# A Longitudinal Study of Americans in Australia

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper, findings of a longitudinal study of the speech of six Americans living in Australia are examined. Prof. Michael Clyne conducted a set of interviews with these subjects in 1988[1]. The second set of interviews was conducted by myself (a female speaker of Canadian English) and a female Australian English (hereafter AusEng) speaker in 1999, wherein I conducted the first half of the interview and she conducted the second half. Two of the participants had also made letters in the form of audio-tapes that they sent to relatives in the United States, and they allowed me to listen to two of them – one from 1974 and one from 1981.

The intent of the study was to examine phonological changes made by the subjects that appeared to be adoptions of AusEng pronunciations. More specifically, the focus was on the characteristics of those people who adopted some AusEng pronunciations. Lexical items and prosodic patterns were not analyzed in detail at this stage of the analysis.

## 2. Research into Dialect Contact

Dialect contact on an individual level has been studied from several different perspectives. First, there has been research into individuals from mobile populations acquiring second dialects, e.g. (Payne 1980; Shockey 1984; Chambers 1998). Second, there has been ethnolinguistic research on dialect groups in conflict, e.g. (Banks 1988; Abrams & Hogg 1988). Third, there has been research into new dialect formation e.g. (Kerswill 1996).

The first sphere, that of "dialect acquisition", as termed by Chambers (1998), examines speakers' adoption of the features of a second dialect using Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT) (otherwise known as Communication Accommodation Theory) as its explanatory basis. Trudgill laid the foundation for this theoretical perspective in his book *Dialects in Contact* (1986). SAT is a theory first proposed by Giles (1973), which states that an individual will modify his or her speech behaviour in response to a particular listener, and this is called accommodation. Speakers may converge towards one another, where their speech behaviour becomes more similar, or they may diverge, wherein their speech behaviour will become more dissimilar.

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[1] Many thanks to Prof. Michael Clyne for finding these subjects, interviewing them and allowing me to continue this line of research.

Trudgill (1986) proposed that there might be two types of accommodation; short-term, which is transitory, and long-term, which occurs when frequent repeats of short-term accommodation cause an individual to permanently adopt the speech features of a particular dialect area.

With regards to his study of individuals acquiring a second dialect, Chambers (1998) comments,

> The responses of my six subjects might possibly be construed as 'long-term accommodation', but I suspect, … that they are not accommodating at all under the circumstances … My evidence against accommodation and for the more permanent acquisition follows simply from the fact that the Canadian youngsters were interviewed individually in their Oxfordshire homes by me, in my normal, unaccommodated middle-class Canadian English accent. The subjects had no reason to accommodate to me in any direction whatever, and there is every indication that they did not.
> (Chambers 1998: 147-148)

However, Chambers does not comment as to what has caused the subjects to make these long-term acquisitions in their speech, rather than short-term accommodations. The methodology used for the 1999 interviews in this study was intended to more stringently test Chambers (1998) finding; ie. whether or not speakers would accommodate for these kinds of regional accent variables in this type of situation. By using two interviewers who were speakers of the two dialects in question, the data could be analyzed to see if there were any adjustments made according to the dialect spoken by the addressee.

In this case, as opposed to Chambers' (1998) study, the subjects were all adults. One could argue that as adults, these subjects are not capable of making significant phonetic adjustments to their speech, based on the long-standing debate concerning a critical period of language acquisition (Lenneberg 1967). However, the research that has been done in the area of new dialect formation shows that adults are probably capable of making certain types of changes to their speech, including exceptionless phonetic shifts (Kerswill 1996). Consequently, in this case, where the majority of the differences between the dialects are exceptionless phonetic differences, the age of the speakers should not exclude them from consideration. Chambers' (1998) findings and the findings of this study also support this view.

The reason for the lack of accommodation found by Chambers (1998) may actually be found within the second sphere of ethnolinguistic research into the area of ethnic groups (related to a specific language or dialect) in conflict.

Research into ethnolinguistic identity show that members of subordinate groups use aspects of language – be it distinct languages, dialects or slang – to mark group membership e.g. (Giles 1977; Gudykunst 1988) and this contributes to maintenance of an ethnic or social identity. SAT (the framework for studies of mobile populations) is related to this but is more concerned with dyadic interactions and negotiation of power (Gregory & Webster 1996) than it is with identity issues.

It appears that where ethnic groups or dialect groups are not in conflict, ethnicity has not been taken into account when describing linguistic behaviour, thus resulting in this division in the field of dialect contact. Nonetheless, most definitions of

ethnicity are expansive enough to include the mobile populations studied in the first sphere of research. One example of such a definition is, "those individuals who say they belong to ethnic group A rather than B and are willing to be treated and allow their behaviour to be interpreted and judged as A's and not B's" (Giles 1979). Clearly this definition is broad enough to include Canadians living in England, as in Chamber's (1998) study, or New Yorkers living in Philadelphia, as in Payne's (1980) work, but there is no mention of ethnic identity in these works, rather it is invoked when there is conflict between groups, such as when studying Scots in the United Kingdom, as in Abrams & Hogg (1988). Linguists may have responding to the fact that the term 'ethnic identity' itself sounds inappropriate to apply to cases like Chambers' and Payne's groups, although its definition is not. The term is usually linked with an oppressed or disadvantaged subordinate minority. Consequently, it does not tend to come to mind when one thinks of subjects moving from one first world country to another where they are not significantly disadvantaged, or when members of the middle class move from one area of a country to another. Because of these associations, perhaps it would be more appropriate to say 'social identity' rather than 'ethnic identity'.

Despite the emphasis on SAT when examining dialect contact for mobile populations, it turned out that social identity, specifically a perception of being American, was a key factor in the subject's adoption of AusEng speech features.


## 3. Methodological Considerations
The variety of American English spoken by the subjects could be called "West Coast American" and is spoken in California, Oregon, Washington, Montana, Idaho, Nevada, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, parts of Nebraska and New Mexico, as shown in Labov's Phonological Atlas of North America (1996). In this study, it will simply be called American English (hereafter AmEng). These subjects were all middle-class and working in professional occupations, and so they had probably spoken a middle-class variety of AmEng in North America and were currently exposed to middle-class varieties of AusEng. So, the variety of AusEng with which they were predominantly in contact was probably General Australian (Mitchell and Delbridge 1965; Collins and Blair 1989) (the variety spoken by most middle-class Australians) as spoken in the city of Melbourne and its surrounding suburbs.

Three phonological variables were chosen for examination, in order to limit the scope of the study to a manageable size. The variables were chosen on the basis of there being differing realizations in the two speech communities (American or Australian), and having a sufficient number of tokens in the database. The variables chosen were post-vocalic /r/, which occurs in AmEng, but not in AusEng, the phoneme /ɪ/, which is higher in AusEng than in AmEng and the phoneme /o/, which is normally pronounced as [oʊ] or [o] in AmEng and as [ɐʊ] or [ɑʊ] in AusEng.

**Table 1**: Social characteristics of the subjects (names are fictitious)

|  | Lucy | Betty | Peg | Tim | Jim | Margaret |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Home state | Nebraska | Nebraska | California | California | California | Oregon |
| Age of arrival | 7 | 29 | 27 | 32 | 28 | 25 |
| Length of stay (as of 1999) | 25 years | 25 years | 25 years | 25 years | 20+ years | 20+ years |
| Educational level | University | University | University | University | University | College |
| Occupation | -------- | Librarian | Professor | Geologist | Retired | Librarian |
| Social contact with Americans | Mother only | Daughter only | Husband, work contacts | Wife only | None | None |
| Social identity | "mostly" Australian | American | No strong social identity | No strong social identity | American | Australian |
| Nationality of spouse | Australian | Australian | American | American | N/A | Australian |
| Intends to return to the United States | No | For a period of one or two years | No | No | No | No |

For all of these variables, there is a range of realizations in each dialect. Because the focus here was on the reasons for pronunciation change, specific realizations were not examined in detail. Instead realizations were treated as belonging to either the AmEng category or the AusEng category. For example, for /o/, realizations that began with an unrounded, mid to low vowel were characterized as AusEng realizations, and realizations beginning with a rounded vowel in this area were characterized as AmEng. Incidences of where an /r/ could be construed as a linking /r/ were omitted because of the ambivalent phonetic situation. Likewise, /ɪ/ tends to be realized as [ə] in unstressed positions, and so these incidences of [ə] were not counted as either American or Australian.

The Canadian English speaking researcher began the interviews and spoke with the subjects for about twenty minutes, involving about ten minutes of casual conversation about their day-to-day lives and ten minutes of describing pictures in a book. At this point the AusEng speaking researcher entered the room and the Canadian English speaker left the room. The AusEng speaking researcher then spoke with the informants for about twenty minutes, again describing pictures in a book for about ten minutes and conversing for about ten minutes. At the end of the interview, they were asked about their awareness of their language use. For all subjects there were at least 30 minutes of recorded conversation in 1999, usually with more than 100 tokens of each variable (the exception is Margaret, who was a fairly laconic subject), but there was less data recorded in 1974, 1981 and 1988 and

somewhat fewer tokens from those interviews.  Consequently data is compared proportionately.
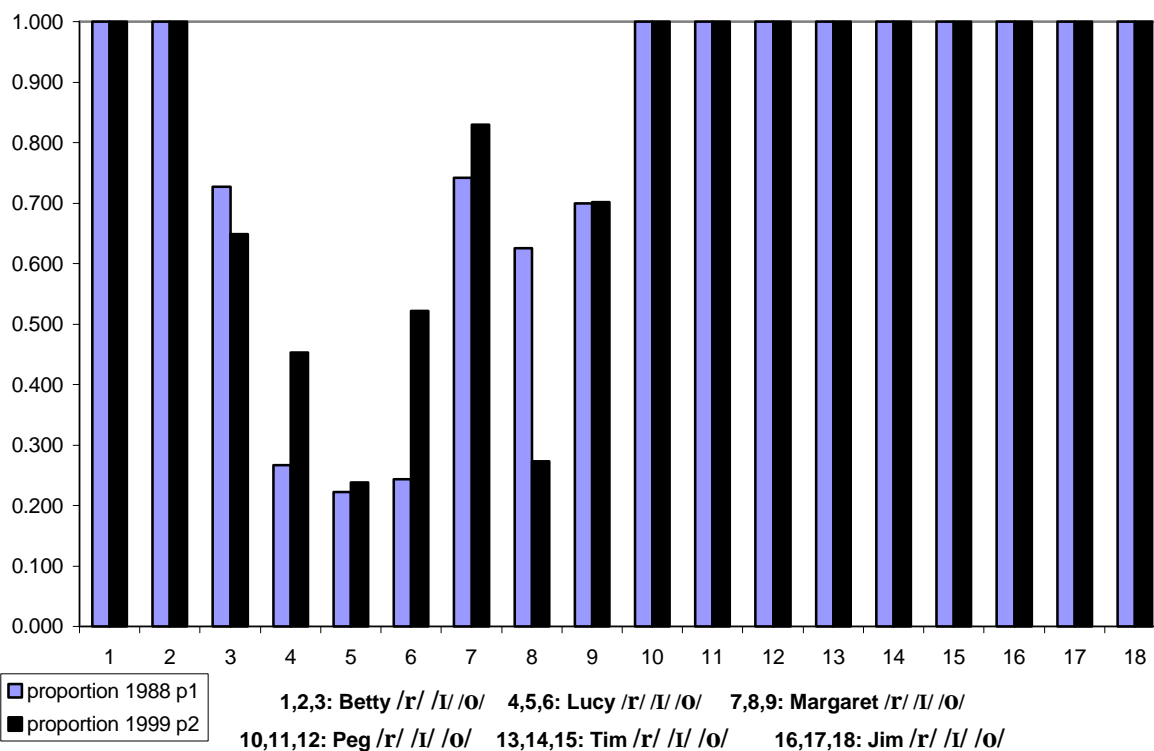
## 4. Findings of the Study
First of all, it should be noted that all the subjects in the study made lexical adjustments towards AusEng, using words such as *petrol* rather than *gas*, and *lift* rather than *elevator*.  They were all conscious of these changes and cited mutual-intelligibility as the primary motivation. For phonological and phonetic variables, however, there is an entirely different picture.

For three of the speakers, there is no change in their adoption of AusEng speech features – that is to say, they had not adopted any of the AusEng variants in question in 1988 or 1999.  For another speaker, Betty, there is some limited change in one variable, the /o/, but not for the others.  There are two speakers who did change their pronunciation patterns significantly; Margaret and Lucy (see diagram 1).

The social factor (of the ones that were taken into consideration) which appears to correlate with the acquisition of AusEng speech sounds is the feeling of being "mostly Australian".  Margaret's and Lucy's speech has changed the most of the subjects and they also report the strongest feelings of identification with Australia. Betty's speech also shows some changes, but not to the extent of Margaret's or Lucy's.  Another factor, that of social contact with Australians, may be responsible for the changes in Betty's speech, since all her primary social contacts are speakers of AusEng. (Jim also has mainly AusEng speaking social contacts, but he has fewer

**Diagram 1: Proportionate use of American accent variants for all subjects**



proportion 1988 p1
proportion 1999 p2

1,2,3: Betty /r/ /ɪ/ /o/    4,5,6: Lucy /r/ /ɪ/ /o/    7,8,9: Margaret /r/ /ɪ/ /o/
10,11,12: Peg /r/ /ɪ/ /o/    13,14,15: Tim /r/ /ɪ/ /o/    16,17,18: Jim /r/ /ɪ/ /o/

and weaker social contacts than Betty, since he is unmarried and has no children.) While the factor of social contact or social network is interesting, it has been dealt with extensively in other work (Kerswill 1994; Bortoni-Ricardo 1985), and this paper will focus on the social identity factor, which appears to be of particular interest in this situation.

For Betty's pronunciation of /o/, an interesting pattern arises. Betty's use of the AusEng variants of /o/ forms an s-curve as it increases from 1974 onto 1999, which is the same pattern that was commonly identified in Chambers (1998). In 1974, she does not use any of the AusEng variant, showing that there is no resemblance between the AusEng variant and the variant of her native dialect. In 1981, only one AusEng variant arises out of a possible 15. By 1988, though, a significant percentage of her realizations of /o/ have a lowered and unrounded nucleus (48 AusEng variants out of 66 tokens in 1988, and 59 AusEng variants out of 91 tokens in 1999). This remains somewhat level to 1999 (see Diagram 1).

For Margaret, her pronunciation of /r/ and /o/ is fairly level between 1988 and 1999 (see Diagram 1 and 2), while her pronunciation of /ɪ/ changes dramatically. She has a much higher percentage of the AusEng variant in 1999. This is interesting since by the time she acquired the AusEng pronunciation of this vowel, she had already been living in Australia for over 15 years. This is suggestive of two things: there can be a lag of several years before a phonetic feature is acquired, and an adult can acquire a phonetic feature.

**Diagram 2: Margaret's use of the variables in 1988 and 1999**
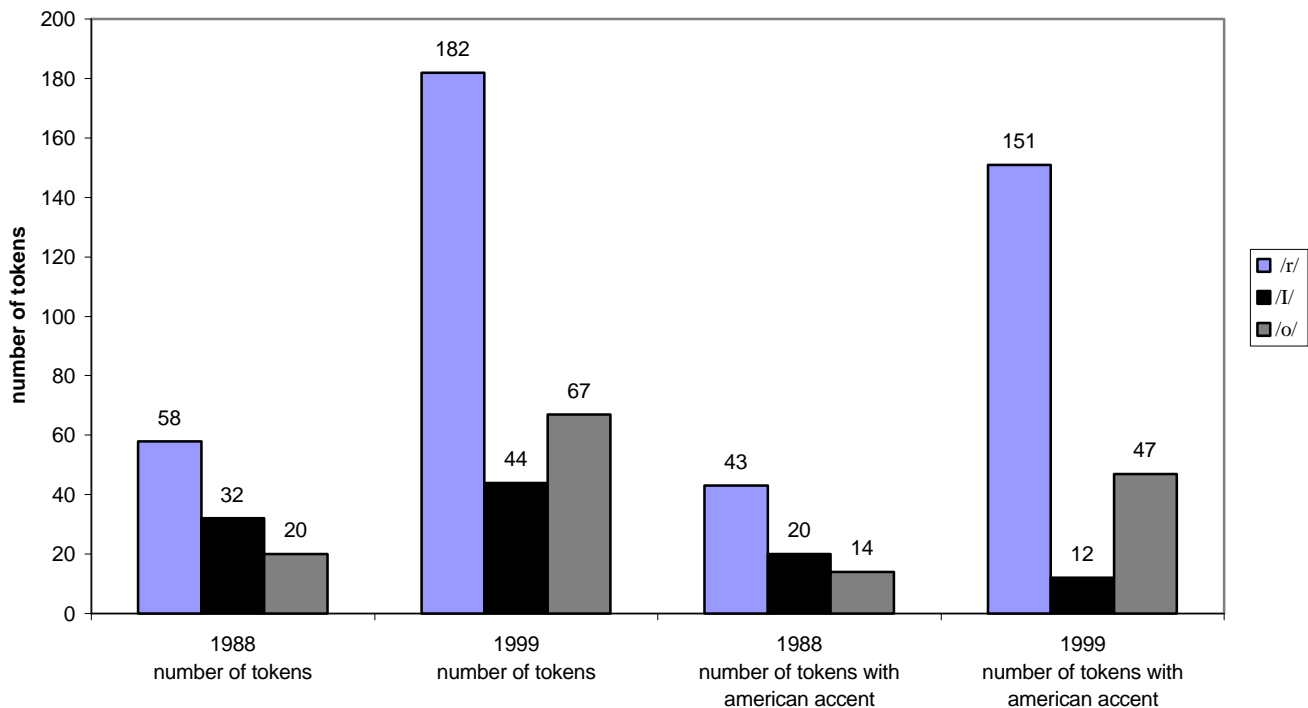
For Lucy, the picture is more confusing and erratic. In 1974, her pronunciation is fully rhotic, with no AusEng variants of /o/ or /ɪ/, but by 1981 she is using 50% American variants for /o/, 28% for /ɪ/ and 64% for /r/. By 1988, her use of American variants drops off dramatically, from 64% to 27% post-vocalic /r/, from 28% to 22% American /ɪ/, and from 50% to 24% American /oʊ/. In 1999, that trend is reversed, and her pronunciation returns to levels of American pronunciation similar to 1981, curiously. In 1999, she uses 45% post-vocalic /r/, up from 27% in 1988, 24% American /ɪ/ and 52% American /oʊ/, up from 24% in 1988 (see Table 2 and Diagram 3).

**Table 2:** Lucy's use of /r/ /ɪ/ and /o/, 1974-1999

| Phonological variable | % American (variant) 1974 | % American 1981 | % American 1988 | % American 1999 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Post-vocalic/r/ | 100 | 64 | 27 | 45 |
| /ɪ/ | 100 | 28 | 22 | 24 |
| /o/ | 100 | 50 | 24 | 52 |

**Diagram 3: Lucy's use of the variables in 1988 and 1999**
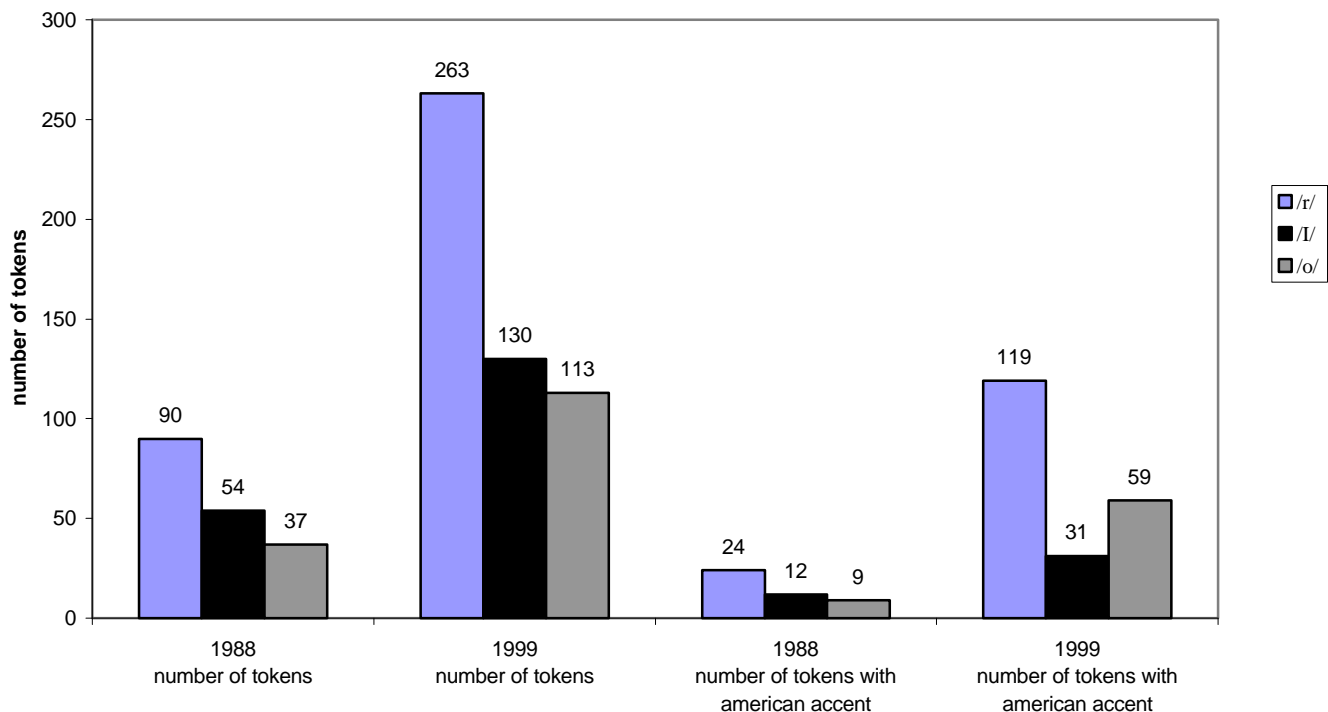


The most obvious possible cause for Lucy's increase in the use of American variants for the 1999 interview is the fact that one of the interviewers was Canadian and thus sounded more or less indistinguishable to the average person from Americans from

this dialect area. (Subjects were not told that the interviewer was Canadian unless they asked specifically.) However, further examination of the data reveals that when speaking to the Canadian researcher, Lucy used 39% post-vocalic /r/ (39 tokens out of a possible 101 were pronounced using post-vocalic /r/), and when speaking to the Australian researcher, she used 41% post-vocalic /r/ (58 tokens out of a possible 140 were pronounced with post-vocalic /r/), a very small difference. Likewise for the vowels, percentages were nearly equal. (Conversation that took place while both interviewers were present has been omitted from this calculation.) As mentioned in section 2, the interview structure was meant to test whether or not accommodation would occur; it did not. A review of the audiotape found that the Canadian interviewer consistently used post-vocalic /r/ in all possible instances and did not use any AusEng vowel pronunciations. Likewise, the AusEng speaking interviewer did not use any American variants. Lucy's social identity was not threatened to cause her to diverge – the subject of conversation was pictures in a British book. Other studies of accommodation such as Gregory & Webster (1996) and Giles (1973), among many others, have shown that accommodation normally occurs very quickly, within the first few turns in an interaction, so the length of the interaction in 1988 versus that of 1999 should not make a significant difference. Consequently, if Lucy was not accommodating towards an Australian model in 1999, then it is unlikely that she would have been doing so in 1988. Lucy may have accommodated in other ways towards Prof. Clyne in 1988, but my point is that *accommodative behaviour does not appear for AusEng versus American variants.* The fact that most of the participants in the study have not accommodated phonologically despite long-term residency in Australia also indicates a lack of accommodative behaviour for these types of variables.

An alternative explanation for Lucy's behaviour could be that in 1988, as a young adult, her social identity was insecure. In 1999, she stated that she considered moving back to the United States after college in about 1989 or 1990, so this indicates that at that time she was unsure as to whether she wanted to re-claim her American identity. By 1999, she claims membership in both groups, which is reflected in her use of American and Australian variants. When she speaks about feeling Australian, she uses post-vocalic /r/ and American realizations of /o/, but when she speaks about feeling American, she drops post-vocalic /r/ and uses an centralized onglide for /i/. Also, when she expresses some criticism of crime levels in America, she uses American variants. In this way, she (presumably subconsciously) obtains dual allegiance by expressing membership in or preference for one group literally and using dialectal variants to express membership in the other group more subtly.

It could be argued that her age of arrival was the crucial factor in her accommodation to AusEng, but in fact her age of arrival had an impact on her identity as an Australian, since she states, "Well, because I grew up here, I feel more like an Australian." Age of arrival is significant, but it is not the only crucial factor, since Margaret's and Betty's behaviour show that it is possible for adults to acquire phonetic features as well (though age of arrival probably has more of an impact on acquisition of phonology (Chambers 1998; Kerswill 1996)).

Given the linguistic behaviour of these subjects, this would seem to imply that in this situation, there is little pressure to accommodate to AusEng variants from AmEng variants, and individuals who change their pronunciation patterns may do so for reasons of social identity.  Of course, other factors may be involved such as phonological flexibility and intelligibility which admittedly spurred on the acquisition of new lexical items for these subjects.

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