

Karen English: Refugee Language Acquisition and Use in the United States

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Overview

Question: How do rates of Consonant Cluster Reduction (CCR) in a refugee community compare with CCR in more established varieties of English?

Study: Data from sociolinguistic interviews with Karen refugees is used to examine the initial stages of a new sustained-contact variety.

Conclusion: Initial analysis shows that Karen English is unique, showing a lack of following phonetic environment effects (similar to creolized Englishes), but with CCR rates similar in range to more established sustained contact varieties.

The Phenomenon: Consonant Cluster Reduction

Consonant Cluster Reduction (CCR) occurs when a word-final consonant cluster (such as [-st] in *west*) is reduced, typically to a single segment (e.g. *wes' side*).

Clusters are reduced at variable rates depending on morpho-phonemic factors such as the following phonetic content.

e.g. Word-final clusters are more likely to reduce when followed by a word starting in a consonant (*the blin' man*) than when followed by a vowel (*the blind ape*) or pause.

What varieties have been studied?

- Hyde County, NC (Wolfram and Thomas, 2002) (White and Black)
- York, England (Fragilemonte and Temple, 2005)
- New Zealand (Schreier, 2005) (White and Maori)
- Chicano (Santa Ana, 1992)
- Tejano (Bayley, 1994)
- St. Helenian (Schreier, 2005)
- Tristan da Cunha (Schreier, 2005)
- And many more**
 - There are many studies of CCR in varieties that are not represented here. These studies in particular have been chosen because they provided detailed information about the particular percentages of CCR based on following phonetic context.

The Problem

We have data from three types of English for CCR rates:

- Native English
- Sustained Contact English
- Creolized English

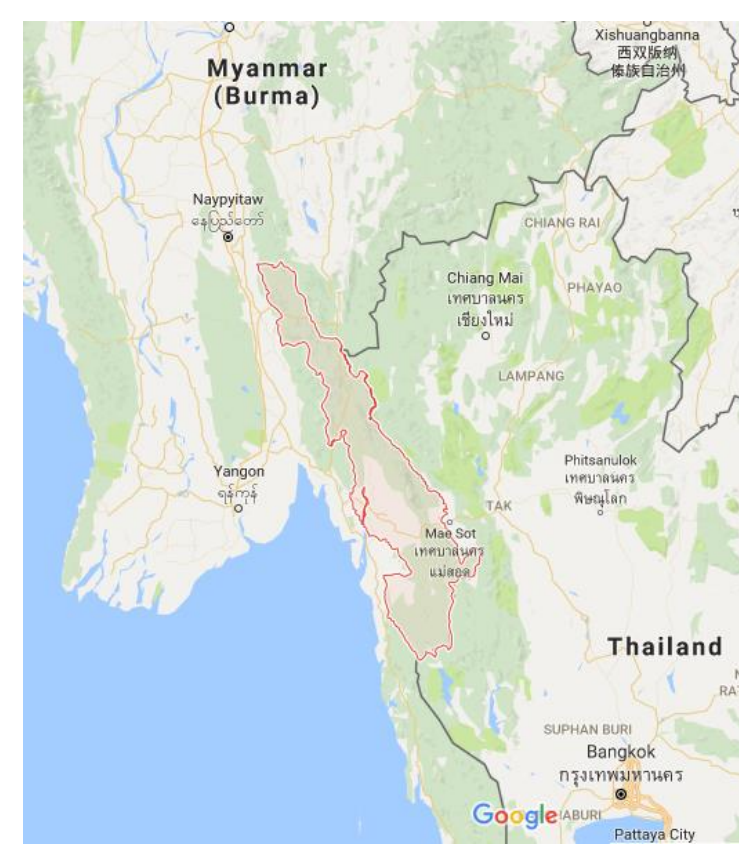
However, there is little data about the specific comparative rates of CCR for the initial stages of Sustained Contact Englishes.

Research Question and Study

How do CCR rates for refugees compare to long-term established varieties of English?

This study presents the preliminary results from 50 sociolinguistic interviews conducted with members of the Karen community throughout the United States. Results presented here come from 6 speakers of Karen English who have been in the United from 2 – 9 years.

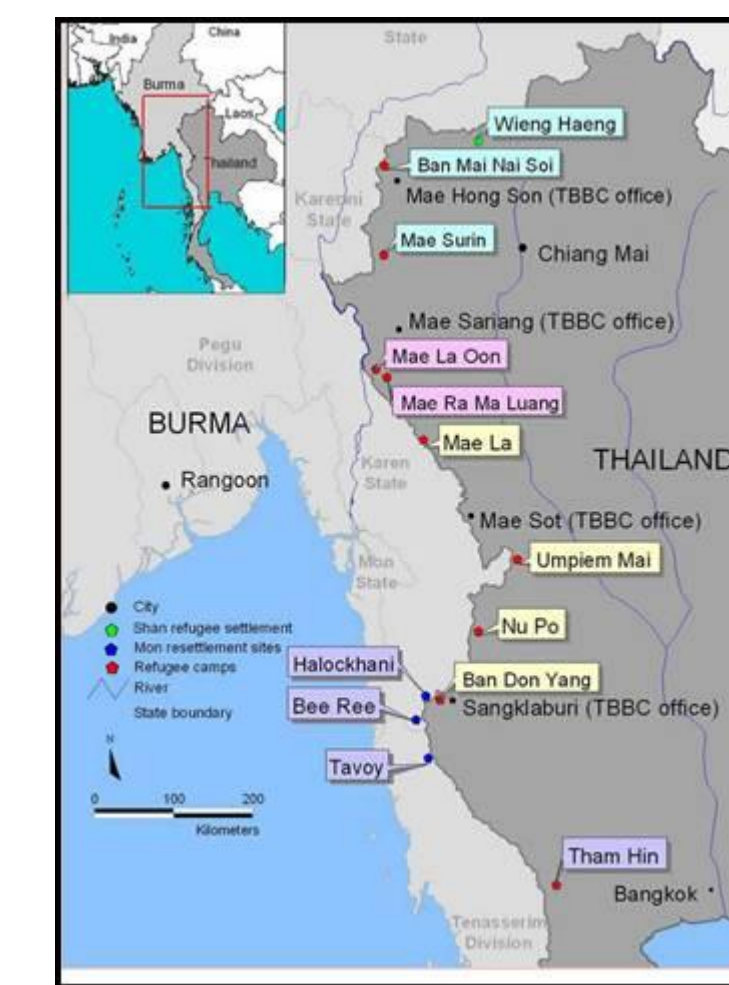
Origins



The Karen are an ethnic group originating in Myanmar (currently known as Burma).

Their language is Tibeto-Burman. (Ethnologue, 2016) While it allows initial consonant clusters, it does not allow coda clusters and even codas are highly restricted.

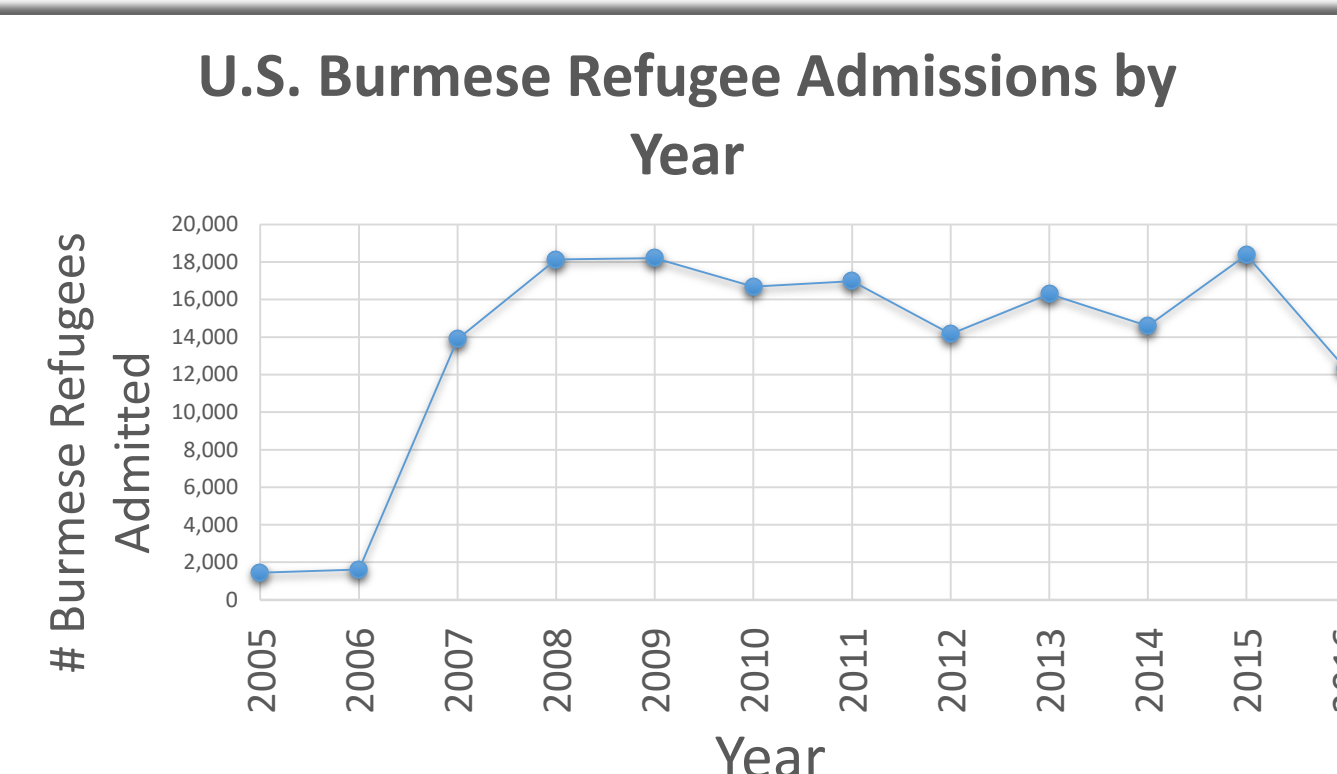
Undergoing sustained conflict and persecution by the Burmese government, many have fled over the border into Thailand, where they reside(d) in refugee camps.



Resettlement

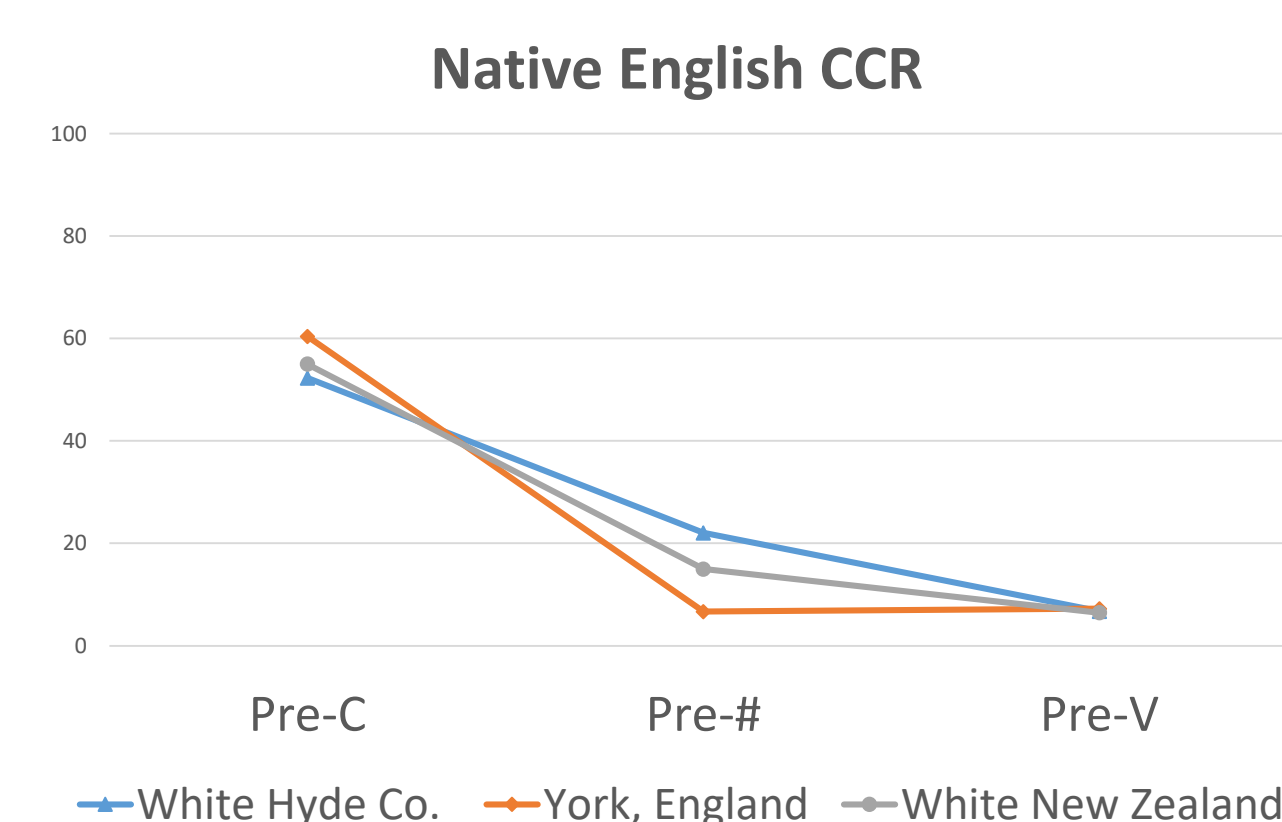
Beginning in 2007, the Karen were made a priority refugee group by the Bush Administration.

Since then, thousands have resettled throughout the United States, primarily in the South and Midwest. (Refugee Processing Center, 2016)

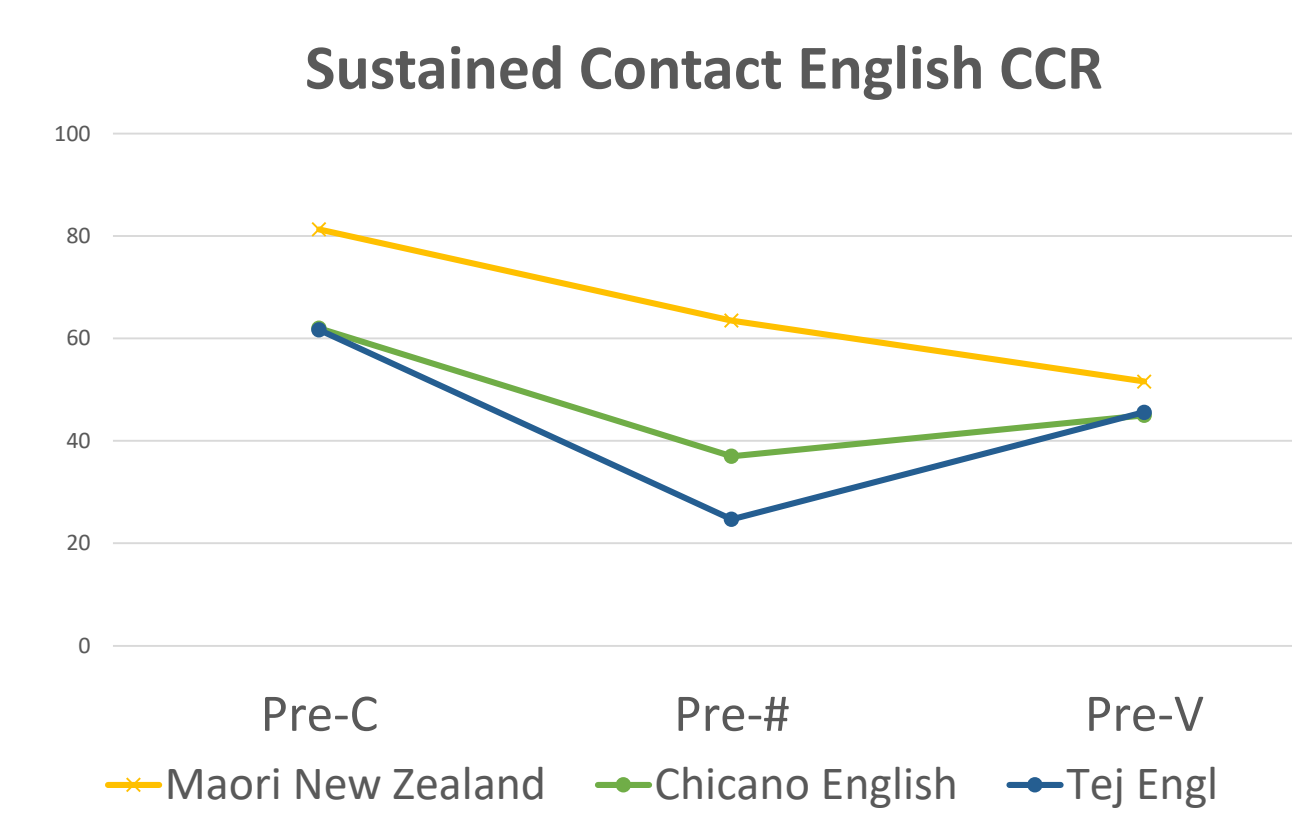


Due to ongoing conflict in their country of origin and rapid adoption of English as a first language by the younger generation, this variety is highly likely to develop into a new sustained-contact variety of English.

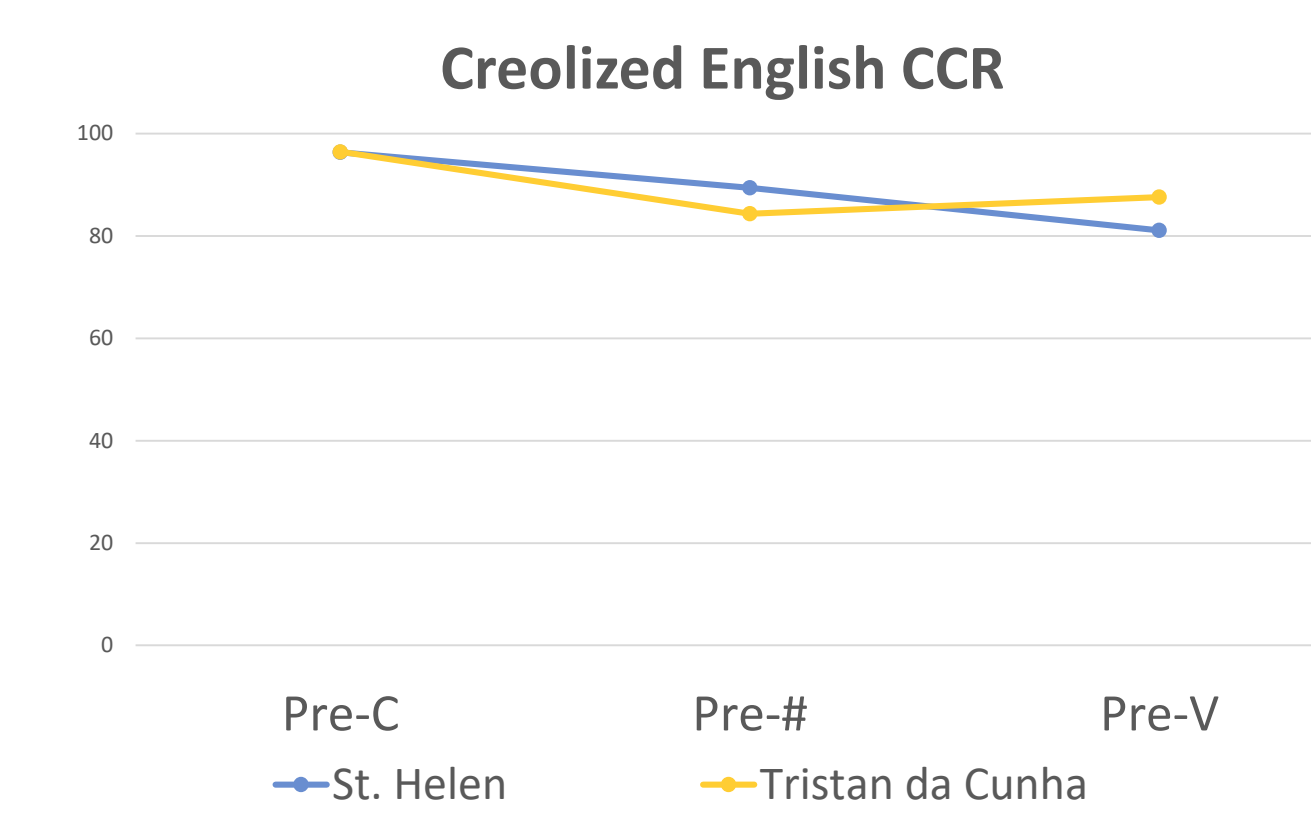
CCR in World Englishes



- Developed in communities that historically spoke English.
- CCR rates differ based on following phonetic environment.

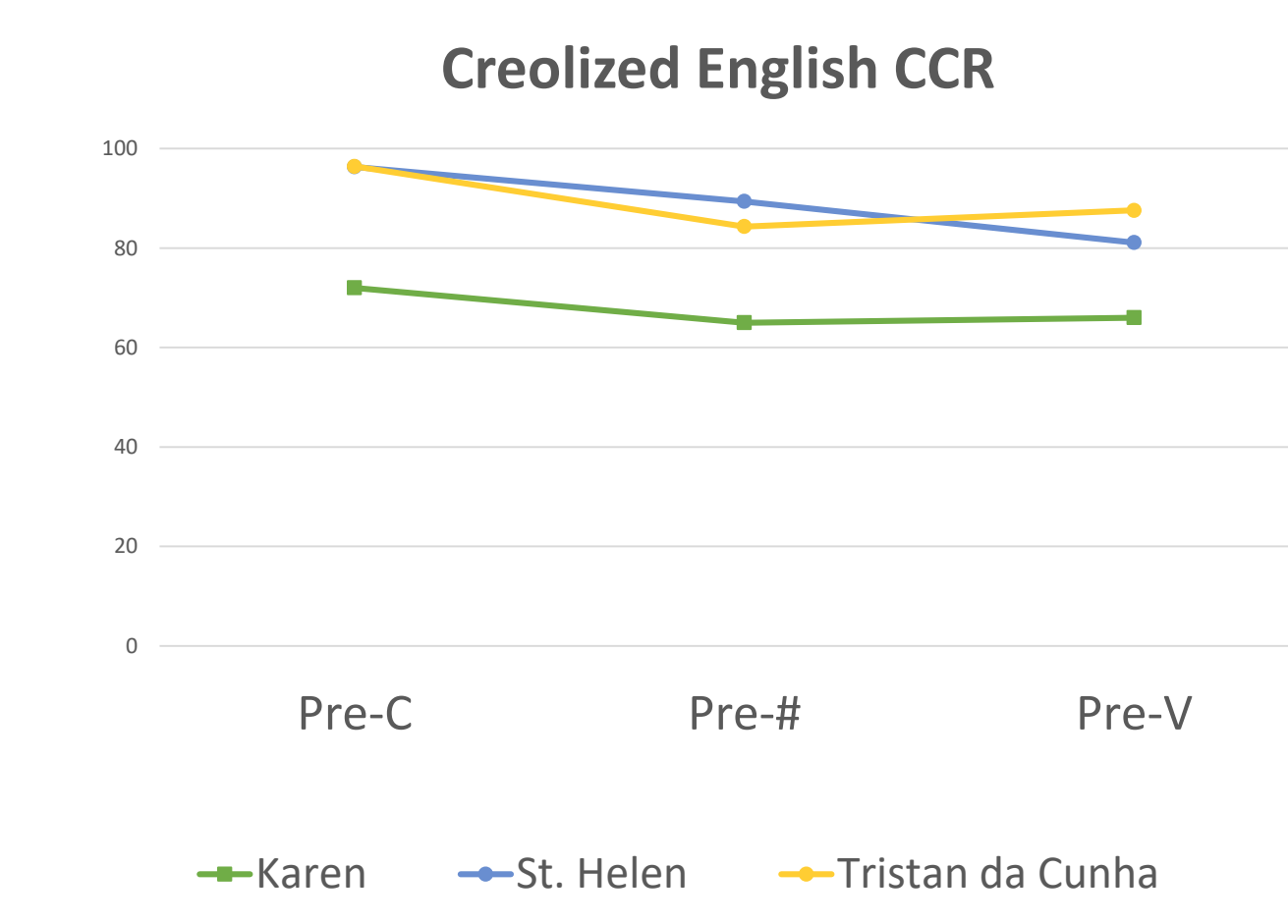
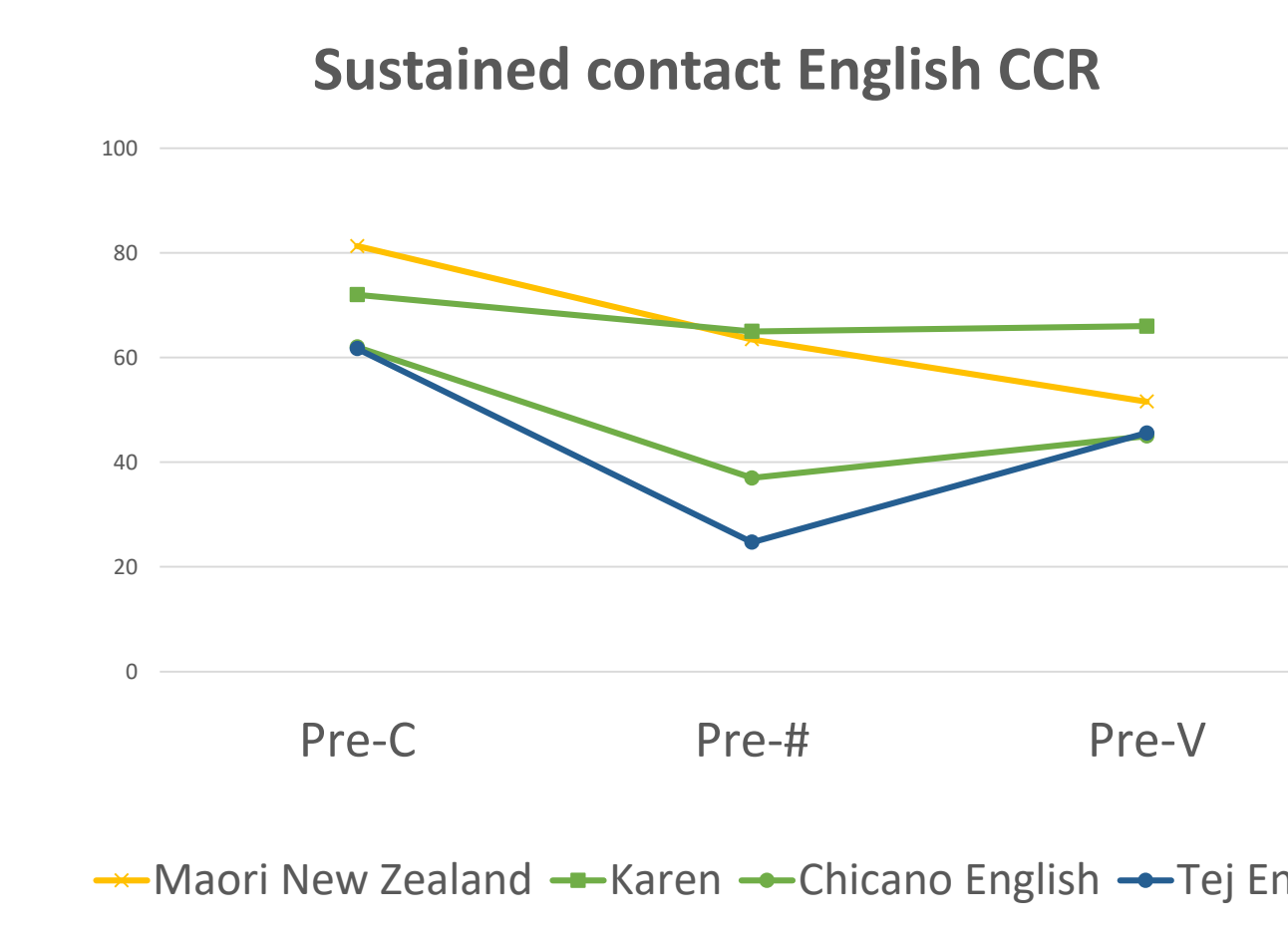
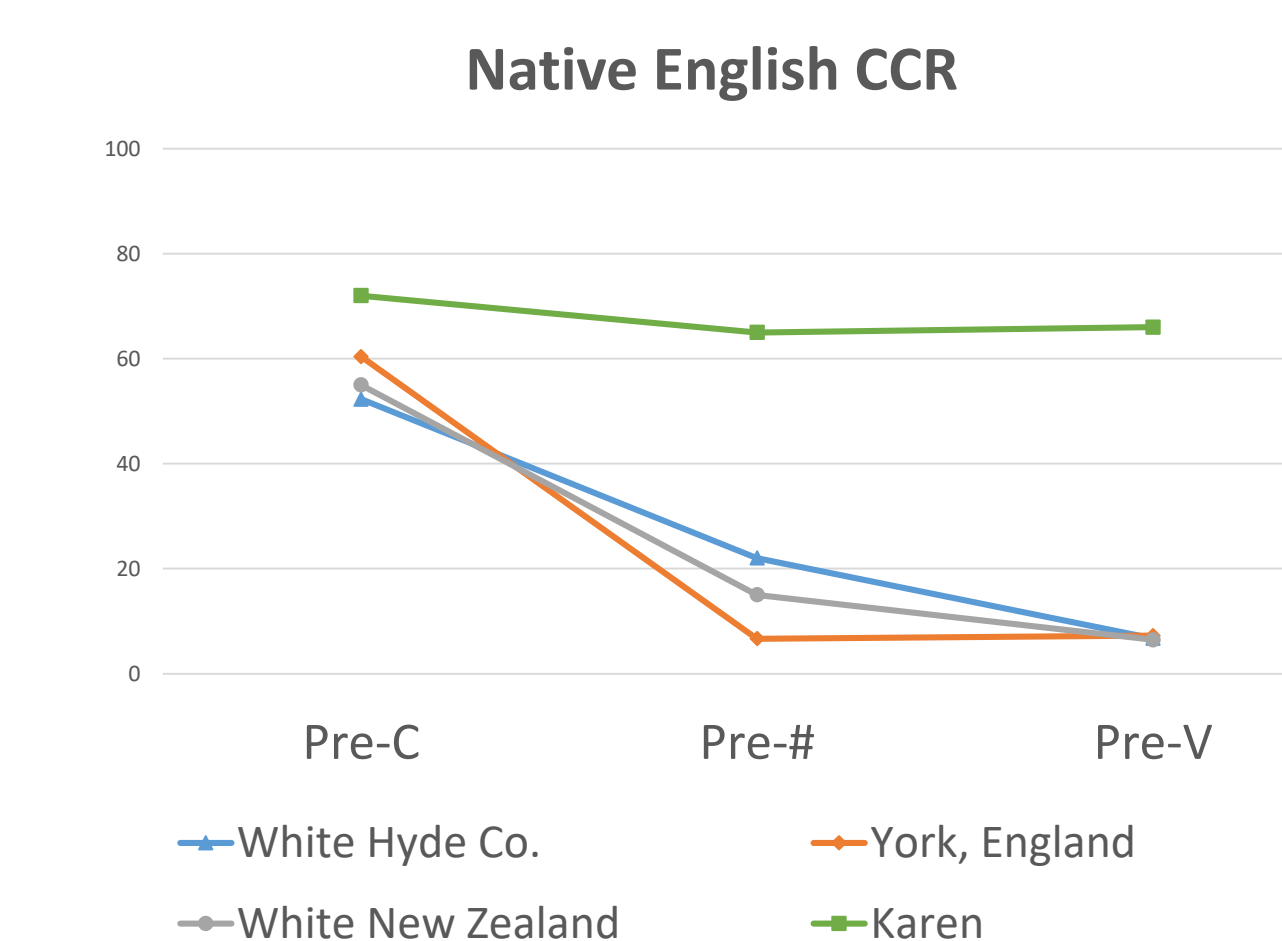


- Developed in communities that did not historically speak English.
- Occurred due to either colonization (Maori English) or immigration (Chicano/Tejano English)
- CCR rates are higher than those of Native English varieties and in some instances, show different patterns.



- Developed in communities which have had limited contact with other varieties of English and developed into creoles due to contact with other languages.
- CCR rates are high, regardless of following phonetic environment.

Karen Comparison



Conclusion:

Refugee CCR rates are unique

Initial rates of Consonant Cluster Reduction for new sustained-contact varieties disregard following phonetic environment similar to Creolized English CCRs.

However, their overall CCR production rates are lower than Creolized English CCR and are more similar in range to those of sustained contact English varieties.

Further Research

As this analysis is currently in its very initial stages, it will be interesting to see if and how rates might change with data from more speakers.

Future analyses will explore at what point the community of resettlement begins to show an impact on reduction rates.

Select References

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