Social Class in Rural Populations: Rethinking Paradigms

Paul E. Reed, *University of South Carolina*
reedpe@email.sc.edu
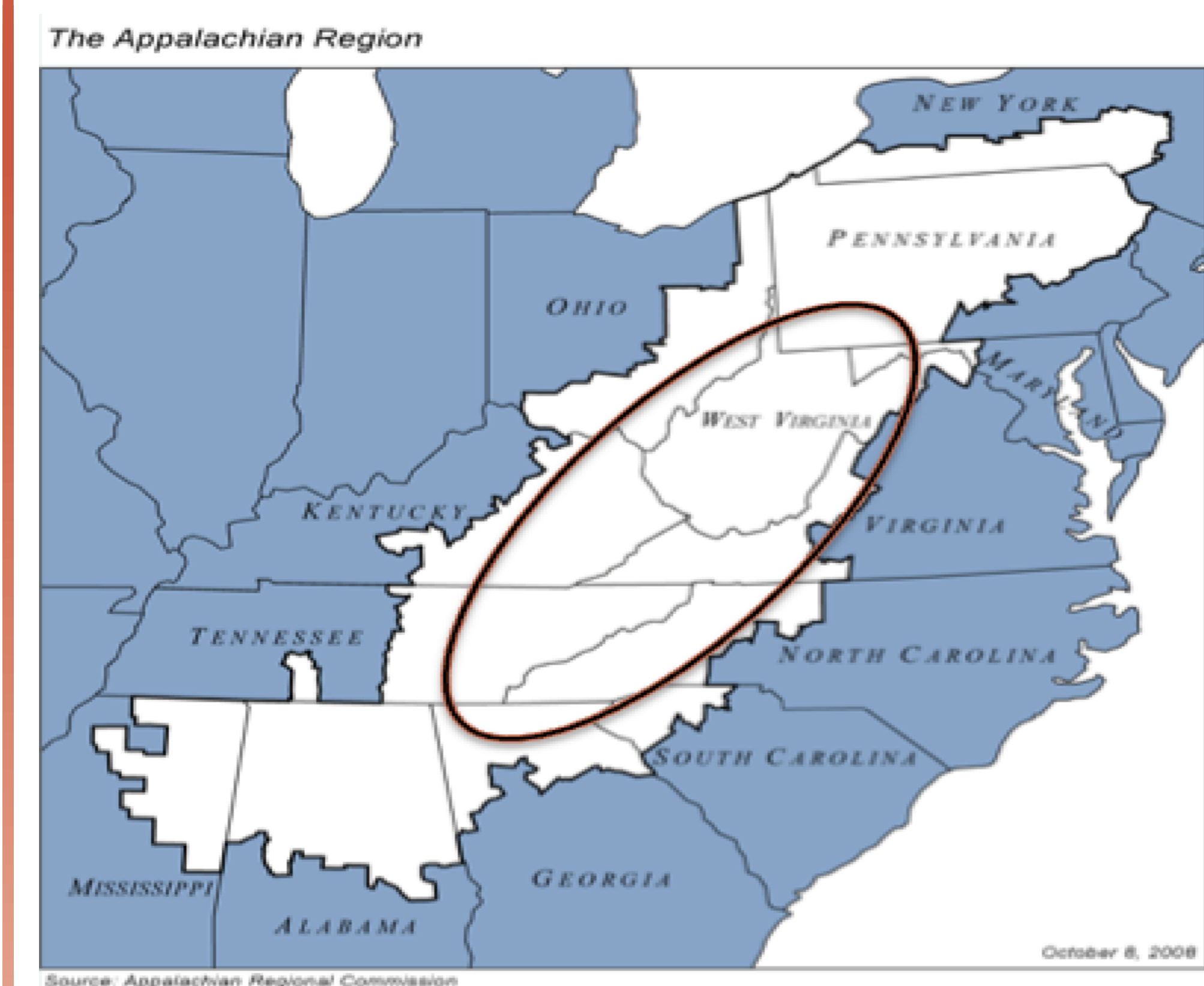
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

INTRODUCTION

Social class has been widely utilized to account for sociolinguistic variation, yet many researchers have admitted the illusory nature of attempts to quantify it. Various proposals have attempted to incorporate class, most summed as certain individuals having access to various language varieties with particular levels of prestige, which impact linguistic behavior. The majority of attempts look at urban or suburban populations. However, in certain regions, it is difficult to ascertain how such paradigms would function in non-urban, rural areas, because, as [Hurst, 1992] explains, class and social differentiation can behave differently in rural areas. One such region is Appalachia. [Hackenberg, 1975] demonstrates this difficulty in southern West Virginia and [Greene, 2010] eschews the use of class for her study of rural Eastern Kentucky due to the problems in quantifying class. This difficulty may arise because local affiliation and local rootedness are a more powerful influence among rural than urban/suburban populations.

APPALACHIA

The Appalachian Region
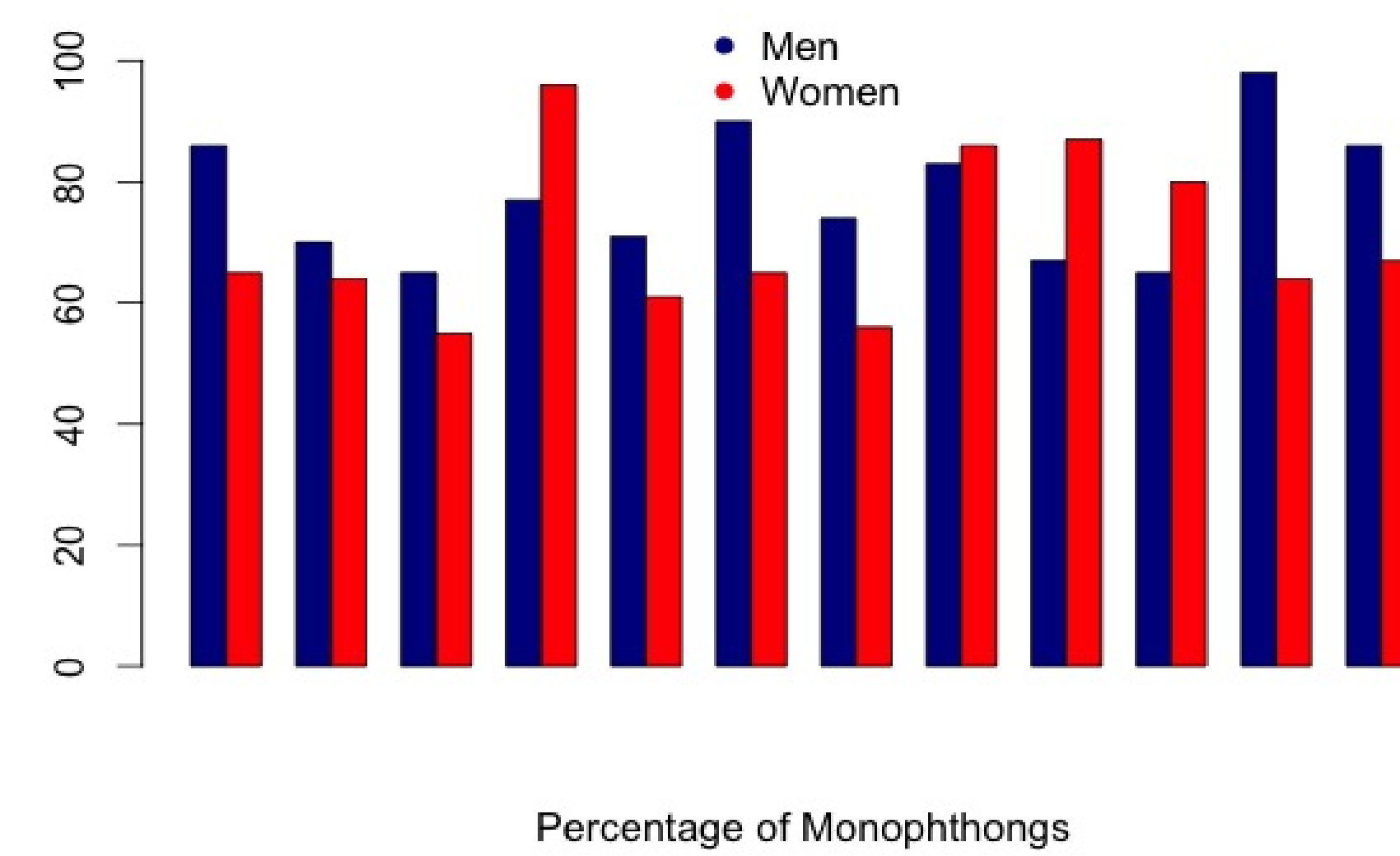Source: Appalachian Regional Commission
October 8, 2008

Appalachia is the mountainous region that stretches from northern Georgia to Pennsylvania [ARC,]. Scholars and lay people alike often consider it culturally and linguistically distinct. A growing body of literature has demonstrated that its language varieties, collapsed under Appalachian English (AE), diverge from Mainstream American English (MAE) and other Southern American English (SAE) varieties [Pederson et al., 1993, Carver, 1987, Labov et al., 2006, among others]. One salient feature of AE is the monophthongization of the diphthong /aɪ/ (see e.g., Thomas 2001, 2003).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CURRENT STUDY

Using data from 24 (12 male, 12 female) speakers from a small rural community in northeast Tennessee, this paper illustrates the difficulties in attempting to use traditional notions of class in explaining the behavior of the monophthongization of /aɪ/. This study suggests a possible metric for local affiliation, and how to incorporate its use in modeling linguistic variation. This paper analyzes the rates and realization of /ai/ monophthongization with sociolinguistic interview data. Preliminary results showed /ai/ monophthongization in all phonetic contexts, but quantitative and qualitative distinctions between speakers. Stylistically, as the context is more formal (reading), there were fewer tokens of monophthongization. However, in the conversational data, traditional sociolinguistic groupings seemed to not be the crucial aspects, rather local affiliation. The affiliation, or rootedness, is measured on a 4-point scale based on responses to three questions about local affiliation, coupled with community ethnographic knowledge.
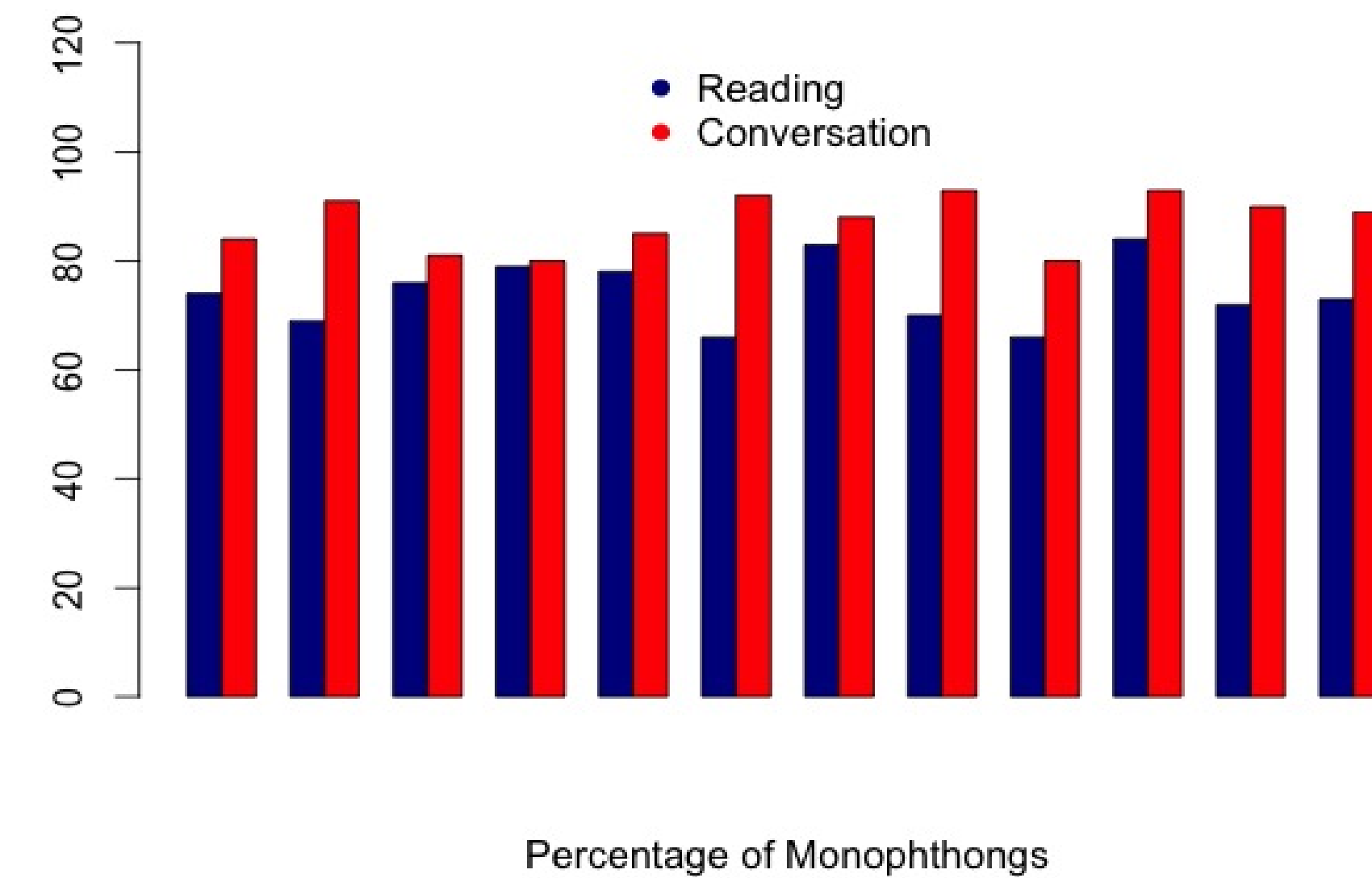
RESULTS

Overall Comparison of Monophthongization by Gender/Sex
Percentage of Monophthongs

Comparison of Women's Monophthongization by Style
Percentage of Monophthongs
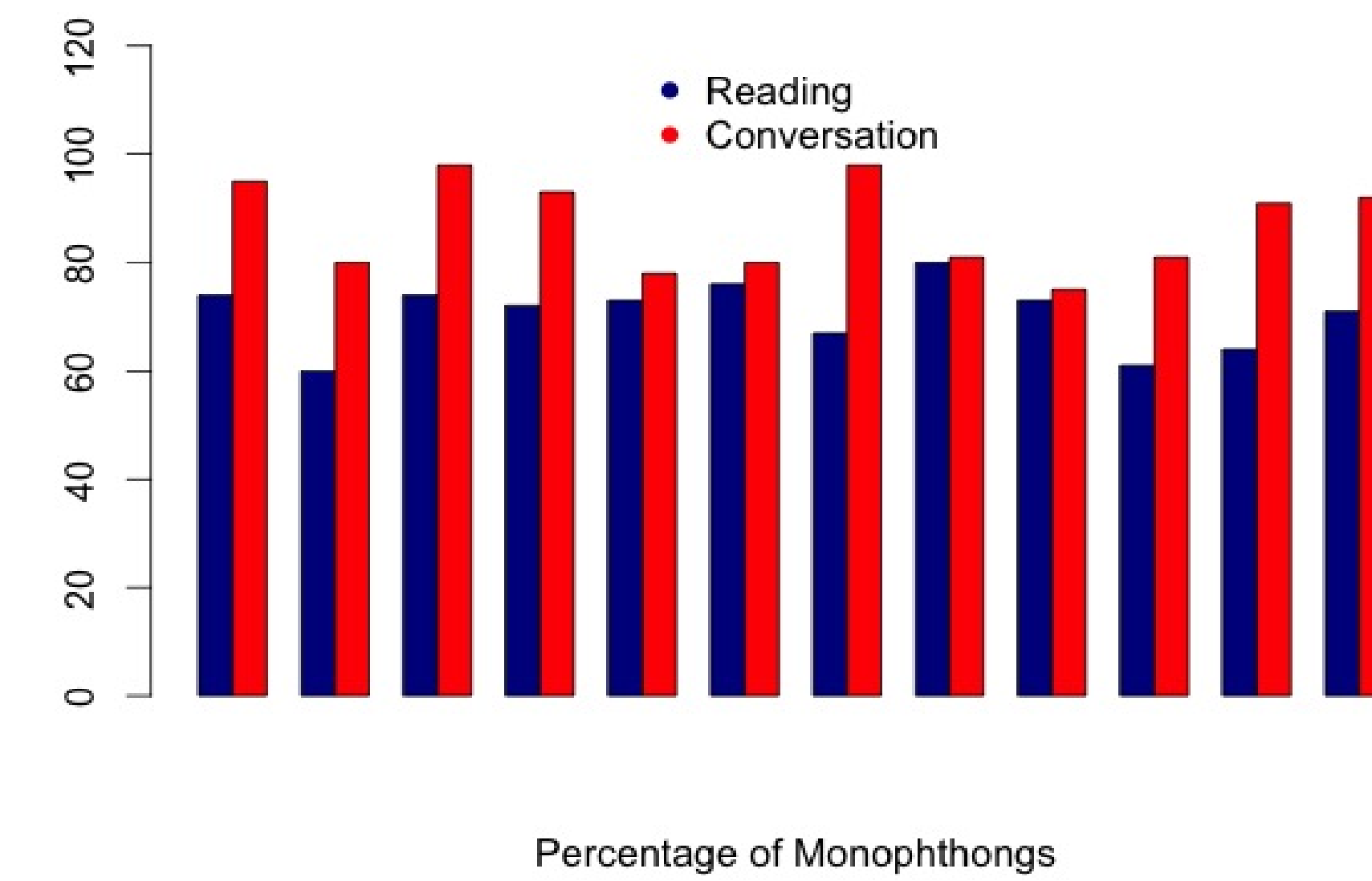
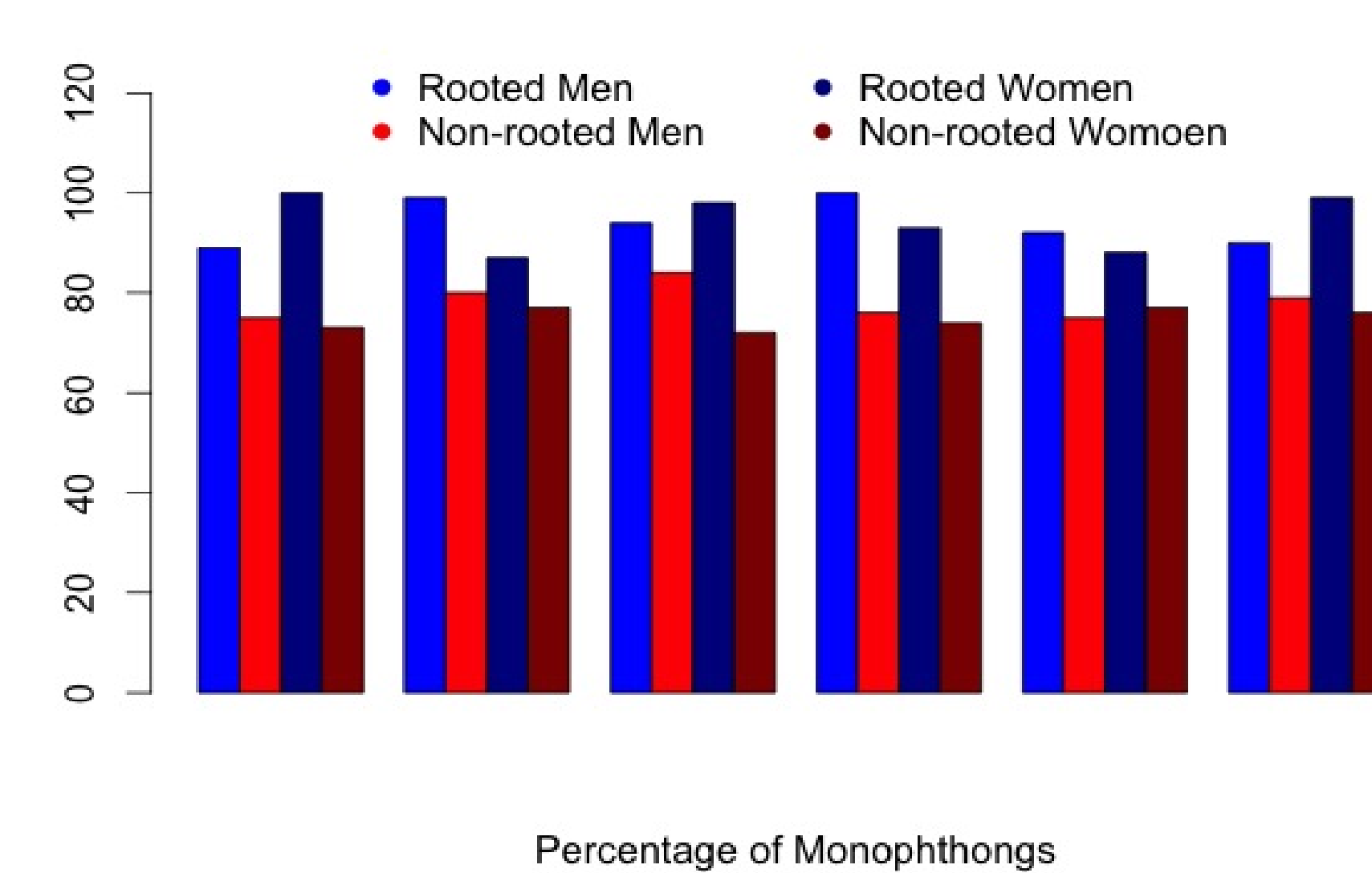Comparison of Men's Monophthongization by Style
Percentage of Monophthongs

Overall Comparison of Monophthongization by Rootedness
Percentage of Monophthongs

REFERENCES

[ARC,] Appalachian Regional Commission.

[Carver, 1987] Carver, C. M. (1987). *American regional dialects: A word study.* University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI.

[Greene, 2010] Greene, R. (2010). *Language, ideology, and identity in rural Eastern Kentucky.* PhD thesis, Stanford University.

[Hackenberg, 1975] Hackenberg, R. G. (1975). The application of sociolinguistic techniques in rural Appalachia. In Ordoubadian, R. and von Raffler-Engel, W., editors, *Views on language*, pages 192–200. Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN.

[Hurst, 1992] Hurst, C. (1992). *Social inequality: Forms, causes, and consequences.* Pearson Education, Upper Saddle River, NJ, 6th edition.

[Labov et al., 2006] Labov, W., Ash, S., and Boberg, C. (2006). *Atlas of North American English: Phonetics, phonology, and sound change.* Mouton de Gruyter, New York.

[Pederson et al., 1993] Pederson, L., McDaniel, S. L., and Adams, C. M., editors (1986-1993). *Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States*, volume 7 vols. University of Georgia Press, Athens, GA.

CONCLUSIONS

The Results (seen at left) indicate that overall, men monophthongize more than women, in line with previous research. However, both groups have several members approaching categorical monophthongal realizations of /aɪ/, which contradicts some research but supports [Greene, 2010] who was also working in a very rural area. Unsurprisingly, the Conversational data for both groups is more monophthongal than the Reading. It must be noted that several members of each group do not appear to style-shift very much. Examining the Conversational data, traditional sociolinguistic class groupings failed to explain or model the variation. Education, SES, and other metrics did not explain the variation. Those speakers whose identities and lives are more firmly rooted (i.e, higher scores on the Rootedness questions) in the local community have greater occurrence of monophthongization. This local orientation better captures the variation present in the community. A researcher approaching this community with *a priori* categories would be unable to account for this variation. Hence, we must be sure to approach all communities that are to be investigated on their own terms, informing our studies with locally relevant social differentiation. Each speaker is an individual, and may not fit neatly into a category.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study highlighted the need for better measures of identity. The results here are tentative. A more refined method based on sociological literature and research into place attachment is ongoing.