairs

5. Conclusion

The goal of this study has been to weigh the overriding effects of urbanity over factors such as ethnicity, gender, age, and level of education in accent markedness among NigE speakers. In spite of questions that may arise as to how plausibly this can be established, the foregoing supports an out-growth of a homogenous system among urban folks – one that may be heard as more urbane or suave. More interesting is the levelling power of geo-social identity which, in effect, appears to have bellied

other socially-conditioned effects in speakers' vocalic configuration.

Though tokens were extracted from all vowel classes for an overall impression of inter-group behaviours (Figure 1a), the focus was more on the classes of high front FLEECE and KIT and *yod*-preceded GOOSE coded as USE (Mesthrie 2010), as well as high back GOOSE and FOOT, and the low central TRAP & lettER. These sets are typically defining for NigE, and often described as steadily resistant to internal variations (Jowitt 2006; Gut 2004). These studies variedly confirm the non-differentiation of these vowels for NigE speakers; but variation – as many variationist studies have shown – is an index of various factors, some of which even the variationist model often fails to account for (Hofmann 2015:1-26). Therefore, while such variables previously considered in the literature indeed have predictive potential to some extent, the speakers' geo-social environment could have even much stronger effects.

As shown in Tables 2a and 2b, both younger and older speakers behave differently in their achievement of the vowel pairs, i.e., they observe phonemic contrast between the pair of KIT/FLEECE, USE/GOOSE and TRAP/lettER (cf. Eka & Udofot 1996). The only exemption to this trend involves the non-differentiation of GOOSE from FOOT by younger speakers. However, as suggested in the analysis, this pattern was strongly consistent for both Northern and Southern speakers of this age group, thus reinforcing the notion of urban-induced convergence. Between younger and older speakers, however, a difference is maintained in their advancement of USE (Figures 1a & b), despite general indication of *yod-realisation* before following vowels in items like *use, due, few, human, etc*. (cf. Oladipupo 2015:27). Acoustically, the absence of *yod* in following [u] or [u:] often reflects in fusion with either GOOSE or FOOT in NigE. To the contrary, results showed clear differentiation in F2 for both groups: Older_North ($R^2= 0.12$ p=0.000562), Older_South ($R^2= 0.27$ p=1.05e-07) and Younger_North ($R^2=0.27$ p= 6.56e-10), Younger_South ($R^2=0.20$ p=0.000476), indicating hierarchies of significant

contrast between typical back vowels and the *J-words* (cf. Mesthrie, 2010:14-5).

Exempting the random effects of individual idiosyncrasies, and other sundry factors beyond the scope of this analysis, results from the current data signal a trail of homogeneous shift in traditional trajectories of NigE systems. The similarities among each age group of speakers – notwithstanding diverse sociolinguistic profiles or linguistic backgrounds – confirm the unifying force of the cities' metrolingual climate. Also, the sameness of patterns in the accent of both groups suggests a badge of identity, and lays the ground for a structurally similar NigE phonology.

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