

Gradience, allophony, and the Southern shift trigger

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The monophthongization of /ay/ in the Southern U.S. is more advanced in pre-voiced and word-final environments (PRIZE), and disfavored but not absent in pre-voiceless environments (PRICE). Does the process by which PRICE is differentiated from PRIZE take place via phonologically discrete diphthongal and monophthongal allophones, or is it a phonetically gradient process? If the characterization in *ANAE* (Labov et al. 2006) of monophthongization as the triggering event of the Southern Vowel Shift is correct, Dinkin (2011)'s analysis of allophony in a chain shift suggests that the relationship of PRICE to PRIZE must be gradient: if PRICE remained discretely diphthongal while PRIZE monophthongized, it would block FACE from lowering.

We examine the degree of diphthongization of /ay/ in two Southern corpora: the 13 speakers phonetically analyzed by *ANAE* in the Inland South, the region where the Southern Shift probably originated, and the 12 oldest speakers from a conversational corpus in Raleigh, N.C. In the Inland South, the oldest speakers show gradient distributions from more diphthongal to more monophthongal PRICE, and PRICE is not significantly more diphthongal at longer durations. Younger speakers, when not 100% monophthongal, have just a few discretely separated diphthongal tokens.

Raleigh is outside the Inland South; monophthongization here may be the result of diffusion rather than direct transmission (cf. Labov 2007). Among older speakers, PRIZE and PRICE appear to have distinct phonological targets, since only PRICE is more diphthongal at longer durations. Nevertheless, PRICE occupies a wide, gradient distribution from more to less monophthongal.

We conclude that PRICE-monophthongization originated as a gradient process; after it went to completion in the Inland South (but not in Raleigh, which developed its own system post-diffusion), speakers began variably correcting /ay/ to a diphthong. This supports the interpretation of the Southern Shift as a proper chain shift triggered by monophthongization of PRICE.