

Accent variation according to audience: a case study of Taylor Swift

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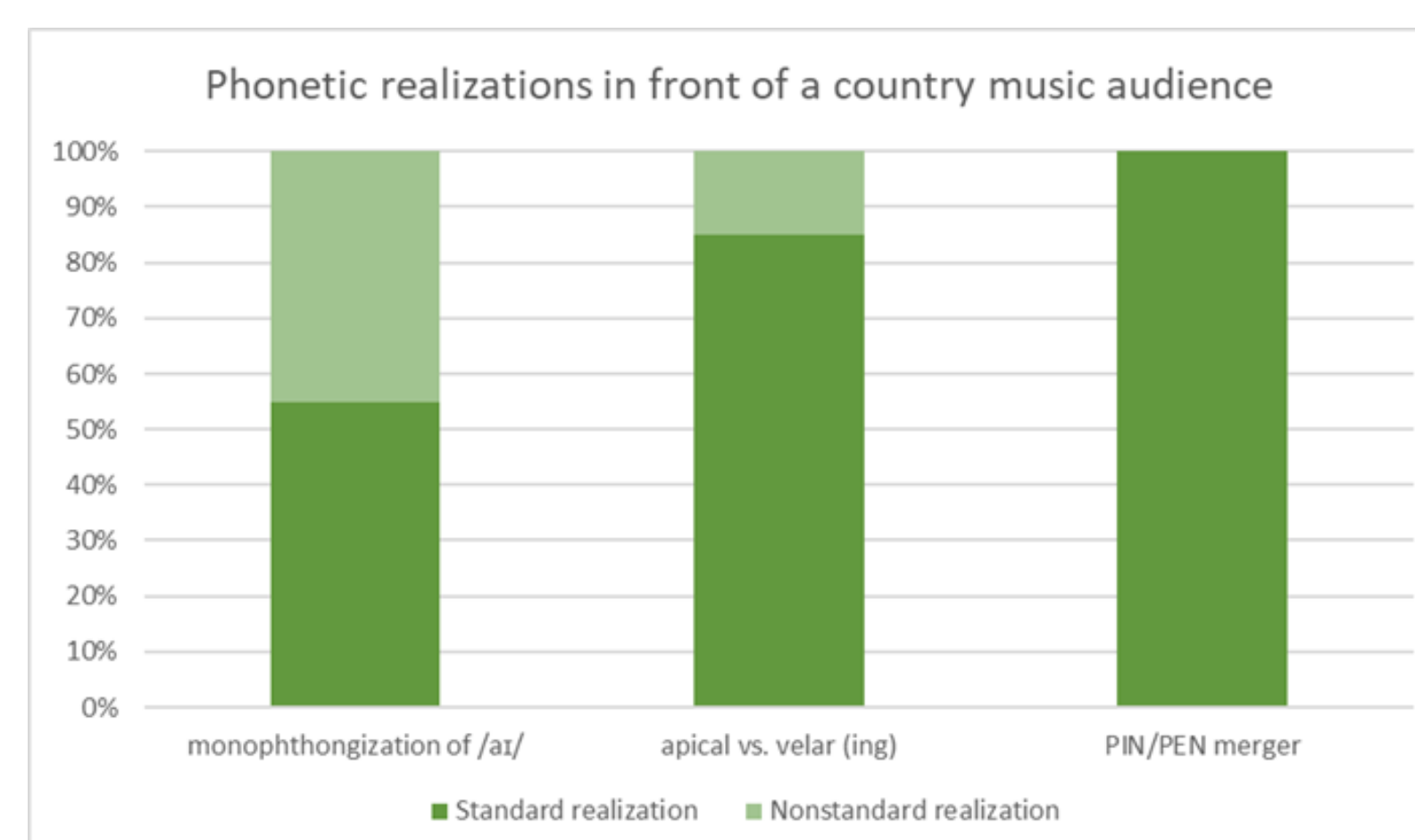
University of Leeds

Keywords

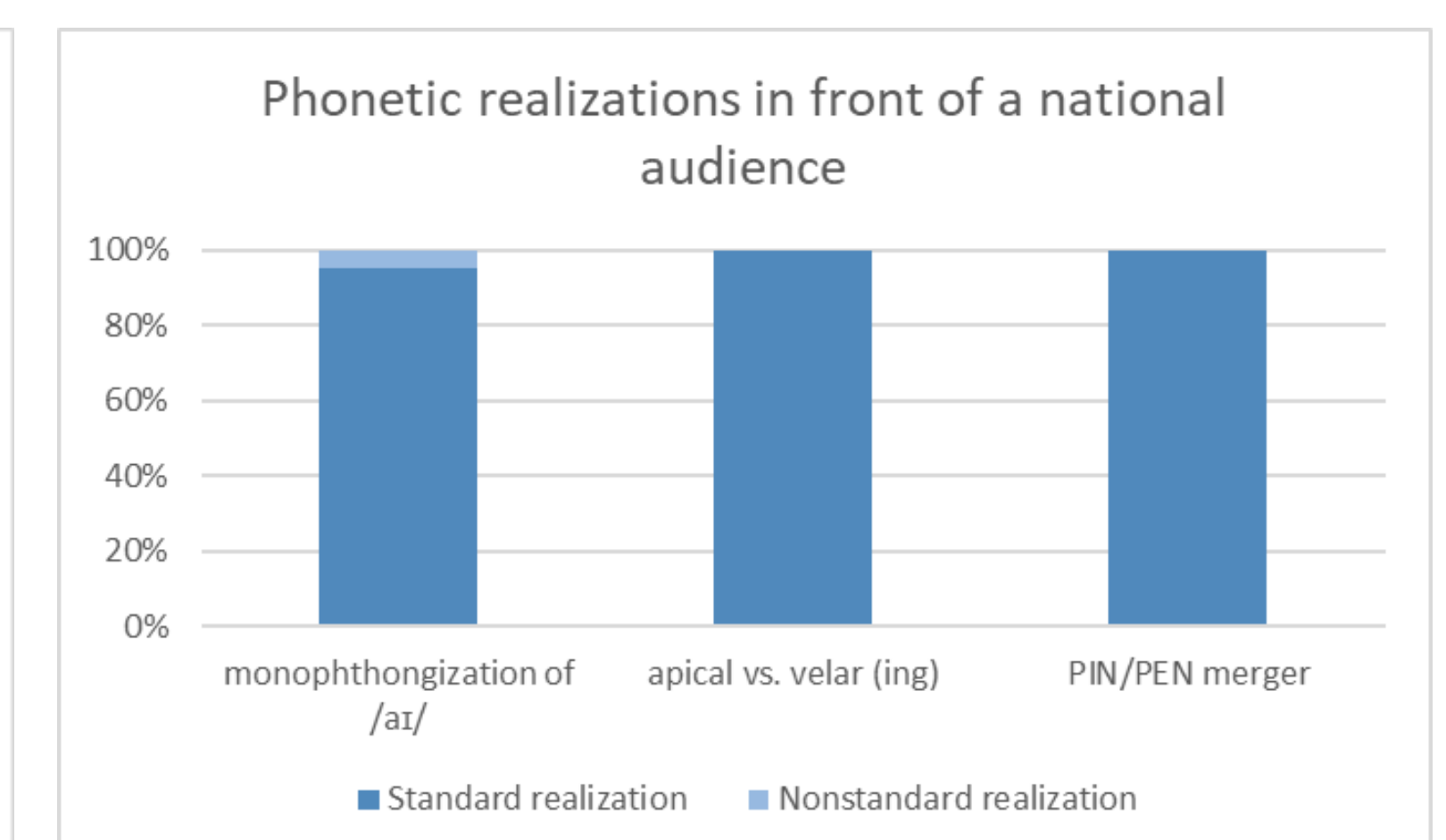
Audience Design, Intraspeaker variation, Level of awareness, Southern accent, Sociophonetics

Introduction

With Bell's Audience Design theory at its outset, this study seeks to explore the variation in Taylor Swift's accent depending on whether she is addressing a national American audience or an audience of Country music listeners. For this purpose, Swift's accent is analysed regarding three phonetic features associated with Southern accents: the monophthongisation of /aɪ/, apical (ing), and the PIN/PEN merger. For each variable, an auditory analysis and an acoustic analysis in Praat are conducted. The analyses reveal an effect of variation in audience on Taylor Swift's production of Southern accent features for all three phonetic variables under investigation, albeit to varying degrees. It is then discussed how this difference in effects may be attributed to different levels of awareness.



Phonetic realisations in front of a Country music audience



Phonetic realisations in front of a national audience

Research Question and Hypothesis

Research Question: Does Taylor Swift's accent vary with regard to Southern features between a Country music audience and a national audience?

Hypothesis: Taylor Swift uses phonetic features associated with Southern speech more in front of a Country music audience than with a national audience.

Methodology

Participant: Taylor Swift

Data: two sets of interviews

- Country music audience: an interview with Herb Sudzin on Sudzin Country Radio in 2007
- national American audience: compilation of Swift's three appearances on The Ellen Show in 2008
- twenty tokens per variable and set of interviews

Method: auditory analysis and different acoustic analyses in Praat for each variable

Results

Monophthongal /aɪ/

- once in front of the national audience
- around half the time in front of the Country radio audience

Apical (ing)

- only three times across all tokens and exclusively in front of the Country music audience

PIN/PEN merger

- auditory analysis revealed no instances across all tokens.
- the realisation of /ɛ/ in front of the Country music audience was considerably closer than in front of the national audience

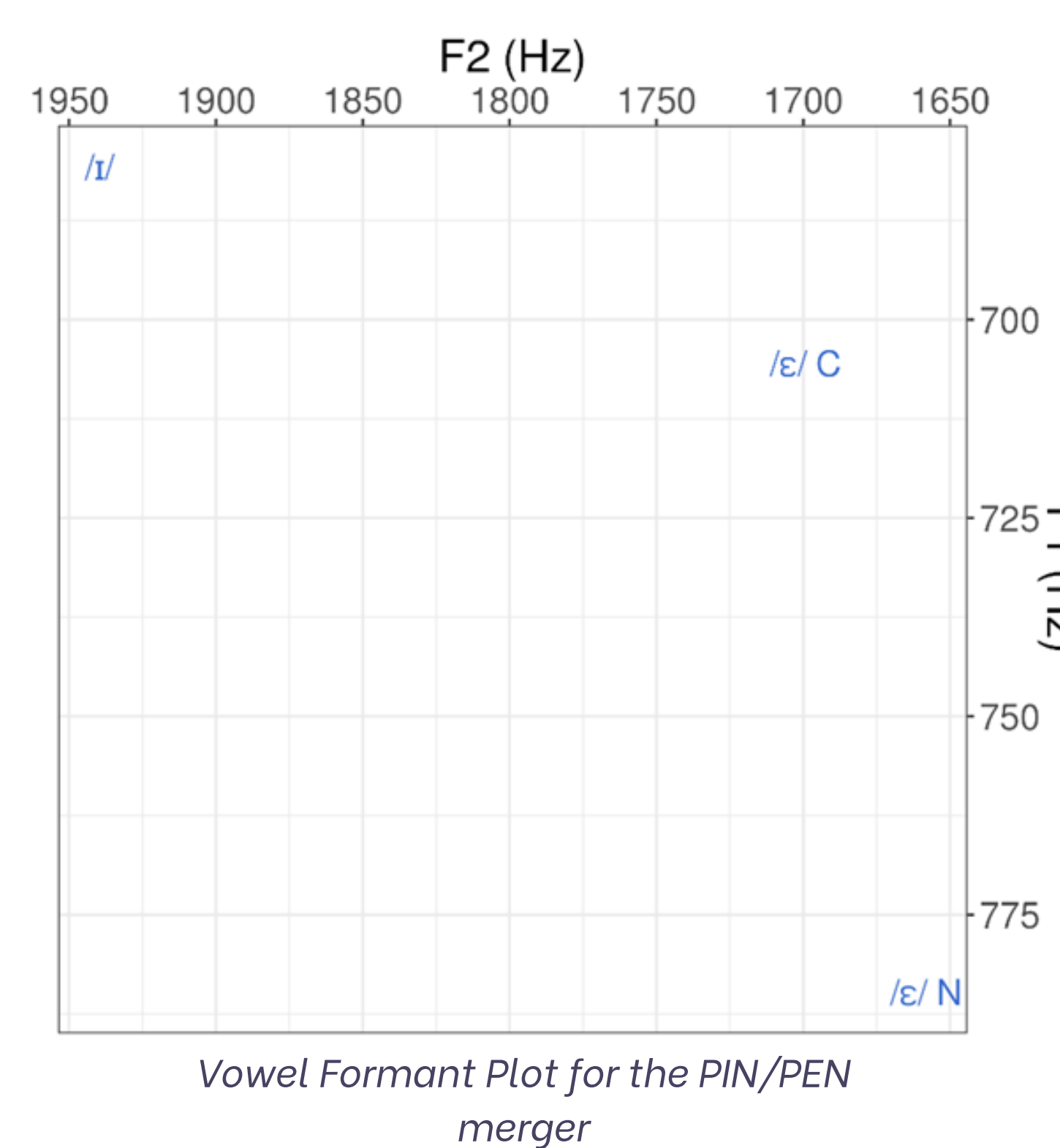
Discussion

For none of the variables standard realisations were produced for more than half of the tokens. This is in line with Bell who states that the effect is generally weaker for auditors than addressees since "[s]peakers treat auditors as second-class addressees." (Bell, 1984, p.174).

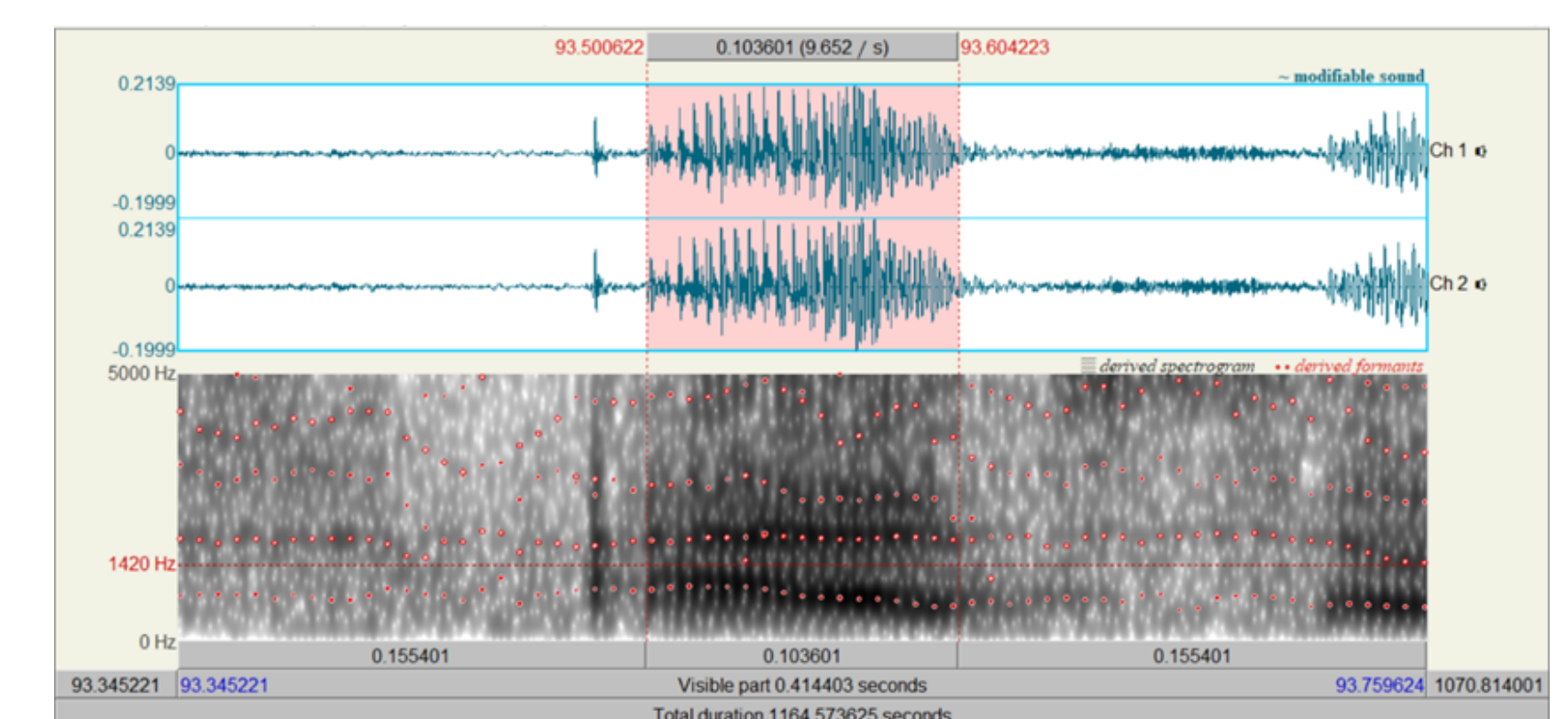
The auditory analysis for the monophthongisation of /aɪ/ revealed considerable variation, with monophthongal /aɪ/ being produced around 40% more in front of a Country music audience. This can be explained through the fact that monophthongal /aɪ/ is one of the most salient features of Southern speech: it can thus be regarded as what Labov describes as a "stereotype" (Labov, 1972, p.314).

Like monophthongal /aɪ/, the (ing) variable can be regarded as a "stereotype" (Labov, 1972, p.314), however, it occurs much less frequently. Considering this variant is generally used more by "speakers at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale", "in more casual talk", and "by males" (Schleef et al., 2011, pp.213-214), Swift was unlikely to produce the apical variant more often, even in front of the Country radio audience.

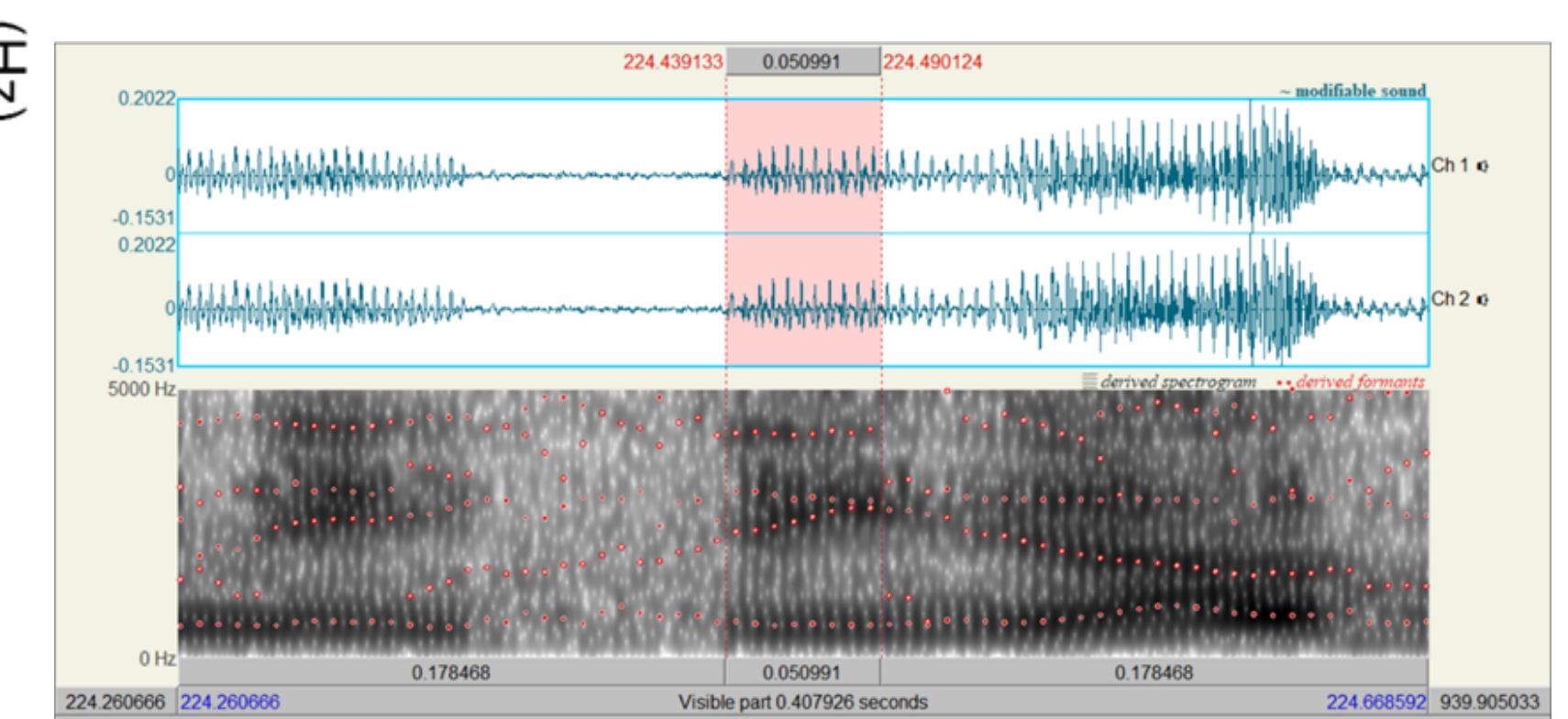
Merging of PIN/PEN was too slight to be audible. In this case, the PIN/PEN merger is likely what Labov calls a "marker", meaning that there is a pattern to its production although it is below the level of awareness (Labov, 1991, p.314). Bell writes that in mass media "the social cost of shifting outside the norm is considerable, since deviation may lead to disgrace or dismissal" (Bell, 1984, p.184). One could infer that Swift did not merge towards the PIN vowel to a more noticeable degree because of the high risk of being perceived as imitating a speaker group other than Southerners.



Vowel Formant Plot for the PIN/PEN merger



Monophthongal realisation of /aɪ/



Velar realisation of the (ing) variable

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Conclusion

This study was able to find an effect of variation in audience on Taylor Swift's production of Southern accent features for all three phonetic variables under investigation. The difference in effects on the phonetic variables can partly be attributed to different levels of awareness. Further, apical (ing) may have behaved differently to monophthongal /aɪ/ due to the variable's associations with class, ethnicity, and style. Similar associations also likely impinged on the audience's effect on the production of the PIN/PEN merger.