

# A Life of Learning

William Labov

American Council of Learned Societies

Charles Homer Haskins Lecture

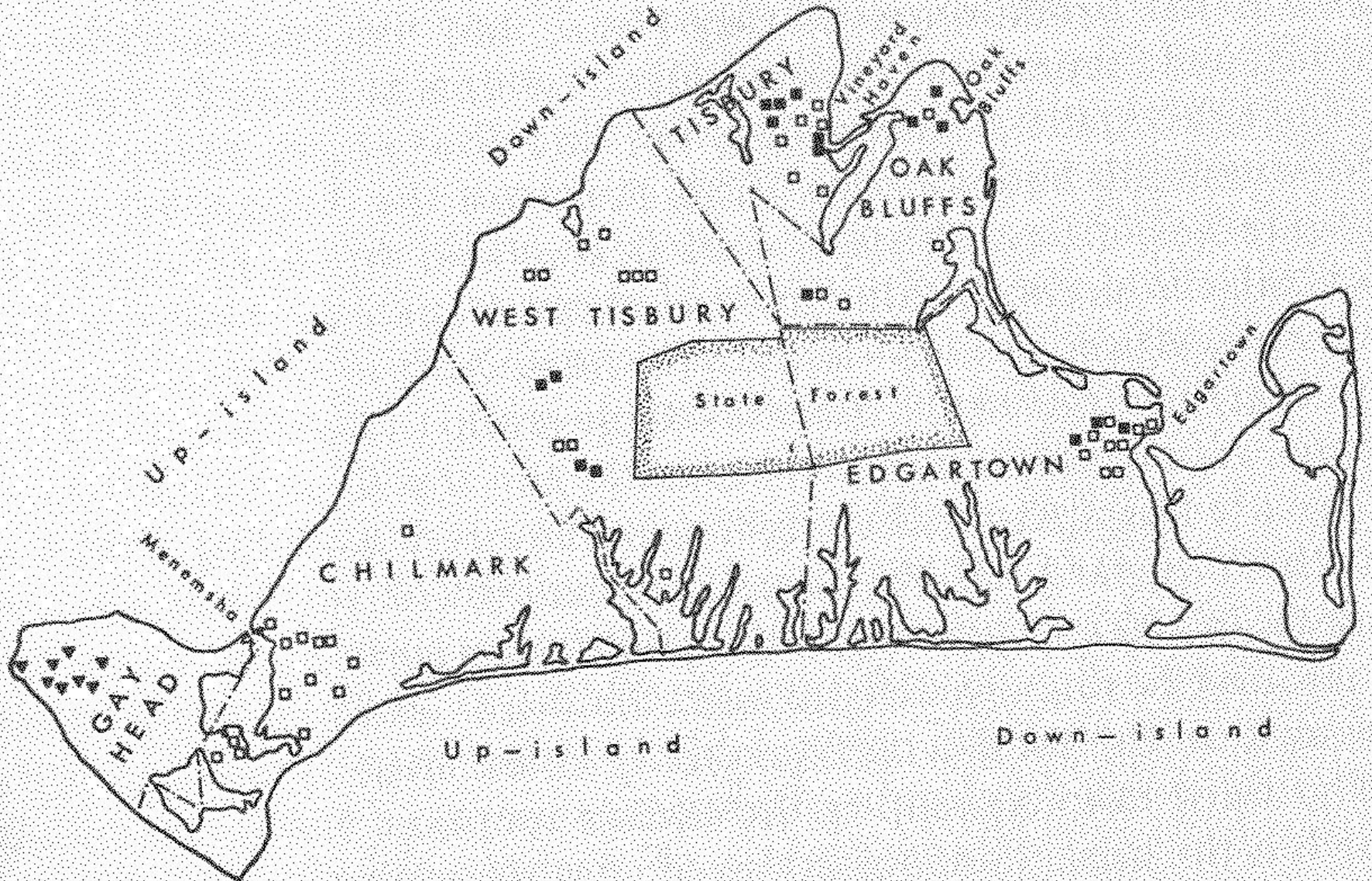
May 8, 2009

1961

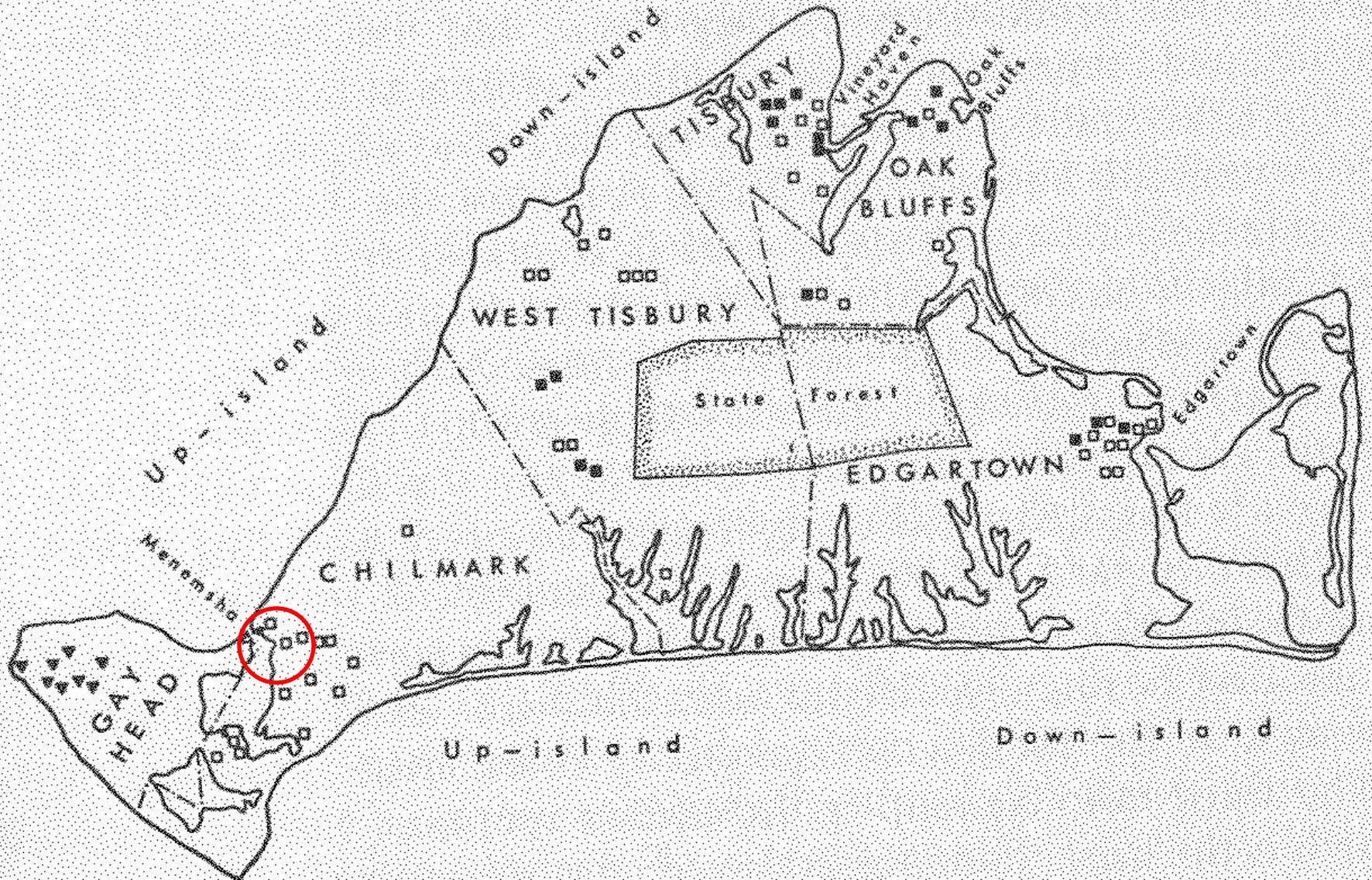
Donald Poole



# Martha's Vineyard



# Martha's Vineyard





You see you people who come down here to Martha's Vineyard don't understand the background of the old families on the island, strictly a maritime background and tradition. Our interests run that way, our thoughts still run that way, I'm speaking now of the descendants of the old families. Now what we're interested in the rest of America, this part over here across the water that belongs to you and we don't have anything to do with, has forgotten all about the maritime tradition and the fact that if it hadn't been for the interest that the early settlers of this country took in the ocean, as whalemens, fisherman, and as seamen and merchant sailors, this country couldn't have existed, the Plymouth Colony would've been a failure.



(What reason do people have to work. . . harder than—than they have to to earn a living?)

I can answer that for you, because I've already worked it out for myself and argued the point with a good many men. It's the satisfaction of feeling that you have accomplished something over and above the bare necessities of life. You take a pride. . . in doing the best that you can according to your ability.

I don't have to go fishing. I can quit right now. . . and be comfortable. But just as long as I draw the breath of life I'll be down in my boat in the morning, at six or half past six in the morning, bound somewhere, doing all that I can, as best as I can, to the best of my ability and knowledge. . . because I take a pride in doing that, something I know and I feel that I'm doing something. . . important. And I'm happier doing that than I would be sitting round to the beach.

A man with a New England conscience can't sit still.  
Does that answer your question?

## A quantitative scale of centralization of /ay/ and /aw/

		(ay)	(aw)
0	[a]	[raIt]	[naʊ]
1	[a·]	[ra·It]	[na·ʊ]
2	[e]	[rɛIt]	[nɛʊ]
3	[ə]	[rəIt]	[nəʊ]

Centralization index = 100 \* mean scale value



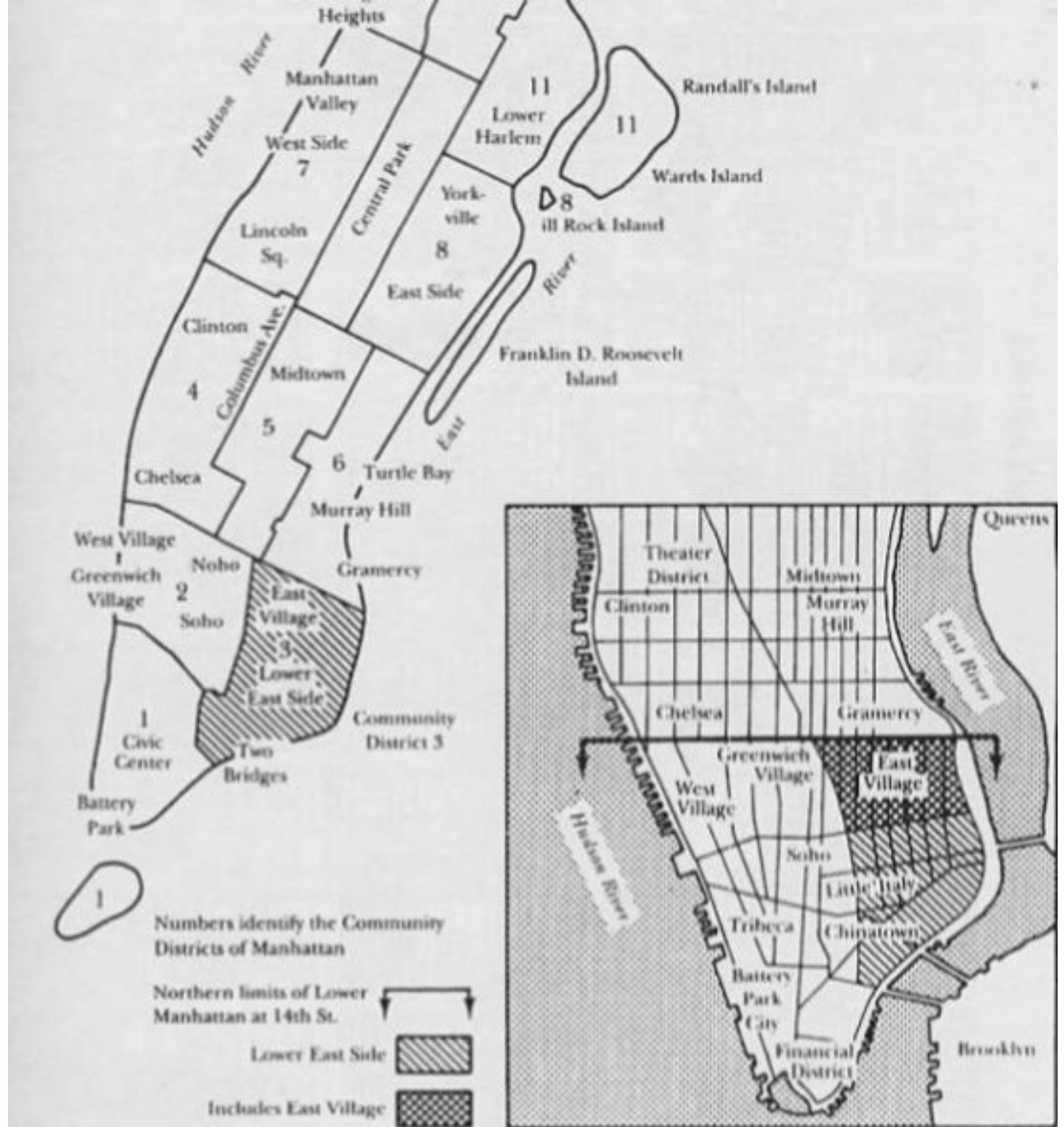
# Centralization index on Martha's Vineyard as a symbol of local identity

Persons island	Attitude towards (ay)	Centralization index (aw)		the
40	Positive	63	62	
19	Neutral	32	42	
6	Negative	09	08	

1963

Jacob Schissel

# The lower East Side of Manhattan





–uh—a few days after my father had died  
and we were sittin’ shive.

And the reason the fight started, he saw a rat out in the yard—  
this was out in Coney Island--and he started talk about it.  
And my mother had just sat down to have a cup of coffee,  
and I told him to cut it out.

‘Course kids, y’know, he don’t hafta listen to me.  
So that’s when I grabbed him by the arm and twisted it up behind  
him.

When I let go his arm, there was a knife on the table,  
he just picked it up and he let me have it.

And..uh .I started bleedin’ like a—like a pig.

And naturally the first thing to do, run to the doctor,  
and the doctor just says, “Just about this much more,” he says,  
“and you’d a been dead.”

## Jacob Schissel narrative

g He saw a rat out in the yard—

h this was out in Coney Island—


i  d he started talk about it.

j And my mother had just sat down to have a cup of coffee,

k and I told him to cut it out.

l ‘Course kids, y’know, he don’t hafta listen to me.

m So that’s when I grabbed him by the arm

 and twisted it up behind him.

n When I let go his arm,

o there was a knife on the table,

he just picked it up

p and he let me have it.

q And...I started bleed—like a pig.

Figure 1. Style shifting of (r) by Jacob Schissel, 63, New York City

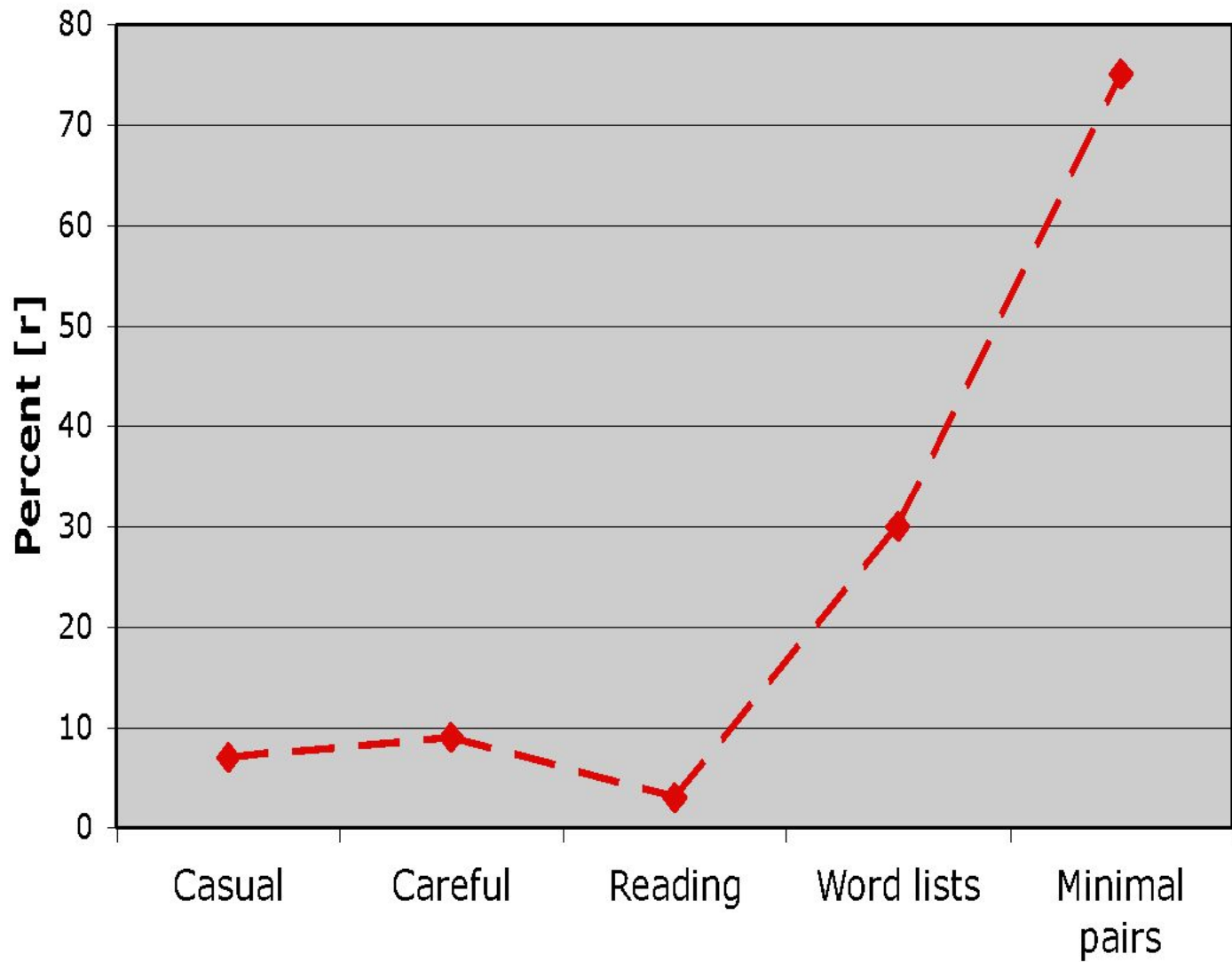


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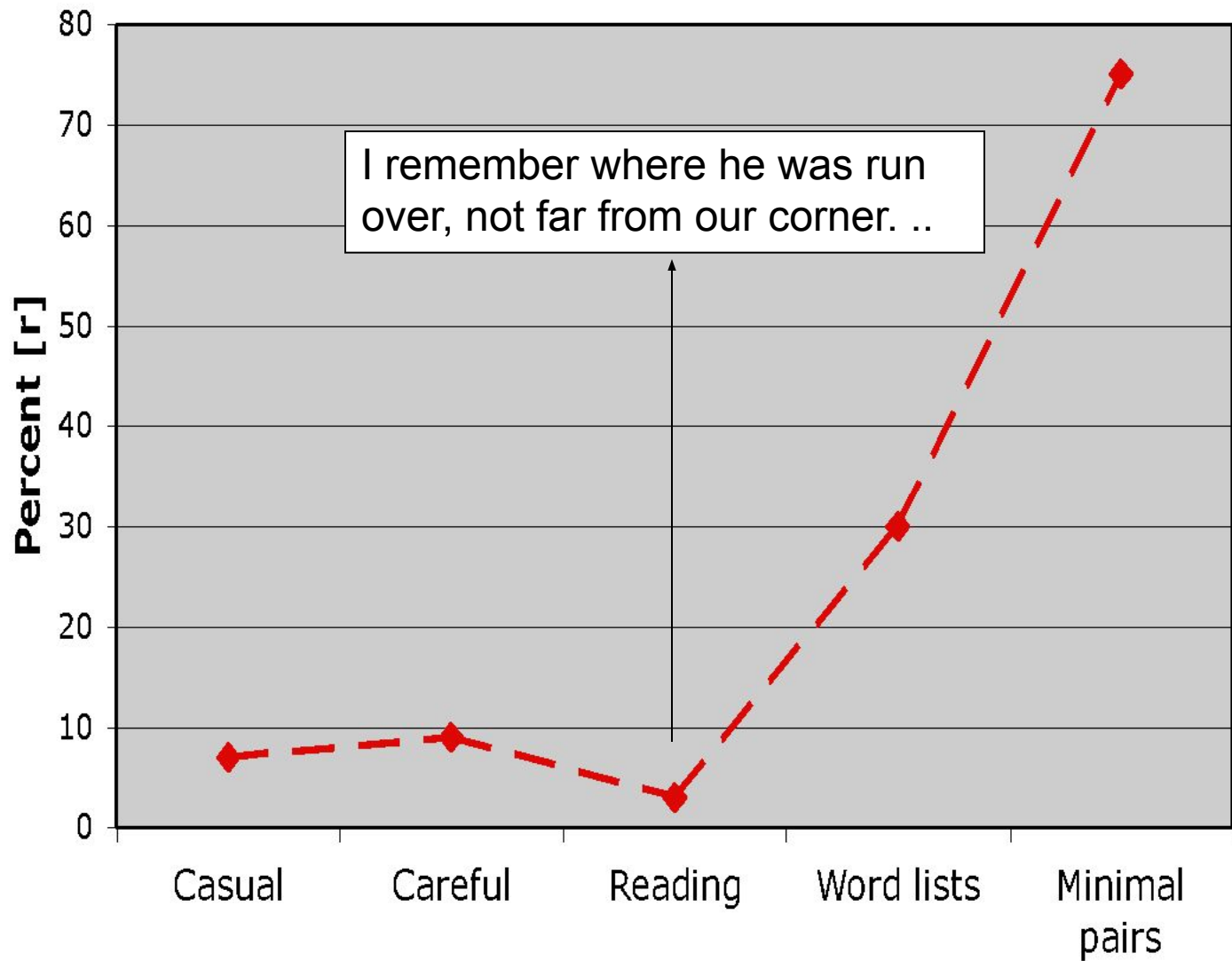


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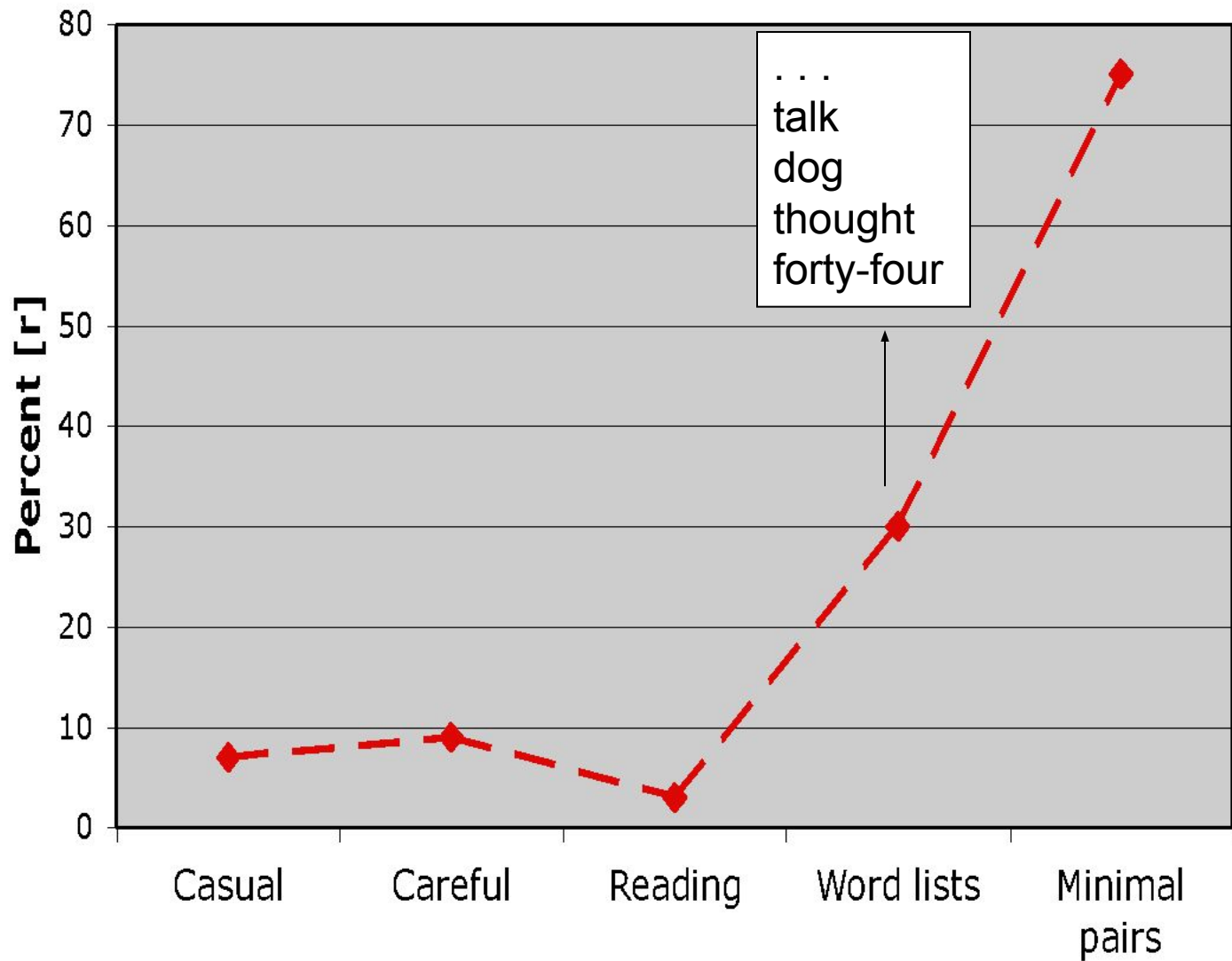




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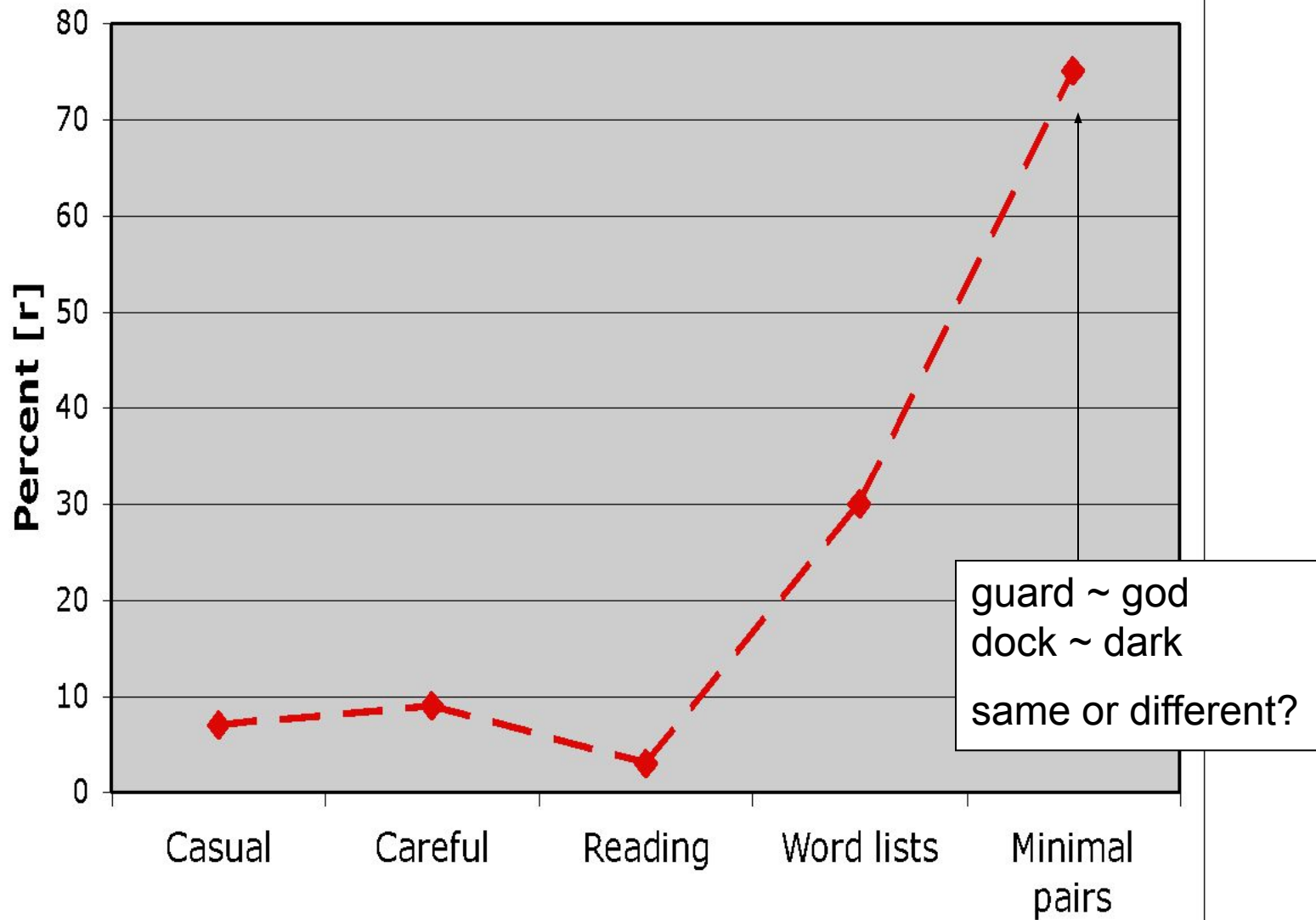


Figure 2. Stylistic and social shifting of (r) in New York City with Jacob Schissel's record

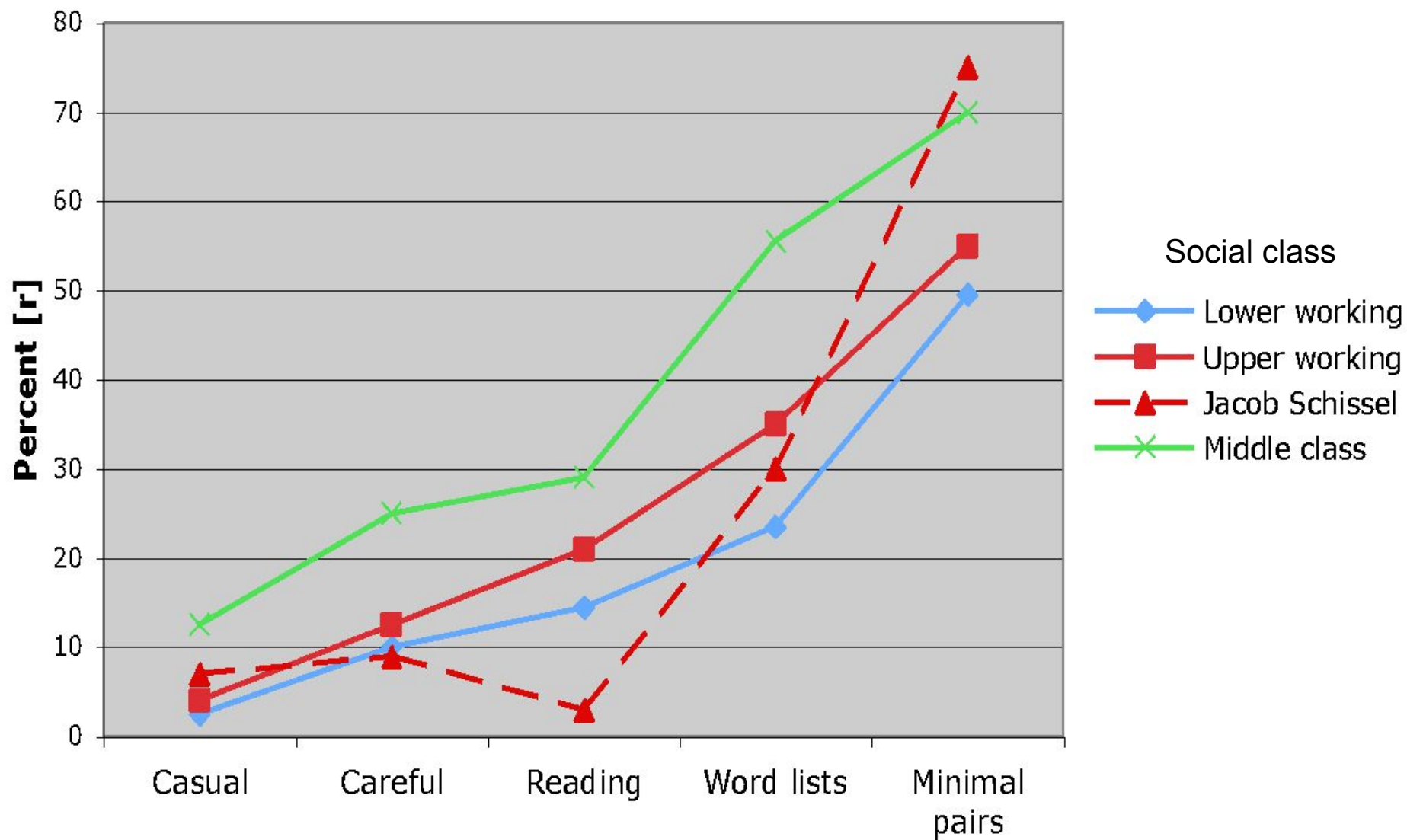


Figure 3. Stylistic and social stratification of (r) in New York City

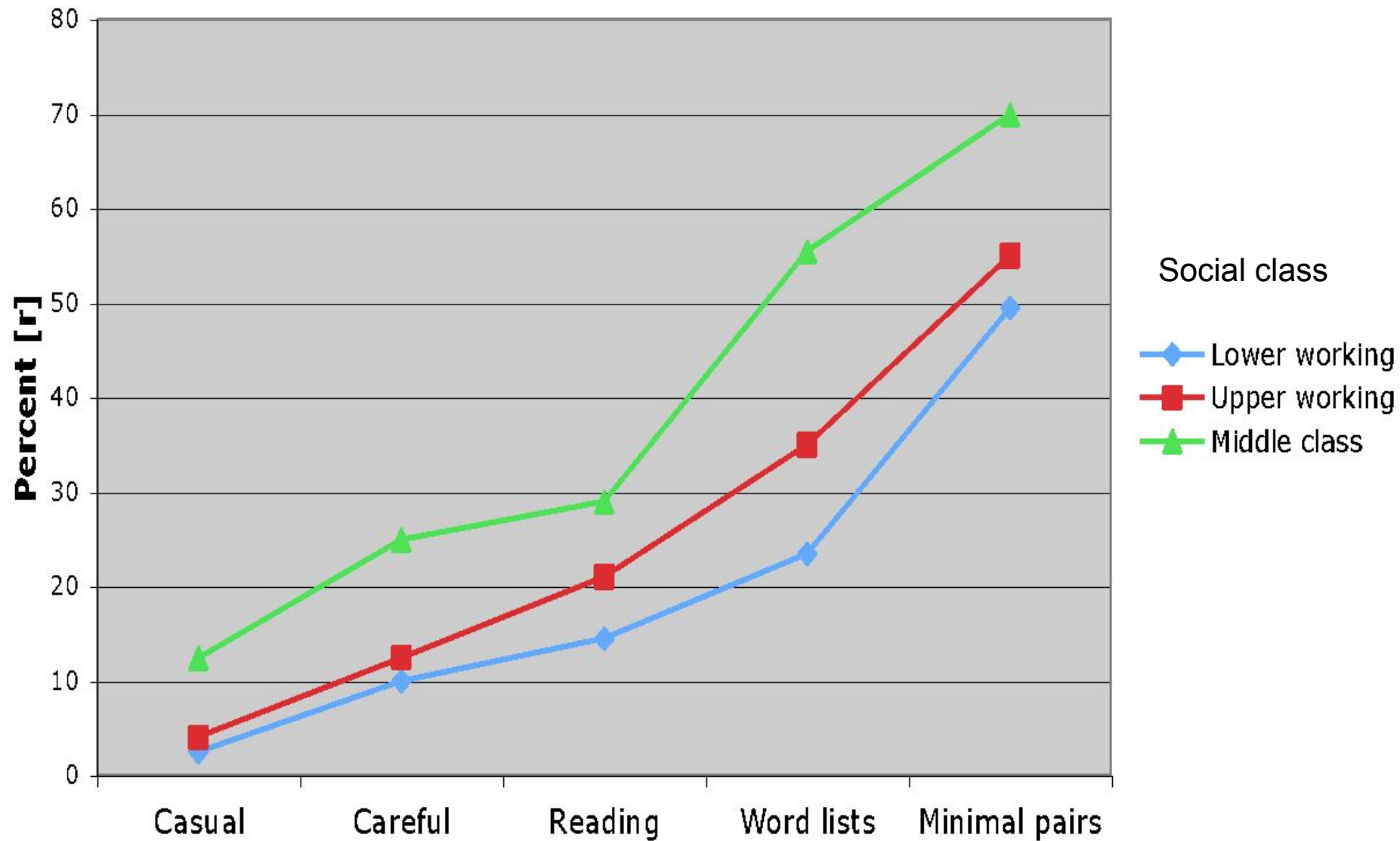


Figure 3a. Social stratification of (r) in New York City

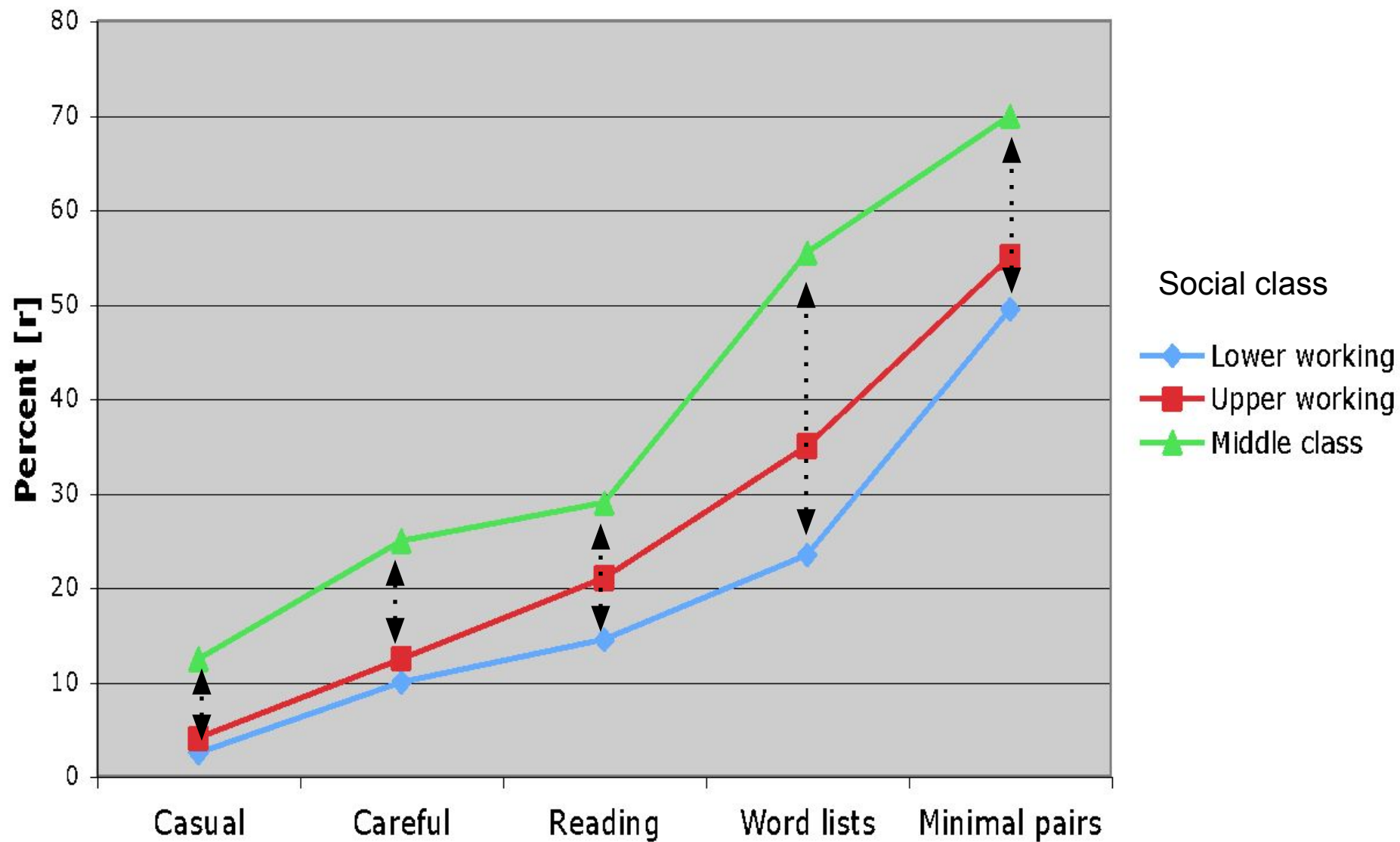
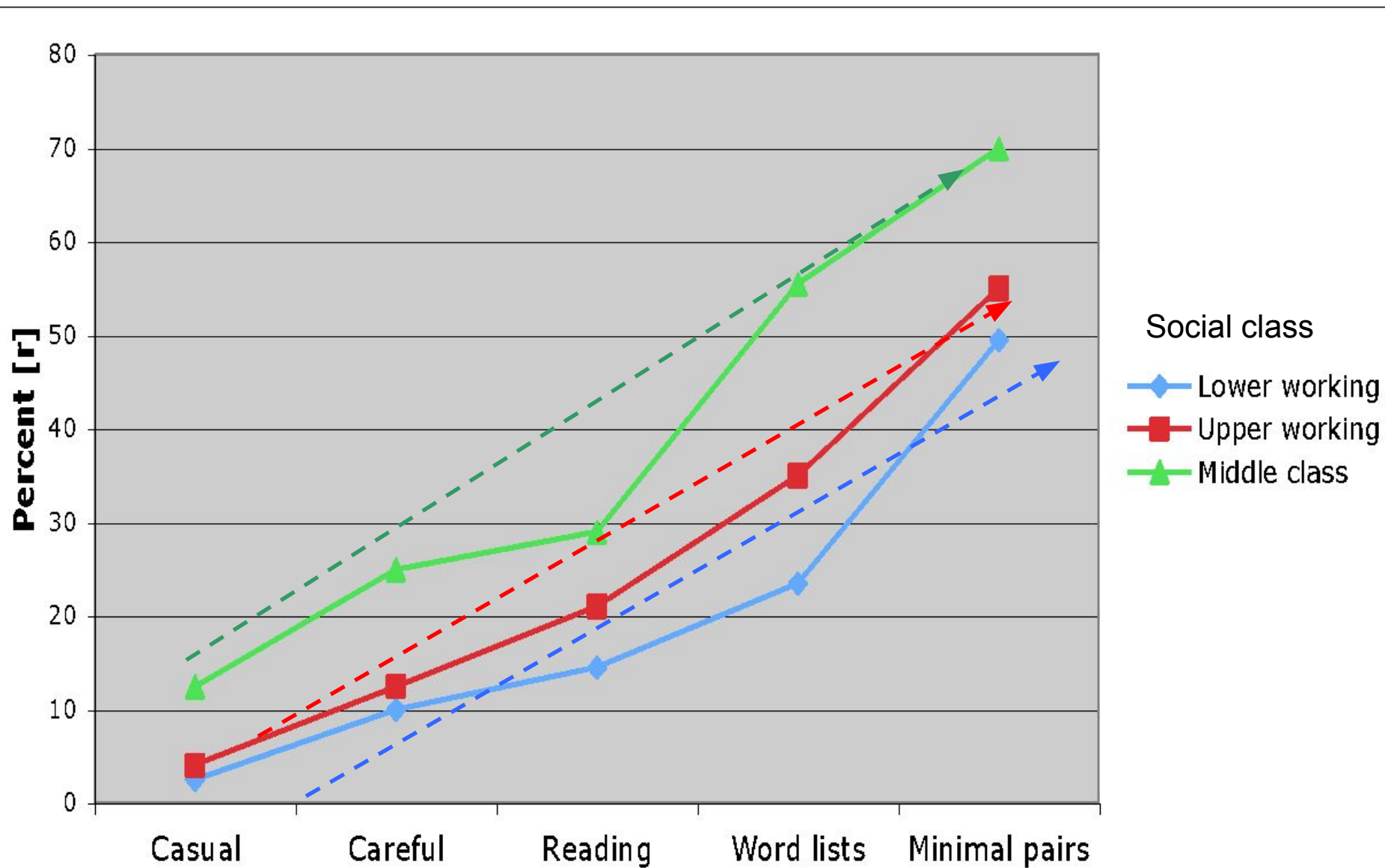


Figure 3b. Style shifting of (r) in New York City



1967

Larry Hawthorne

# South Harlem





## Larry Hawthorne interviewed by K.C. at the Club House

KC: Uh what happens to you after you die, do you know?

LH: Yeah, I know. After they put you in the ground, your body turns into bones an' shit.

KC: What happens to your spirit?

LH: your spirit--soon as you die, your spirit leaves you.

KC: Where does the spirit go?

LH: Well, it all depend.

KC: On what?

LH: You know, ah, like some people say if you're good an' shit, your spirit goin' to heaven, an if you good--if you be bad, your spirit goin' to hell, well bullshit, your spirit goin' to hell anyway, good or bad, y'know.

KC: Why?

LH: Why? why? I'll tell you why. 'Cause you see, doesn't nobody really know that it's a god, you know. 'cause I mean I have seen black gods, pink gods, white gods, all color gods, and don't nobody know i's really a god, and when they be sayin' if you good you're goin' to heaven, that's bullshit

KC: Is that so?

LH: 'Cause you ain't goin' to no heaven. 'Cause it ain't no heaven for you to go to.





KC: Well if there's no heaven, how can there be a hell?

LH: I mean, yeah. . . hm. . . well let me tell you, it ain't no hell, 'cause this is hell right here, you know?

KC: So this is hell?

LH: Yeah. This is hell right here.

Faustus: Where are you damn'd?

Mephistopheles: In hell.

Faustus: How comest it, then, that thou art out of hell?

Mehistopheles: Why this is hell, nor am I out of it.

Marlow: The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus



LH: But you don't really know if it's a god or not. Nobody really knows that. Nobody!

KC: That's true. But, just saying that there is a god. What color is he? White or black?

LH: . . . . . He be white, man.

KC: Why?

LH: Why? I'll tell you why. 'Cause it--the average whitey out here got everything, you dig it? an' the nigger ain't got shit, you know, you understand? so um, for then, for that to happen, you know it ain't no black god that's doin' that bullshit! . . .

KC: Yeah, I got to go for that, boy!

LH: Dig it, that's square business, man!

## Three forms of the verb IS in African American Vernacular English

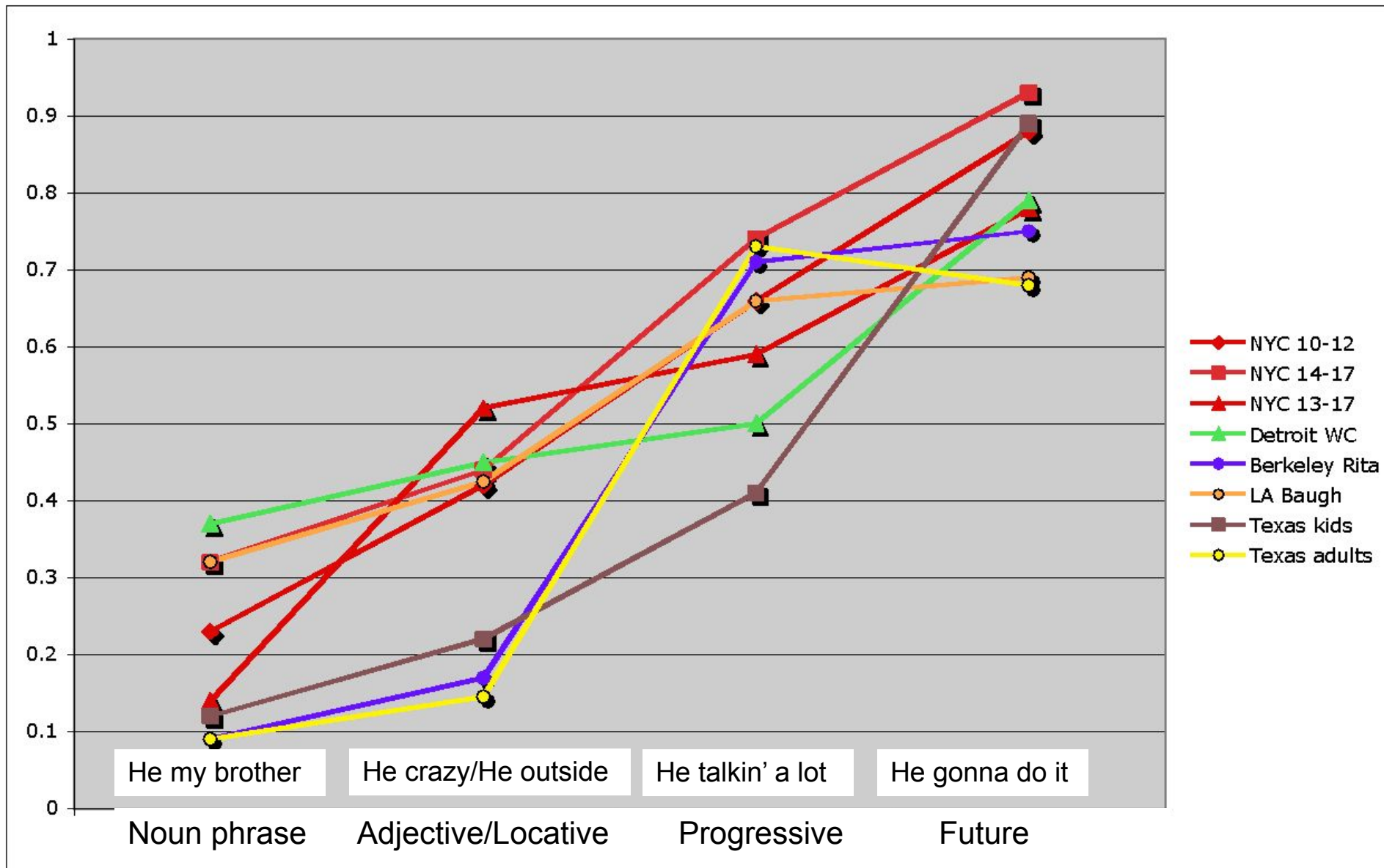
Full form: don't nobody know if it is a god

Contracted: it ain't no black god that's doin' that bullshit

Zero form: if you be bad, your spirit goin' to hell



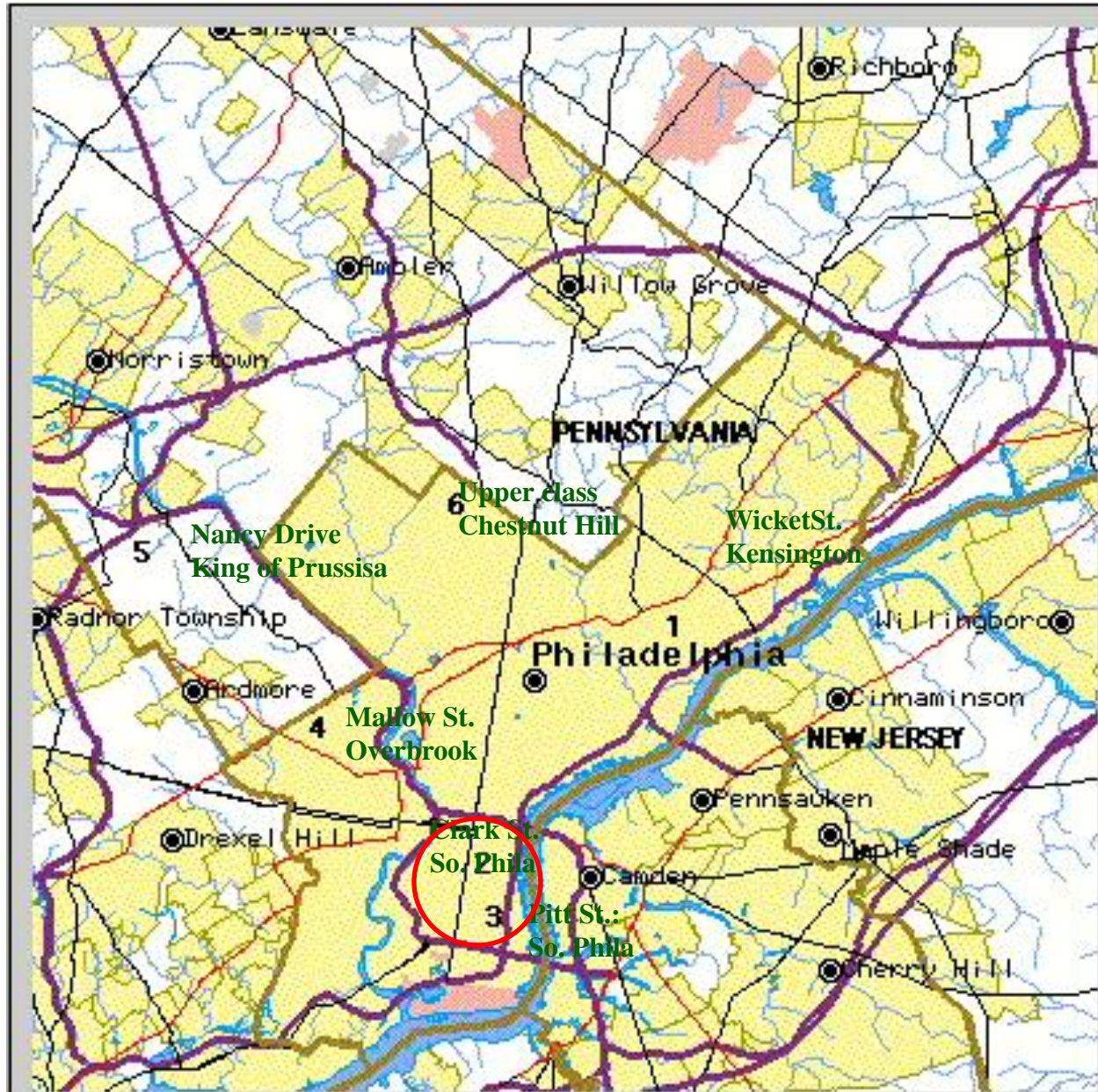
Figure 4. Percent deletion of the copula and auxiliary is in four grammatical environments for eight studies of AAVE

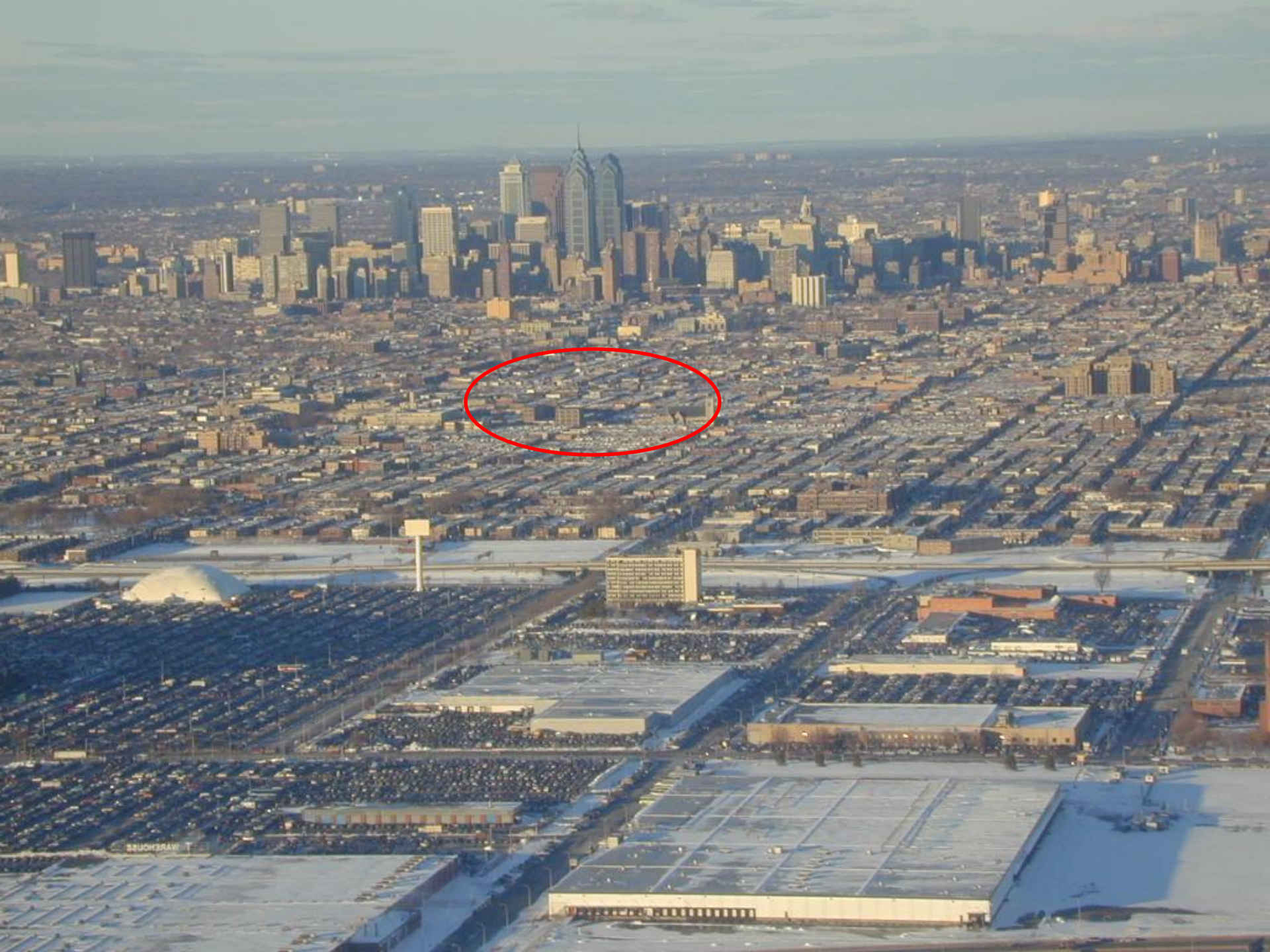


1973

Celeste Sullivan

# The Philadelphia Neighborhood Study [N=120]









My mother used to say--I used to go to the movies and she used to send a couple of boys up the street to watch who I used to be in the movies with. (Did she really?) Oh yeah.

But we were in cahoots, the boys and I. (I believe it.) Yeah. That's the only way you could get out--like we'd date. I would date. And like. . my father would say, "Where you goin'?" "Well daddy now look! Georgie's gonna take me--" Georgie down the street. And daddy thought, "Oh boy, she's safe with Georgie." (Sure!) So Georgie would go *his* way, and I would go *my* way. And then we would meet, see, at a certain time. I'd say, "Georgie please! Please, Georgie don't do that to me! You better be there!" He'd say, "Don't worry--" 'cause his father was just as bad as my father. We would meet, and we'd come home like two nice little kids.



But I used to go dance at the canteen. (The canteen?) Yeah they had a canteen that was all service men. And you couldn't get in if you didn't have a date. And you'd have to be a service man--to take you in. But once you got in you could leave this guy, you know, and dance with everybody else. And that's what we used to do, stand in the corner. And wait for the fellas , and they'd-- I'd say to one of the sailors, "Are you going in there?" And he'd say "Yeah", "Would you take me in?" "Sure!" And they would take you--and nothing *bad* would happen in there. They really ran--the Salvation Army ran a beautiful thing. There was only coffee and doughnuts, there was no drinking, and soda, and music. All night you'd *dance, dance, dance*.

Figure 5. The curvilinear pattern for social class in the fronting of (aw) in *south, down, out*, etc. in Philadelphia

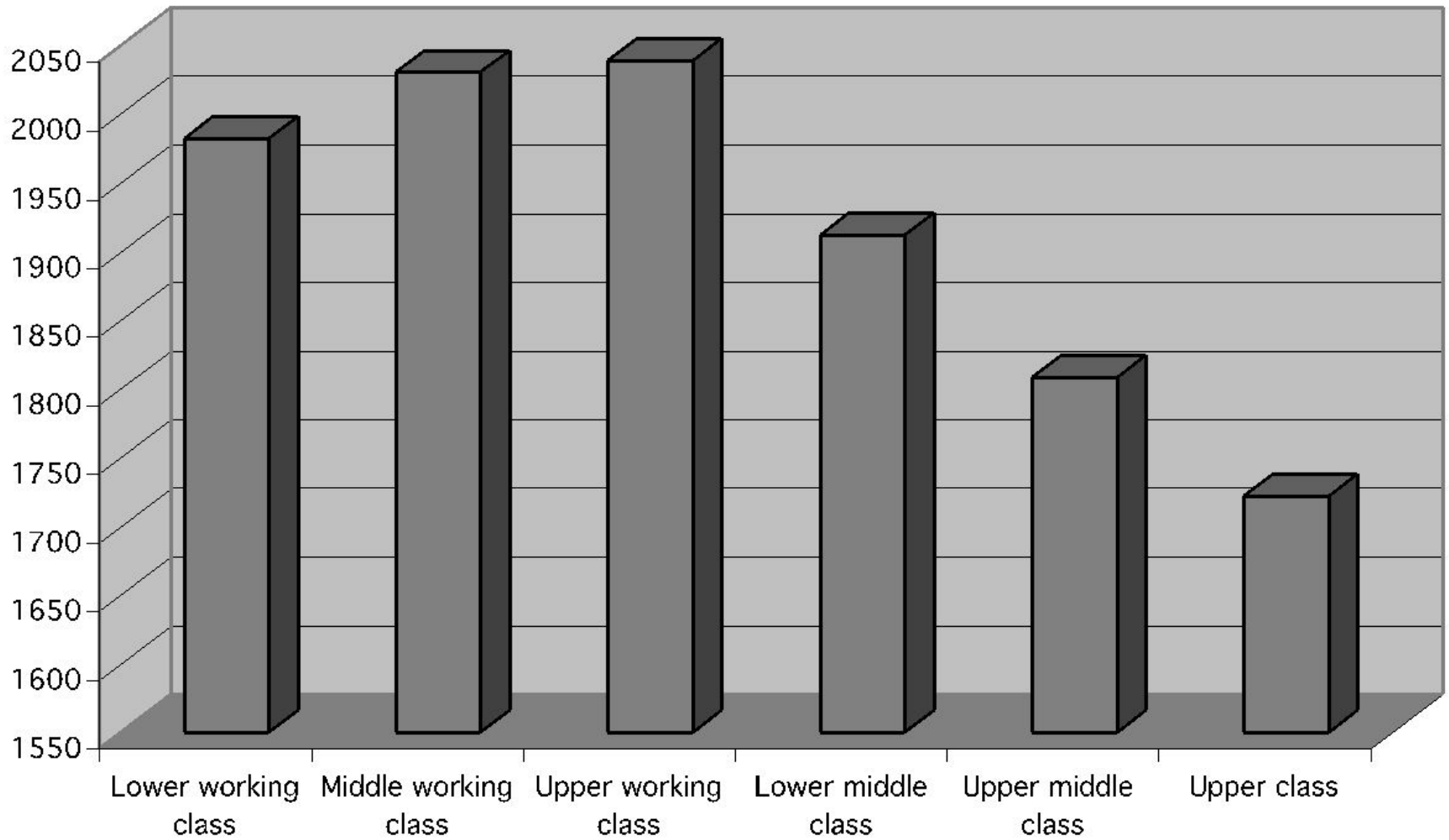


Figure 6. Fronting of /aw/ (F2) in *out*, *south*, *mountain*, *downtown*, etc. by age with partial regression lines for 6 socioeconomic groups in Philadelphia [N=112]

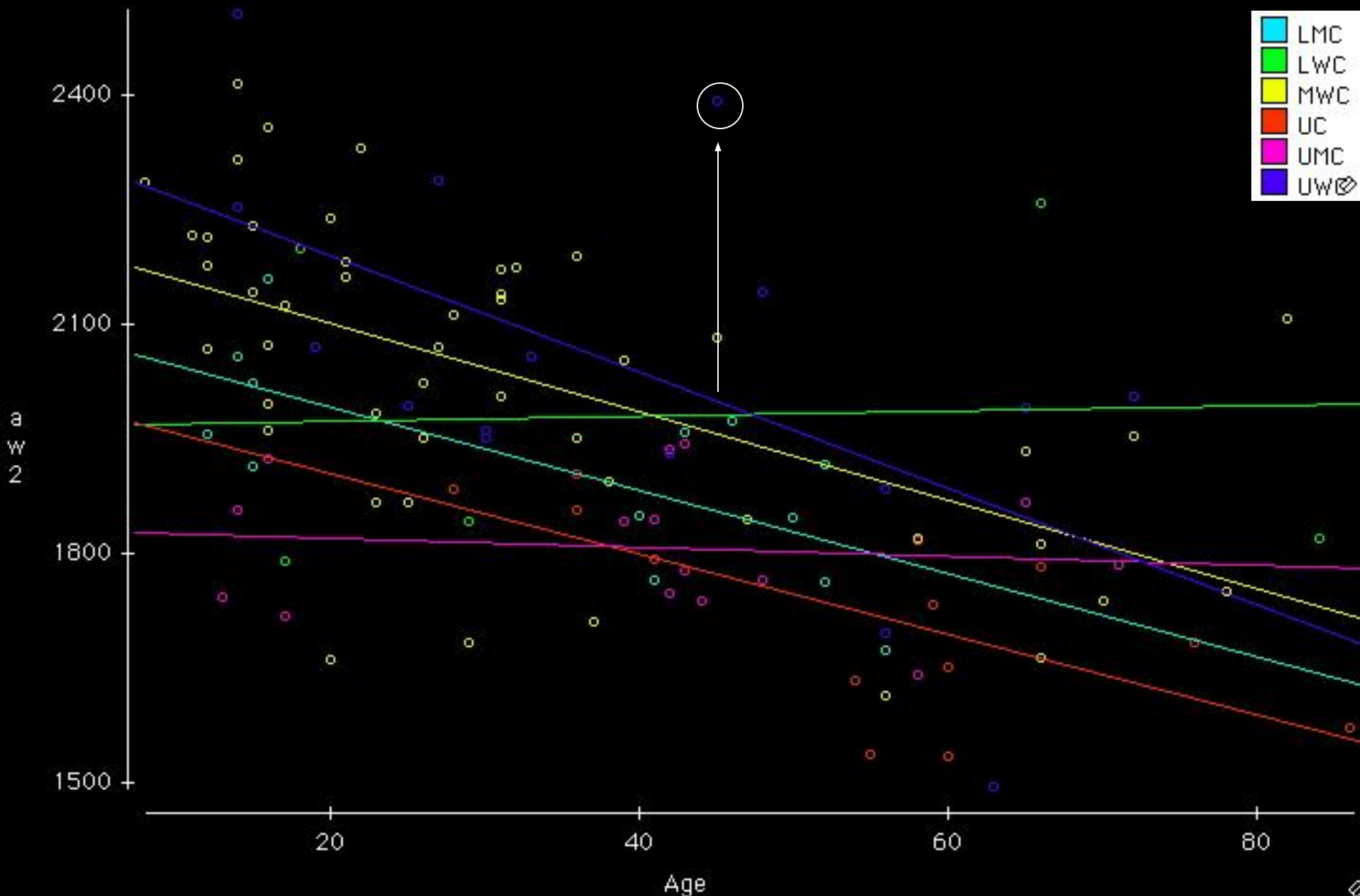
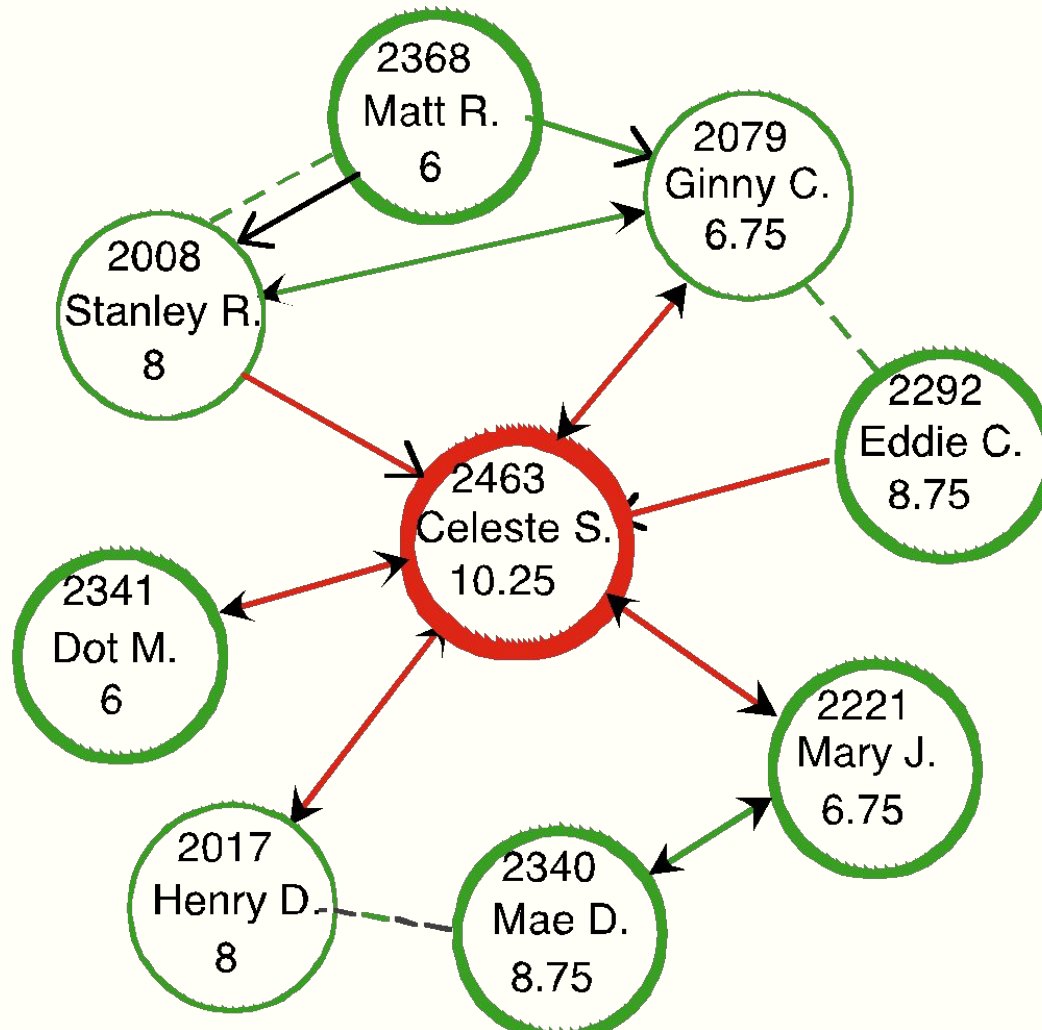
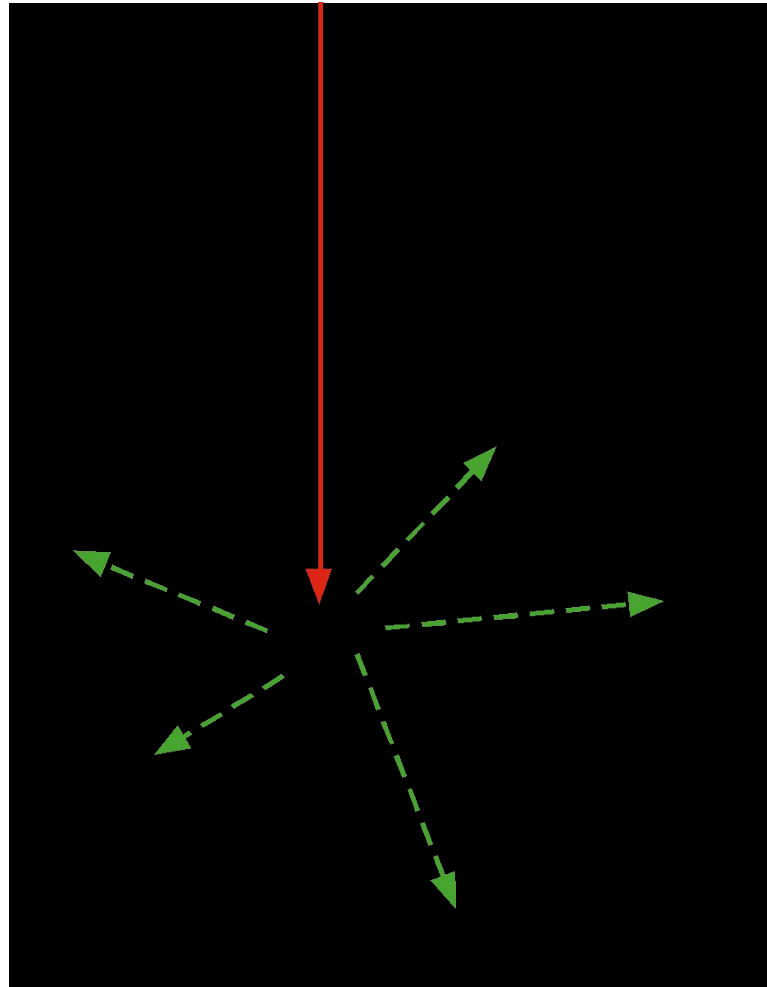


Figure 7. Sociometric position of Celeste S. in the Clark St. network  
(Upper figure: advancement of change, lower figure, C5 index).



# The two-step flow of communication

(Katz and Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence*)



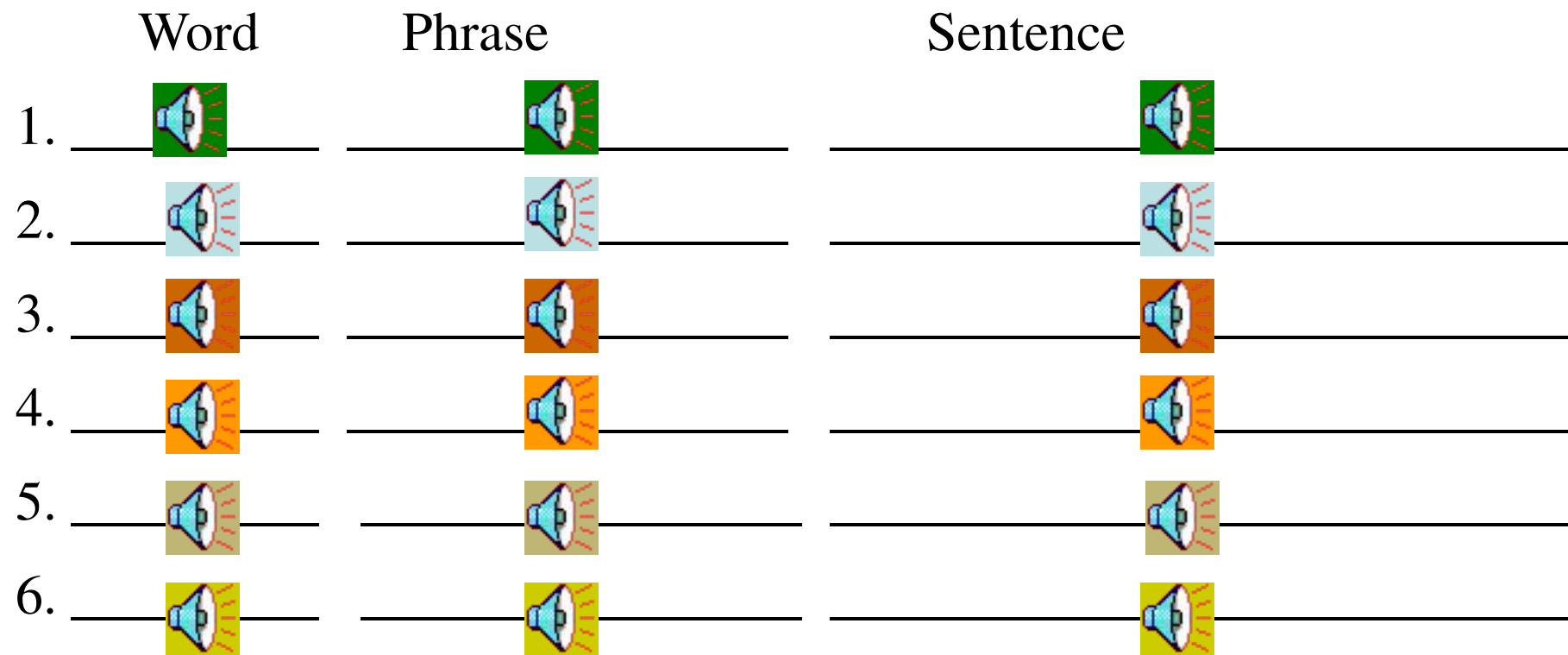
1986

Jackie Garapedian

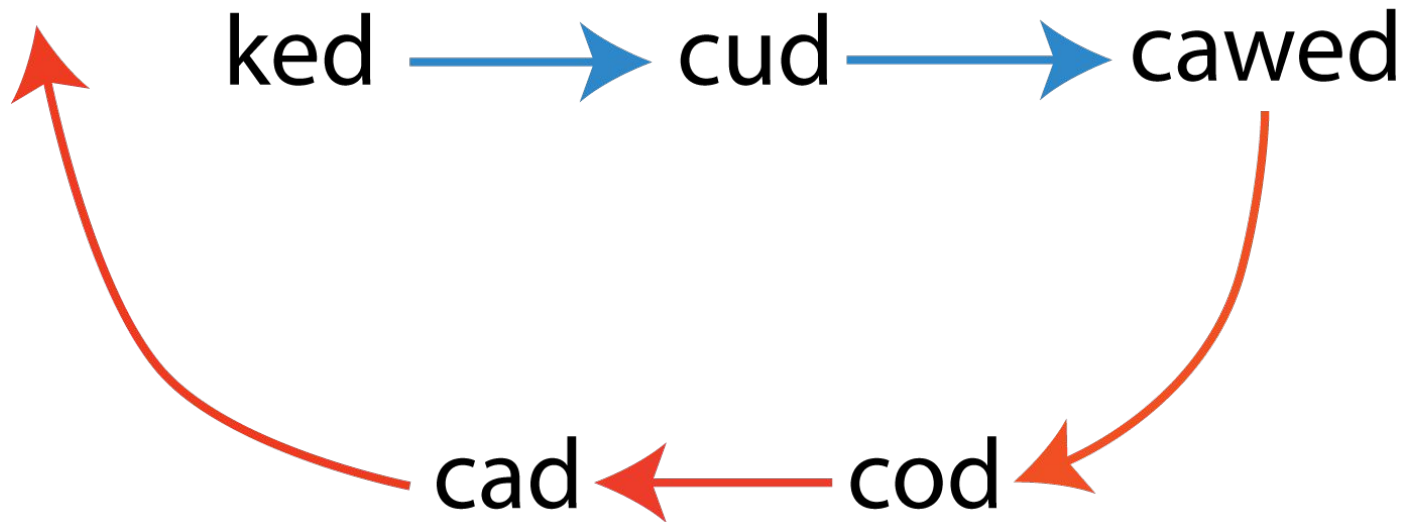




# Project on Cross-Dialectal Comprehension: Gating Experiment 2



# The Northern Cities Shift



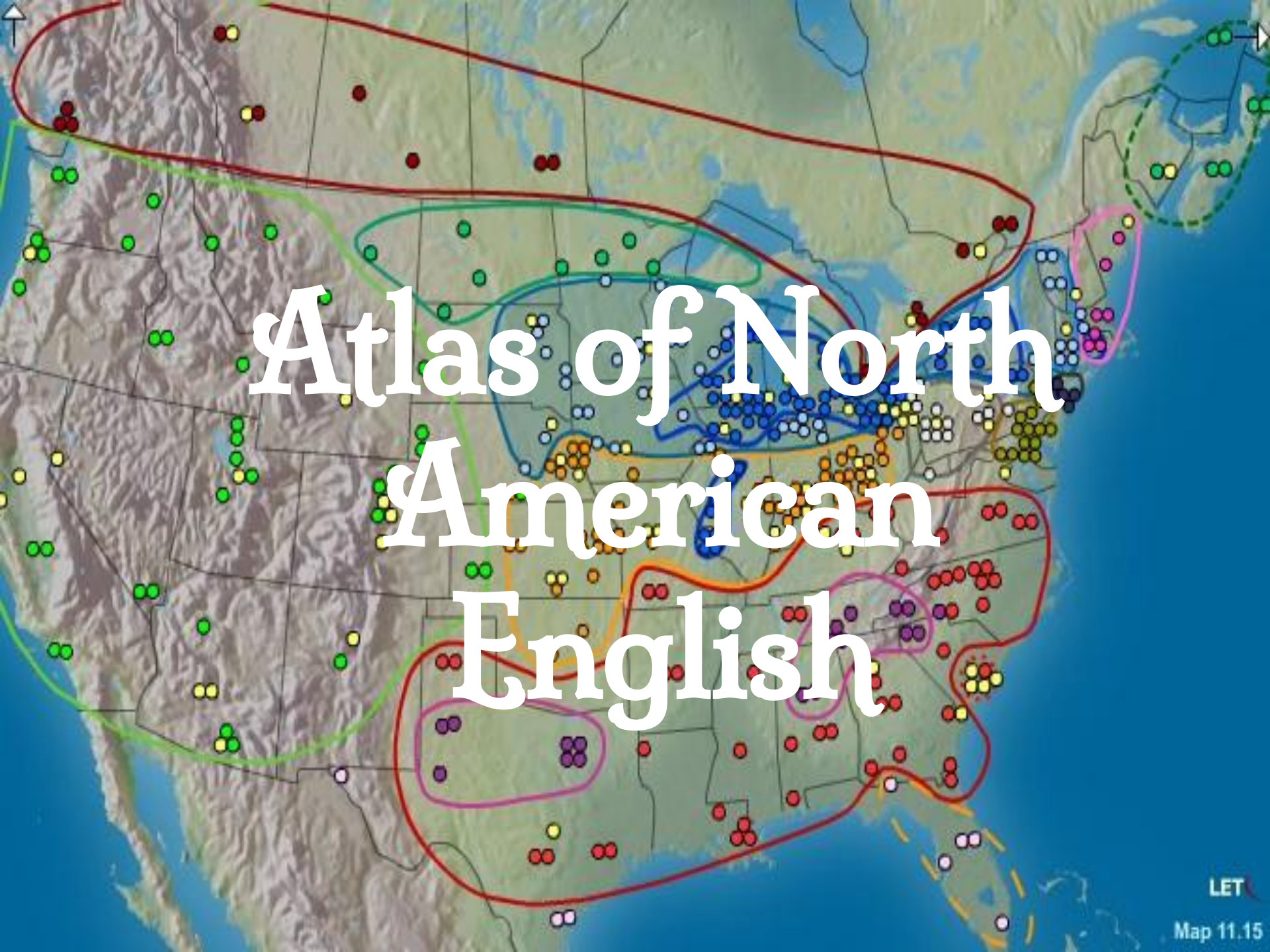


Well, I believe that if someone dreams about death, that it means change, positive change. Ahm, I had a dream that my mother was dead, and uh, although I woke up kind of scared, I just looked at it as change, you know, either marriage, or something, I know she just got a new job, she works for A.M.A., so I-- that's why, you know I put it towards that, that she just got a new job, that's what my dream was about. Friend of mine had a dream that um—this one guy died, and he lives downstairs from me, and she actually saw him in the coffin. And his sister dreamt the same dream, and his cousin dreamt the same dream. Three people dreamt the same dream about this guy. Now that—that kind of gets me a little scared now, 'Kay, three different people, dreaming about the same guy in the same dream. . . Uh we don't tell him about this dream, not to get him worried, but uhm. . .



( How old are you?)

Ah. . . 19. I have a fake ID. . . . that uh a police officer by the way gave me. . .hm, we won't mention his name. Well my girl friend goes to Illinois State University out in Normal, Illinois and uh met a policeman out there who gave us—he confiscated these ID's from other girls, and s's, "Take this back to Chicago and put it to use." And it happens that this girl looks like me, she's got the brown eyes, the brown hair, the height, the weight, so all's I did was memorize the social security number and their address, and it's fine, it gets me everywhere. I mean I don't take it—I don't go out crazy, in this bar, like I walk out staggering, I you know. I know I have my limits. . .

A map of North America, including the United States, Canada, and parts of Mexico, illustrating dialect regions. The map features various colored dots (red, green, blue, orange, purple, yellow, white) scattered across the landmass, representing different dialectal features. These dots are grouped into several distinct regions outlined by colored lines: a large red outline covers the northern and western parts of the continent; a green outline follows the western coast; a blue outline encompasses the central and northern plains; an orange outline is in the southern central region; a purple outline is in the southern part; and a pink outline is in the eastern coastal area. The background shows topographical features like mountains and rivers. The title 'Atlas of North American English' is overlaid in large white serif font.

# Atlas of North American English



# The Inland North

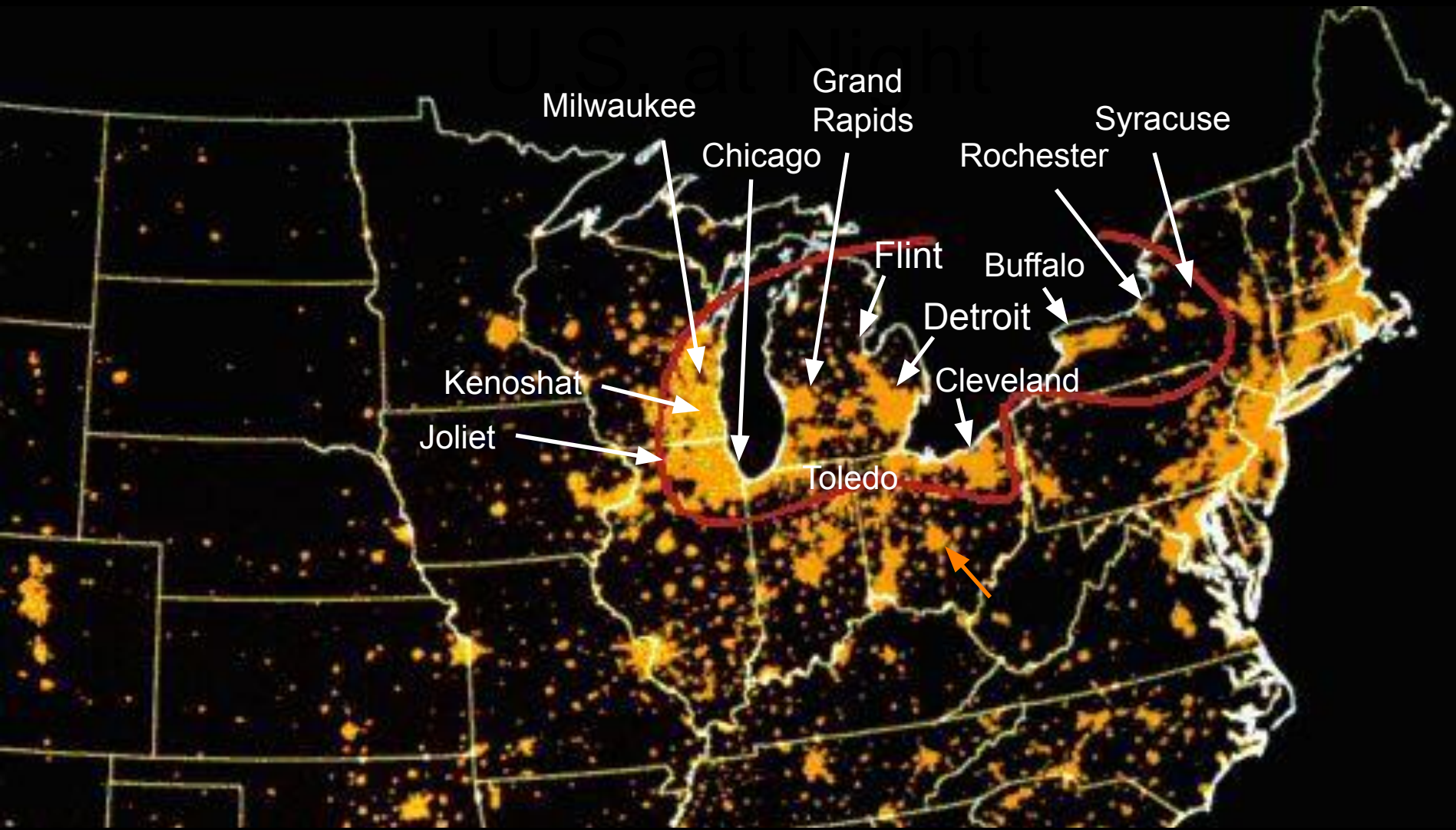
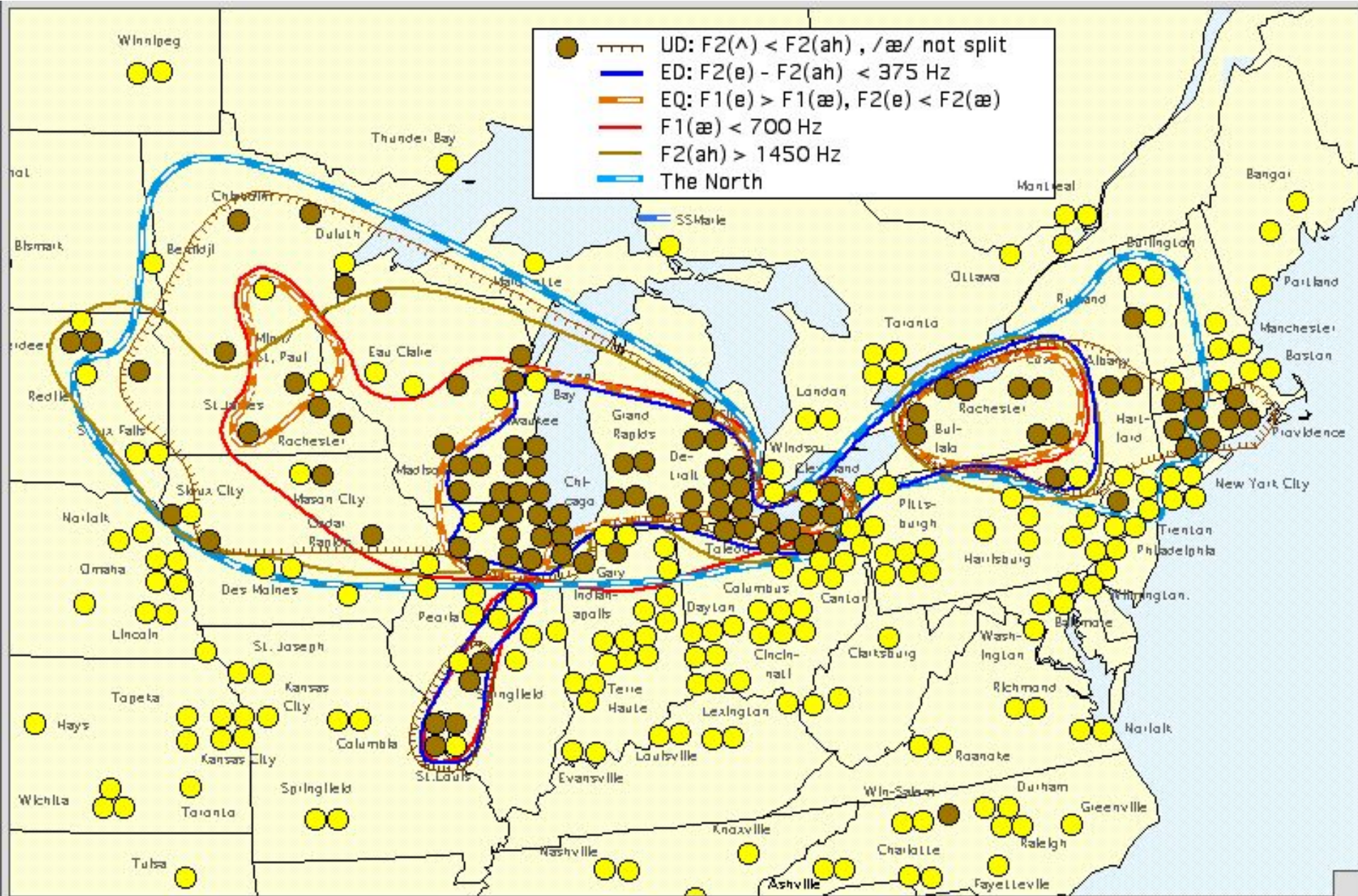


Figure 9. The UD measure of the Northern Cities Shift

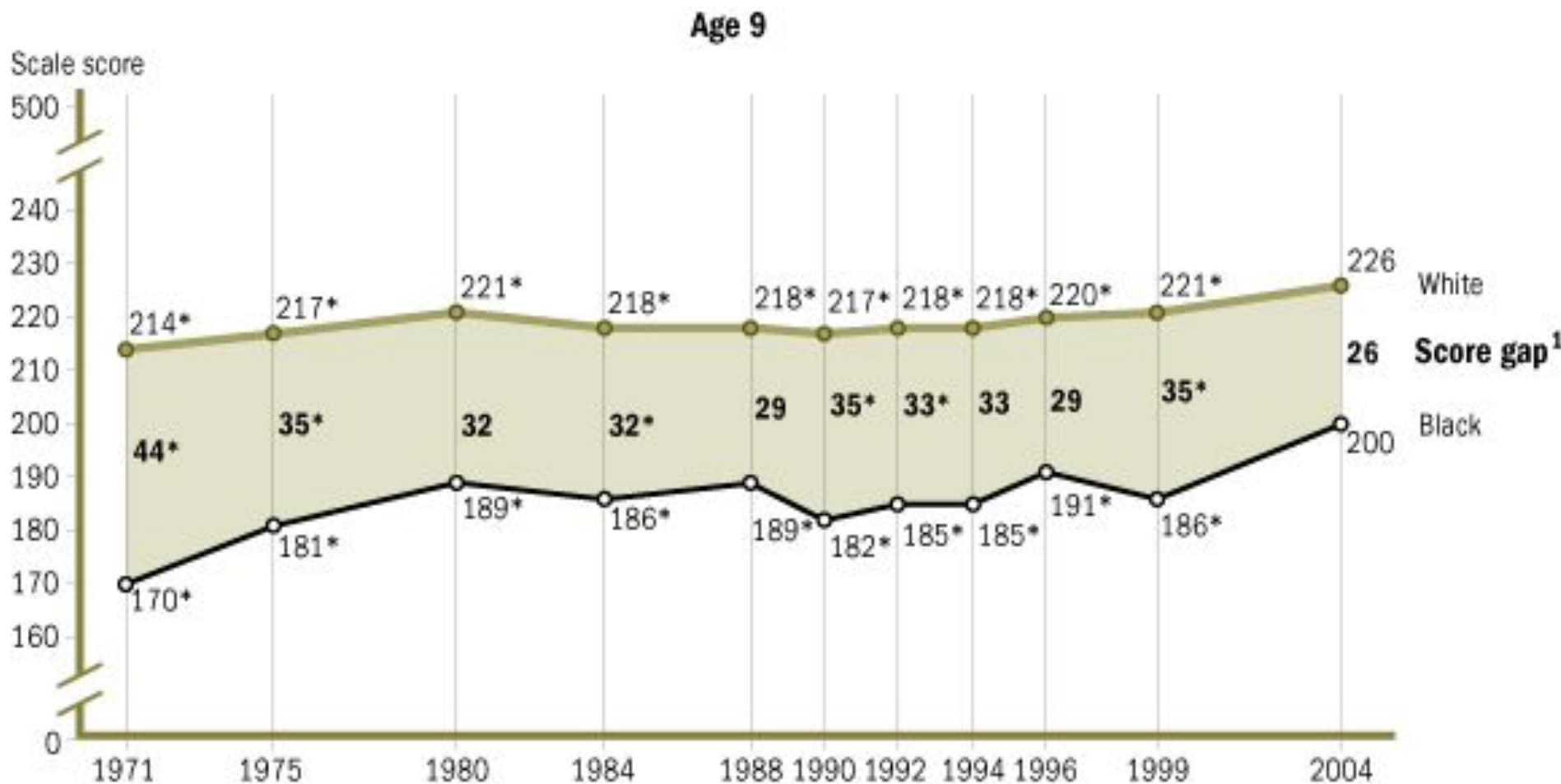




2001

Latasha

Figure 10. The minority gap in reading achievement: fourth grade NAEP reading average scores by race from 1971 to 2004.





Well. . .well I used to be bad--I used to be bad in first grade and kindergarten. But--and then when they come to second grade and stuff they always blame me stuff cuz they know I always do that but I always be good in second grade. I--but I used to be bad in first and kindergarten cuz it wasn't really nothing to do, so I just be bad. And when they come to second grade they always blame stuff on me And like yesterday I got blamed, because some girl hit somebody and they were jumping her and thought it was me and my friends. Me and my cousin, and my friends we--they always blame stuff on us. And that---and that's not right. And I tell my mom and my mom don't do nothing. She just said "Be good."

# DEALING WITH ZEKE





My mom **used** to say "Boy, don't play the fool.  
You know I work all day so you need to be in school."  
So I went to school to have a good week.  
It would have been **fine** if not for that **Zeke**.

As I walked across the street, there was Zeke,  
standing in the school yard, acting all hard.  
I tried to walk by, but Zeke was an ace  
at bumping into kids and then he'd make a mean face.



ON THE  
PHONE



I didn't **choose** to be in **that** class. And you can't just **shove** all **those** names into somebody's head. So when **Shanetta** put **China** in **South** America, I did too.



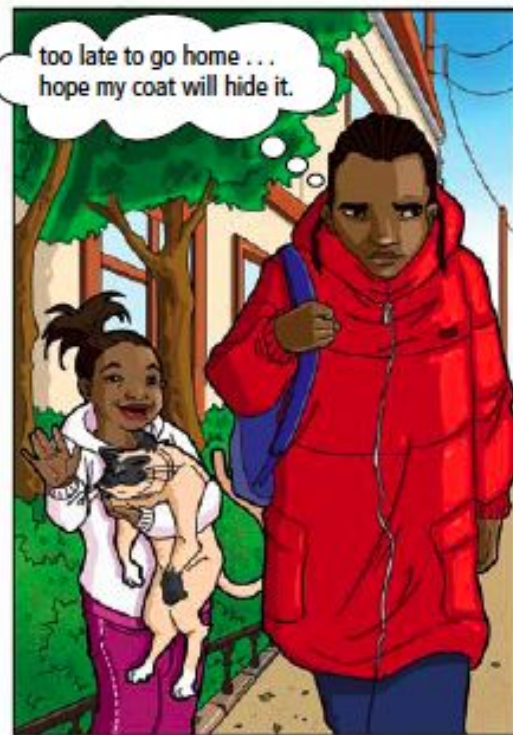




Anyhow, I told her, "Shut your mouth, girl! You had no business putting the wrong thing on your answer sheet, so I had to see it!" And I don't know why she got all mad, because what I had said was just plain common sense. And she went to push me.

# Take Off Your Coat!





And why is your coat still on?



It's NOT cold. Would you mind taking that coat off?



It's cold in here. I need to keep my coat on.



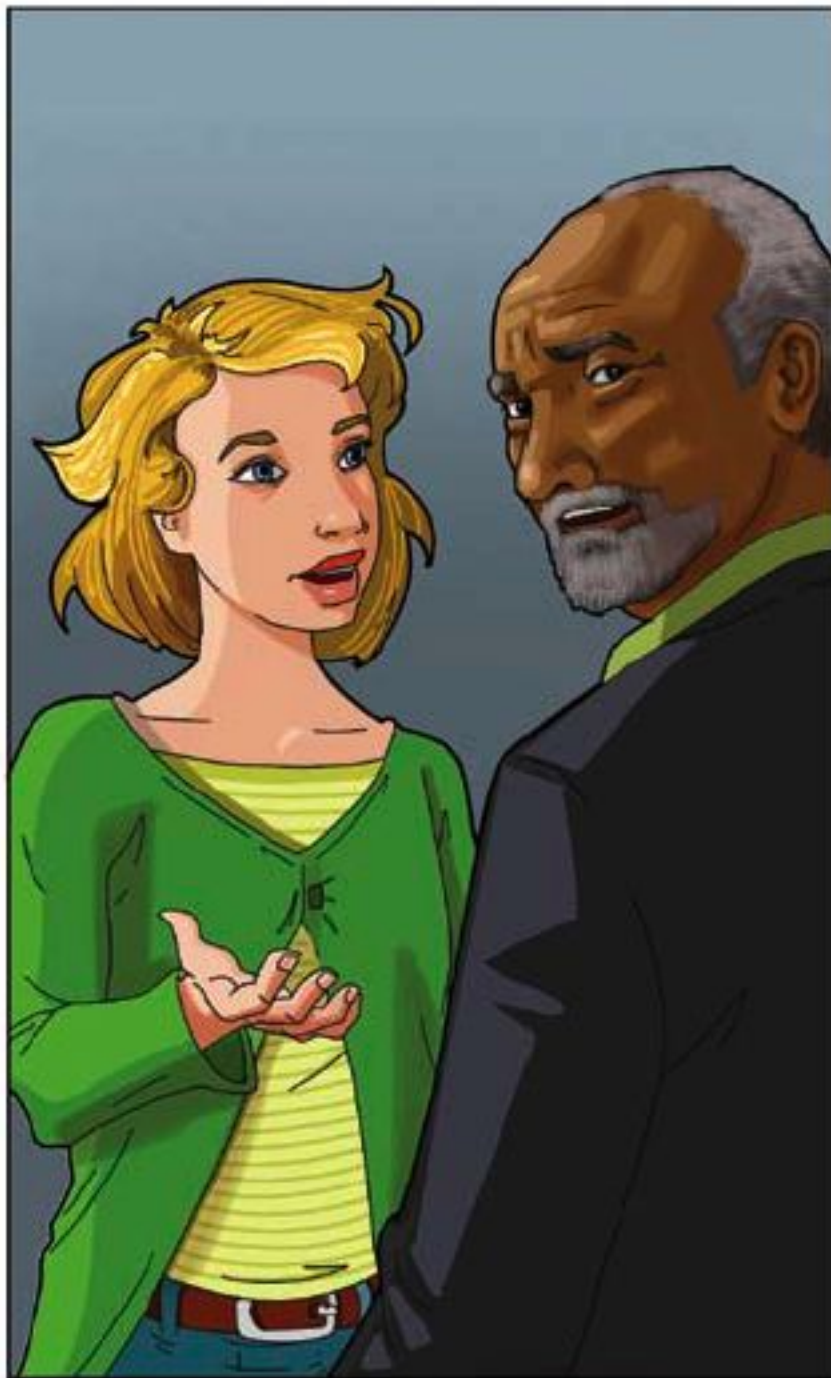
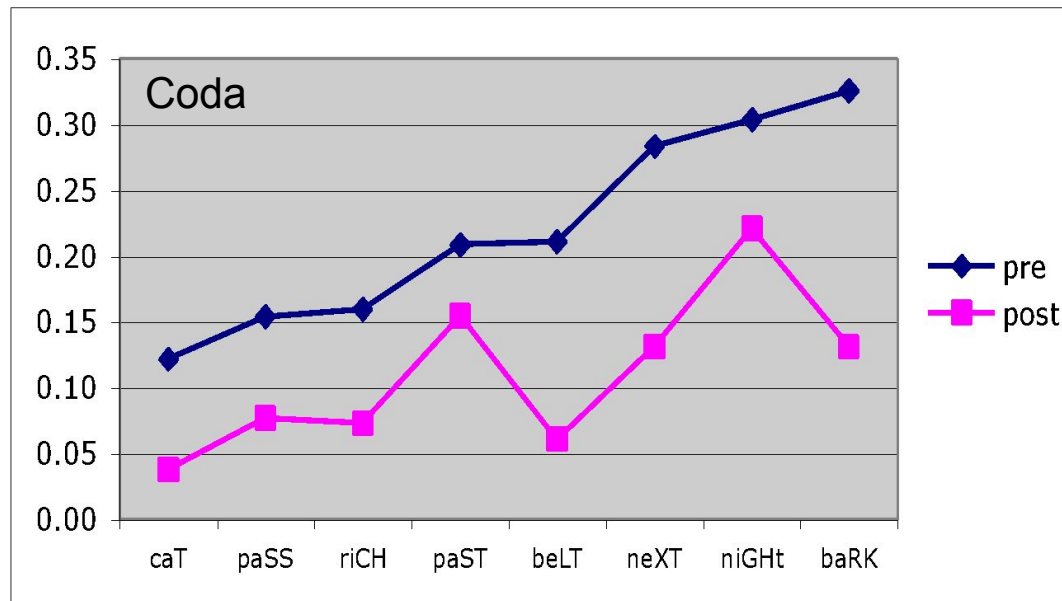
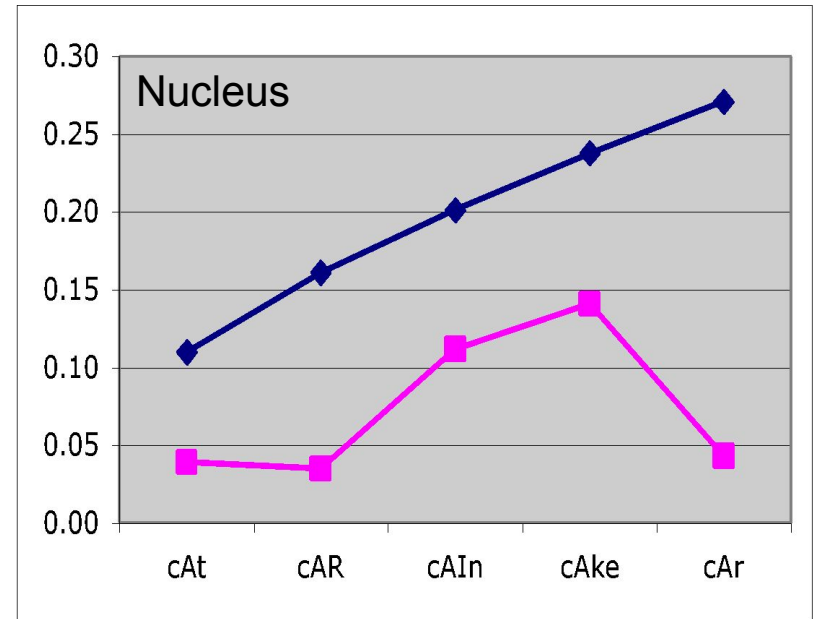
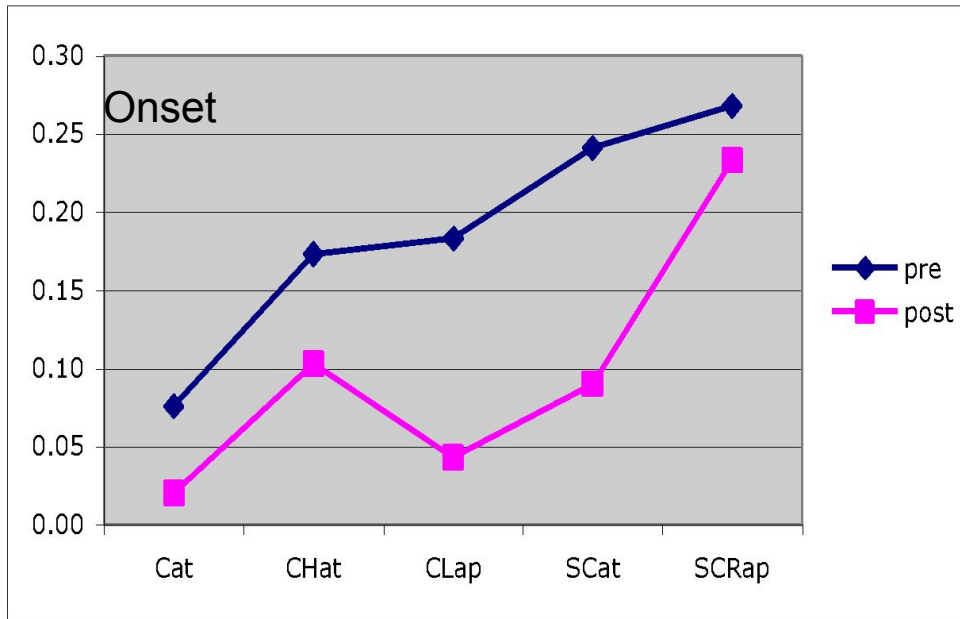


Figure 11. Reduction of decoding errors by syllable structure for Philadelphia African Americans struggling readers, 2001-2, pre- and post-test [N=135]





( Did you ever get into a fight with a kid bigger than you? . . .  
. . . . . Tell me what happened.)

Well my brother's dead right? And my brother used to smoke  
cigarettes and, it was some little girl she a fake Muslim.

She say, "That's why your brother dead cuz [sucks teeth]  
he was smoking cigarettes on the corner and stuff having - um  
- guns and stuff." And my brother do NOT have guns. All  
the people they say my brother was a peacemaker. They kept  
on talking about my brother and [sucks teeth] I -I just gotta  
fight with 'em.



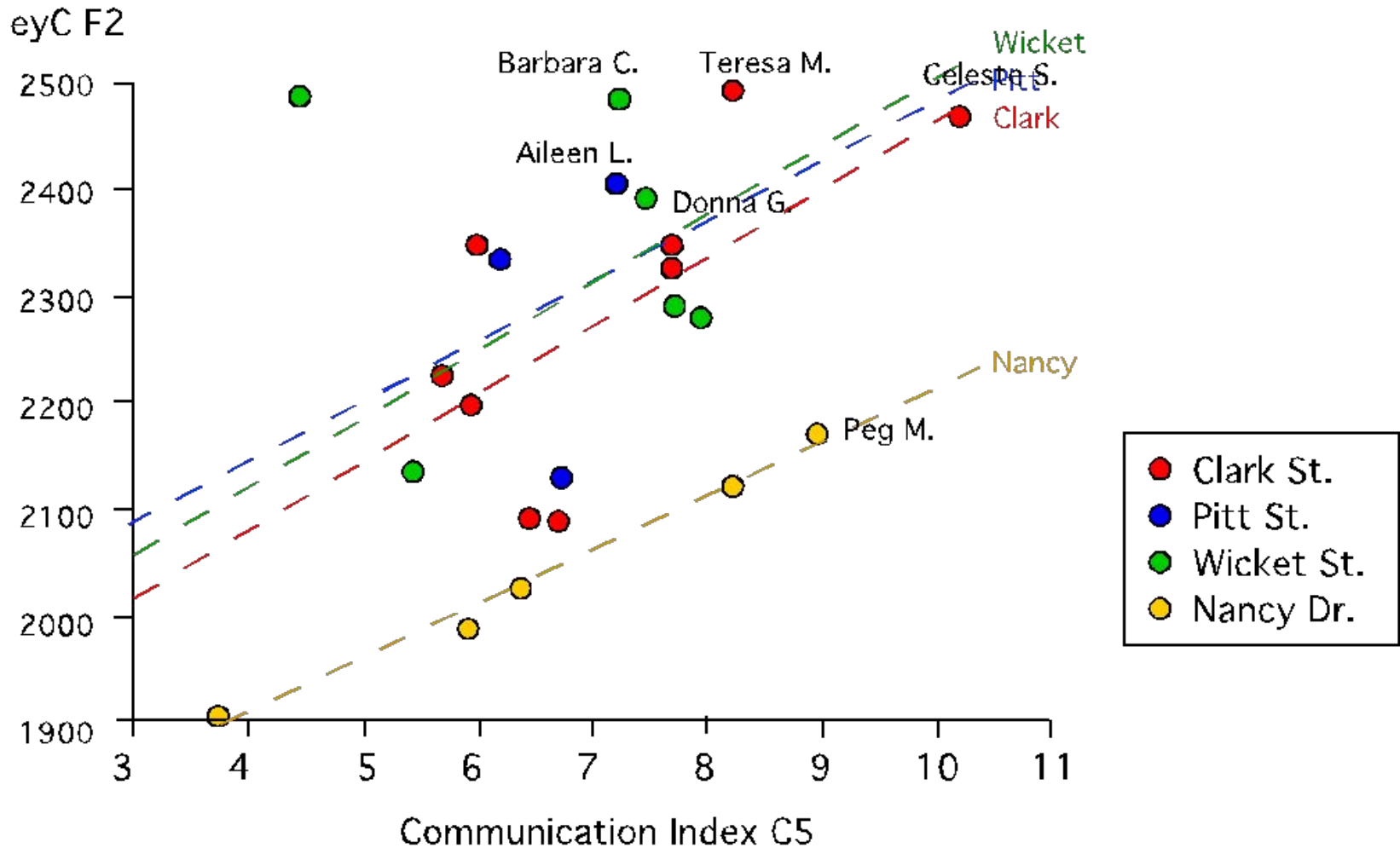
That's why I wanna be in some other world - not other world, but I wanna be in some o - some other country cuz around my way [ts] it's - it's drama around my way . . . I'm not a scared of 'em but I just want to move . . . Like my brother and my cousin dead and they kept on talking about them [ts] so I gotta fight with'em.





(What is happiness?) Oh that's very easy, young man, that's very easy indeed. I've thought about this very deeply and my wife and I have discussed it a great deal. A lot depends in the first place how you define success. Happiness and success should go together. . . and what is a successful life to me . . . may not be to you. But I believe, and I live, the theory, that a man can be the most successful, and also, the most happy, if he's doing the type of work which he . . . enjoys. Every day's work is not work, it's not really a challenge, but it's a *pleasure* to do something that you enjoy doing and you feel that you know something about and that you can continue to learn something about. In other words, it's uh—if I can make it clear to you, happiness consists mostly, other things being equal. . . . of having the ability when you go to bed at night, thinking back of what you've done during the day, to feel that you have accomplished something useful. A man has to live with himself. And nobody knows himself like he does, what goes through your mind in the course of a day. If you go to bed at night, and you feel more or less satisfied and contented that you've done the best you could, you've been fairly successful and things have turned out fairly well for you

Fronting of (eyC) by communication index C5 for 21 female speakers of the Philadelphia Neighborhood Study



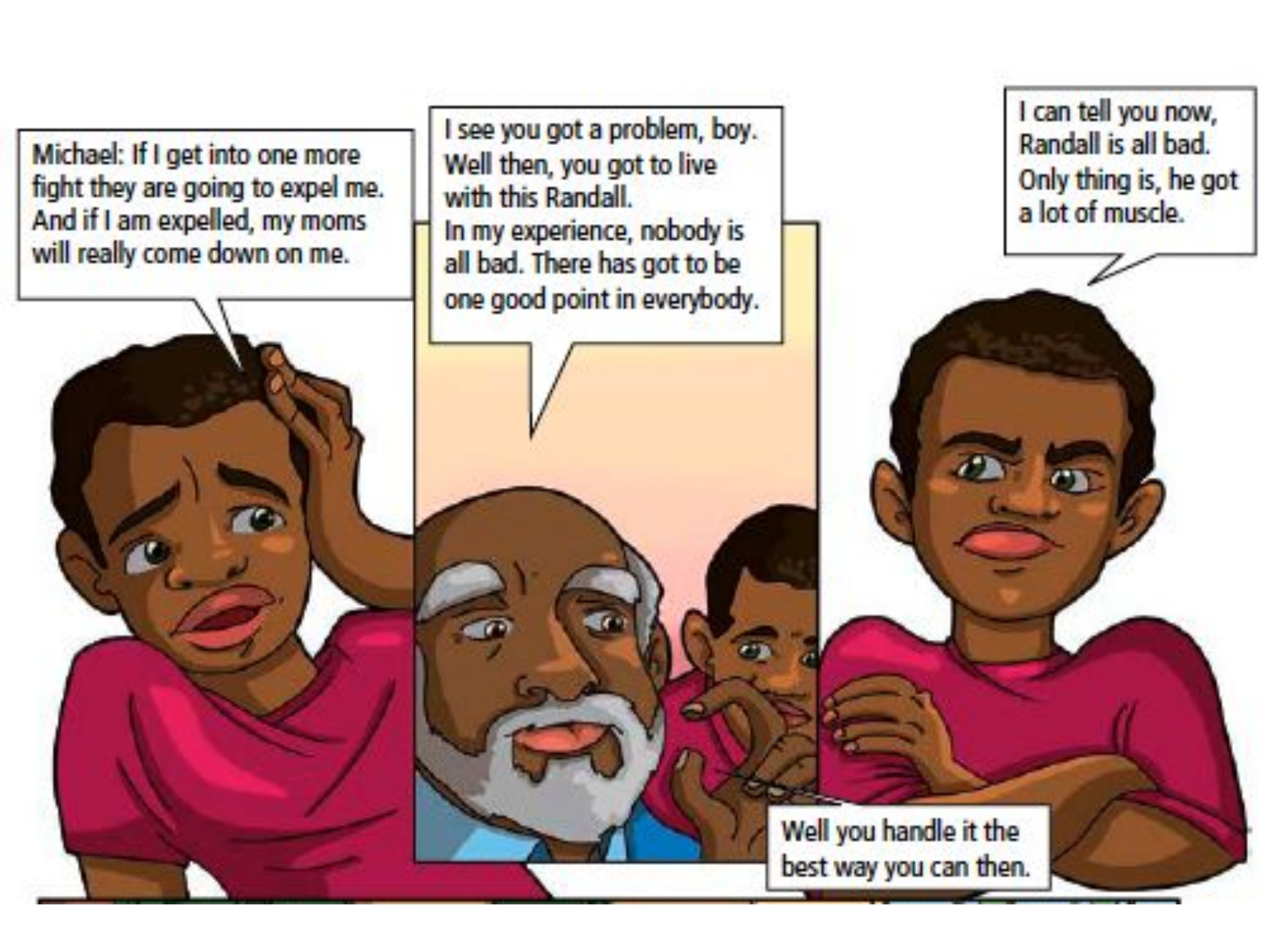
# Advice from Mr. Fred



Now when I was coming up we would handle this kind of thing, just go to the hands and that would be it.

I could take him on, easy, Mr. Fred. But I'm suspended three times now.





Michael: If I get into one more fight they are going to expel me. And if I am expelled, my moms will really come down on me.

I see you got a problem, boy. Well then, you got to live with this Randall. In my experience, nobody is all bad. There has got to be one good point in everybody.

I can tell you now, Randall is all bad. Only thing is, he got a lot of muscle.

Well you handle it the best way you can then.