

Pitch Accent Use in Appalachian English

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Researchers have been studying variation in the pronunciation of consonants and vowels for decades, but until recently they have given little attention to variation in prosody. When Beckman and Ayers (1994, 1997) developed the MAE ToBI (Mainstream American English Tones and Break Indices) system for analyzing intonation and phrasing, linguists gained a powerful tool for exploring this aspect of variation in American English. However, most work on intonational variation to date has focused on British English (Vizcaino-Ortega 2002, Fletcher, Grabe and Warren 2004) or Australian and New Zealand English (Fletcher, Grabe and Warren 2004). Although research has begun to be conducted on prosody in regional varieties of American English (Arvaniti and Garding 2004), this remains an area highly in need of study. In this project, I used conversational speech to analyze prosody in Appalachian English (AE), one of the most divergent, yet least described, varieties of American English (Wolfram and Christian 1976), and compare it with MAE and SAE (Southern American English). AE is spoken in the central part of the Appalachian mountain region, including parts of West Virginia, Eastern Kentucky, Eastern Tennessee, Western North Carolina, and Western Virginia. It is closely related to Southern American English (SAE) but it also shows influences of a distinctively Scots-Irish-influenced heritage. I used one-hour interviews with AE speakers from Elliott County, Kentucky, and I used data from the Switchboard Corpus for MAE and SAE speech (Godfrey et al. 1992).

In closely examining the intonational patterns of AE and comparing them with those of MAE and SAE, I determined that AE overall uses a different proportion of pitch accents than the other two varieties (see Figure 1). Pierrehumbert and Hirschberg (1990) describe H* (H*) L-L% as the simple declarative tune in American English. My data suggest that this is indeed true for MAE and SAE speakers but not for AE speakers. Four of the AE speakers commonly use L+H* where others use H*, and several AE speakers use increased numbers of L* in that position. Therefore I suggest that the simple declarative tune in AE may be more nuanced and variable than in MAE or SAE, and needs further analysis.

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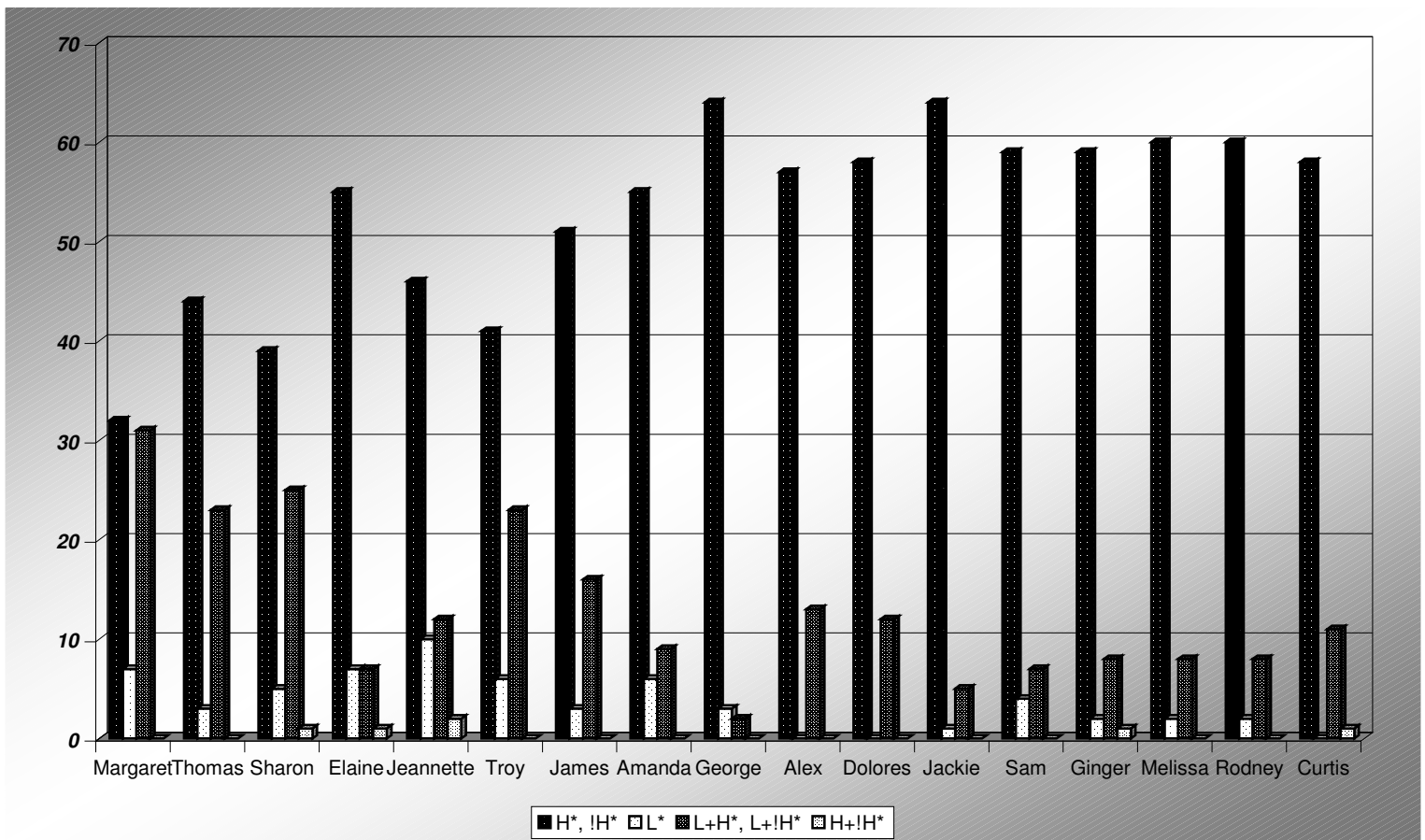


Figure 1. Pitch accent distribution per speaker