Styling the mother: Performing Baltimore's Hon persona

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1. INTRODUCTION

- Like several other US cities (Carmichael & Dajko 2016, Johnstone et al. 2006), Baltimore has developed a named social persona—**the Hon**—associated with the White working-class
- The performance of this persona is institutionalized in an annual festival, HonFest
- **This project investigates how performers use features of Baltimore English in performing the Hon**

2. THE HON PERSONA

- Social persona: A socially recognized *type* of person (D'Onofrio 2020)
- A persona is linked with a repertoire/style (Eckert 2008) and with social meanings

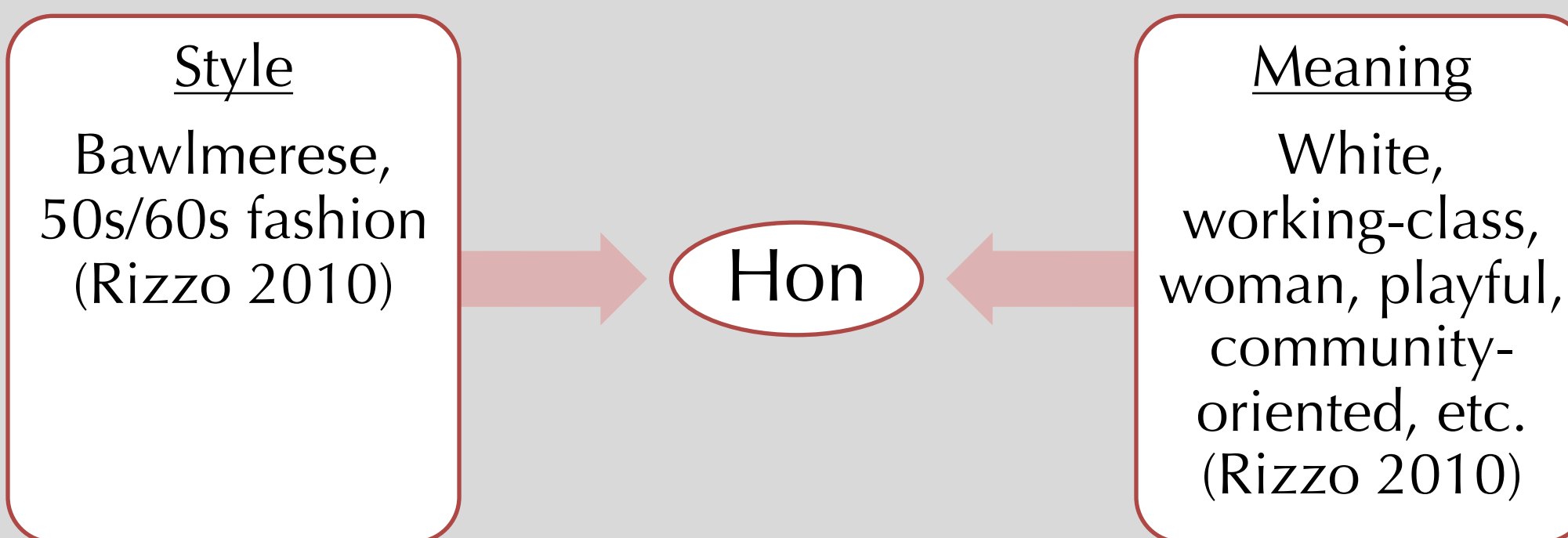| Style		Meaning
Bawlmerese, 50s/60s fashion (Rizzo 2010)	→ Hon ←	White, working-class, woman, playful, community-oriented, etc. (Rizzo 2010)

Figure 1. A book cover illustrating the Hon's visual style.

- Many Hon performers are children of working-class Baltimoreans
- They see their performances as honoring working-class women—like their own mothers (Rizzo 2010)
- Their performance stylizes the culture of their mothers

3. METHODS

- 7 members of "Hon Hive" community of practice (HonFest volunteers and repeat participants)
- All women from the Baltimore area
- 6 White, 1 Black
- Modified sociolinguistic interviews with two passages and two word lists
- First passage and word list read in normal style
- Second passage and word list read "as a Hon"
- Order counterbalanced across participants
- Data come from reading tasks

4. VARIABLES

- Vocalic variables reported for Baltimore English
- Dialect respellings used to infer salience

Feature	Example	Respelling count	Count in data
Tense BATH (/æh/)	<Cayntin> *Canton*	3	178
Raised CHOICE	<buoy> *boy*	2	127
Monophthongal TOIL (/oyl/)	<fawl> *foil*	10	36
Fronted GOAT	<clays> *clothes*	26	257
Fronted GOOSE	<bewt> *boot*	7	247
Fronted/raised MOUTH	<airs> *hours*	15	259
Raised NORTH/FORCE	<lured> *lord*	5	131
Monophthongal PRIZE (/ayV/)	<tam> *time*	17	294
Monophthongal TILE (/ayl/, /ayr/)	<doll> *dial*	49	72
Raised START	<core> *car*	5	132
Raised THOUGHT	<owen> *on*	1	78

Table 1. Target features with counts of dialect respellings in Bawlmerese folk dictionaries. Pre-lateral environments are excluded from GOAT and GOOSE.

5. RESULTS

- "Performance scores" are assigned to indicate degree of shift between guises
- 1 = large shift
- 0.5 = small shift
- TOIL and TILE excluded due to low counts (but see vowel plot)

	A	AB	D	F	K	LR	MA	Total
Tense BATH	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	4
Raised CHOICE	0.5	0	1	0	0	0.5	0	2
Fronted GOAT	1	1	1	1	0	1	0.5	5.5
Fronted GOOSE	0.5	0	1	0.5	0	1	1	4
Fronted/raised MOUTH	1	0.5	1	0	1	1	1	5.5
Raised NORTH	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Monophthongal PRIZE	1	1	0	0.5	0	1	0	3.5
Raised START	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Raised THOUGHT	0	1	0	0	1	1	0.5	3.5
Total	6	4.5	6	3	2	5.5	3	

Table 2. Shifts in target variables between guises. A = Angelina, AB = Anita Boh, D = Dottie, F = Faye, K = Karen, LR = Lavender Rose, MA = Ms. Annett. All names are pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

Which features show the most style shifting?
- Fronted GOAT
- Fronted/raised MOUTH
- Tense BATH
- Fronted GOOSE
- Monophthongal PRIZE
- Raised THOUGHT

Why?
- Fronted GOAT and monophthongal PRIZE are Bawlmerese stereotypes
- Fronted/raised MOUTH and fronted GOOSE appear frequently in dialect respellings

These features are part of the performance register and the "metadiscourse" register of Bawlmerese (Johnstone 2018)

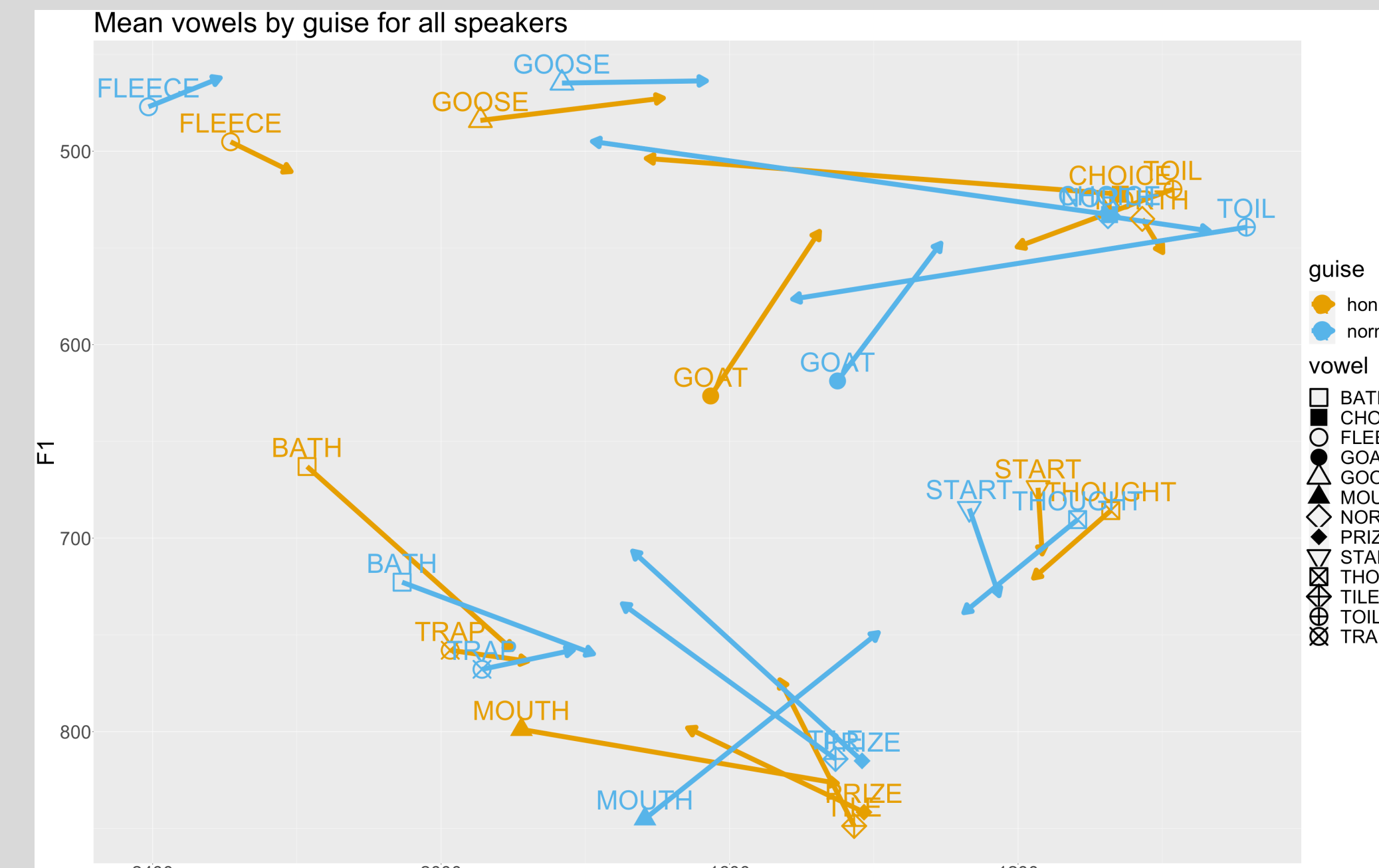Mean vowels by guise for all speakers

Figure 2. Vowel plot for normal and Hon guise. Values for nuclei are from 35% through the vowel. Values for offglides are from 80% through the vowel

What about BATH and THOUGHT?
- Their use in performance suggests that they are salient (see Schilling-Estes 1998)

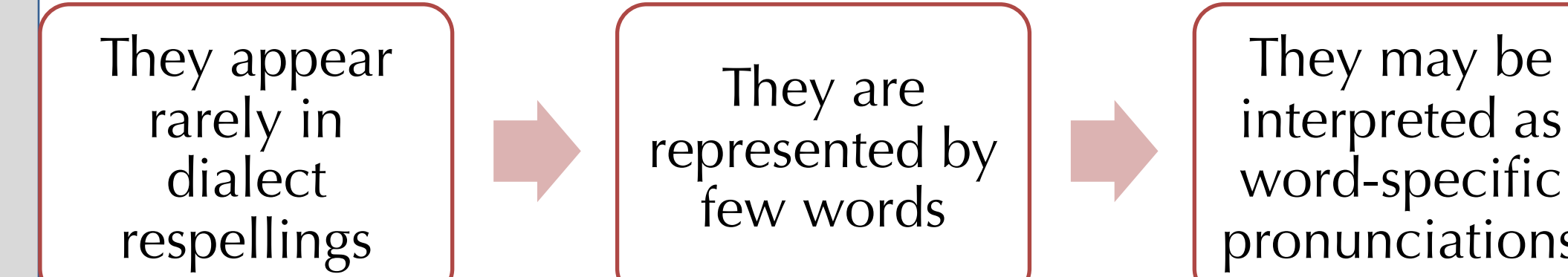These features are part of the performance register but not the metadiscourse register

- They may not appear in dialect respellings because they are difficult to represent orthographically (see Johnstone 2018)
- They may not be stereotypes of Bawlmerese because they are stereotypes of Philadelphia/New York (Labov et al. 2013, Newman 2014)

What about the features that didn't shift?
- Only one speaker raised START, but five speakers *backed* START
- START may be both raising and backing in this region (cf. Labov et al. 2006: fig. 17.9)
- The backing may be more salient than the raising

Even if a vowel is changing in multiple dimensions (F1 and F2), only one dimension might be salient

- Few speakers raised CHOICE or NORTH
- These features have little salience

| They appear rarely in dialect respellings | → | They are represented by few words | → | They may be interpreted as word-specific pronunciations |

Which speakers used the most features?
- Dottie, Angelina, and Lavender Rose had the highest performance scores
- They are all natives of Baltimore or its inner suburbs with working-class backgrounds
- They are core members of the Hon Hive and have attended HonFest more than other participants

How about the speakers in the middle?
- Anita Boh had the 4th highest score
- She is from an outer suburb of Baltimore
- She has the next most HonFest attendances after Dottie, Lavender Rose, and Angelina

- Exposure to/experience with Hon performances is more important than speaker background in predicting performance score
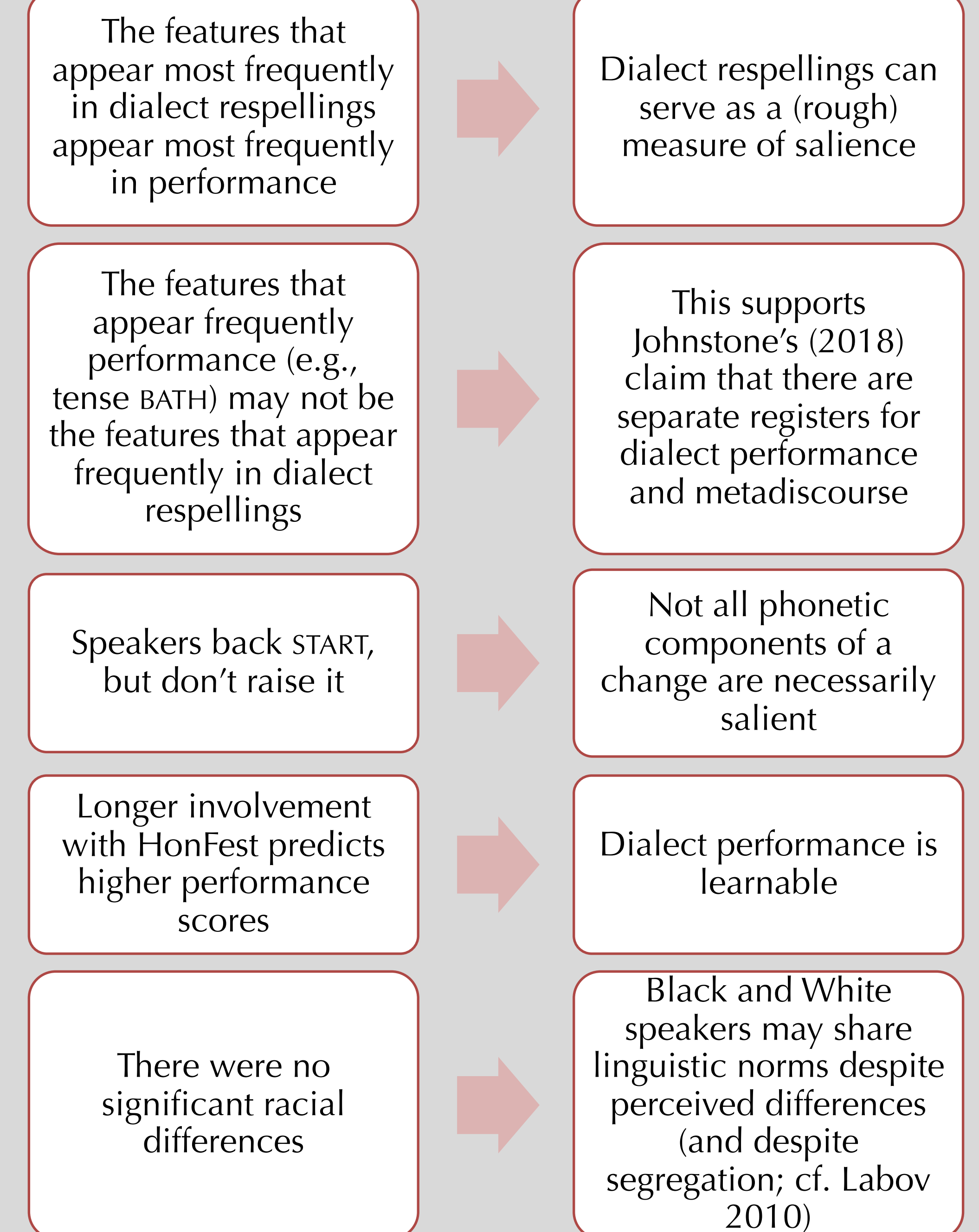
Dialect performance is a learnable skill, even in the presumed absence of explicit dialect coaching

And the other speaker in the middle?
- Ms. Annett had the 5th highest score
- She is the only Black speaker in the sample
- She commented unprompted during the reading task that she would perform the Hon in her "African-American style"
- However, she is not unique with respect to any variable considered here
- The most notable differences are that she doesn't tense BATH and only slightly fronts GOAT

With respect to vocalic features, Black and White speakers share similar norms for performing the Hon

6. CONCLUSION

The features that appear most frequently in dialect respellings appear most frequently in performance	→	Dialect respellings can serve as a (rough) measure of salience
The features that appear frequently in performance (e.g., tense BATH) may not be the features that appear frequently in dialect respellings	→	This supports Johnstone's (2018) claim that there are separate registers for dialect performance and metadiscourse
Speakers back START, but don't raise it	→	Not all phonetic components of a change are necessarily salient
Longer involvement with HonFest predicts higher performance scores	→	Dialect performance is learnable
There were no significant racial differences	→	Black and White speakers may share linguistic norms despite perceived differences (and despite segregation; cf. Labov 2010)

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