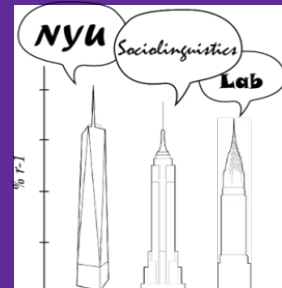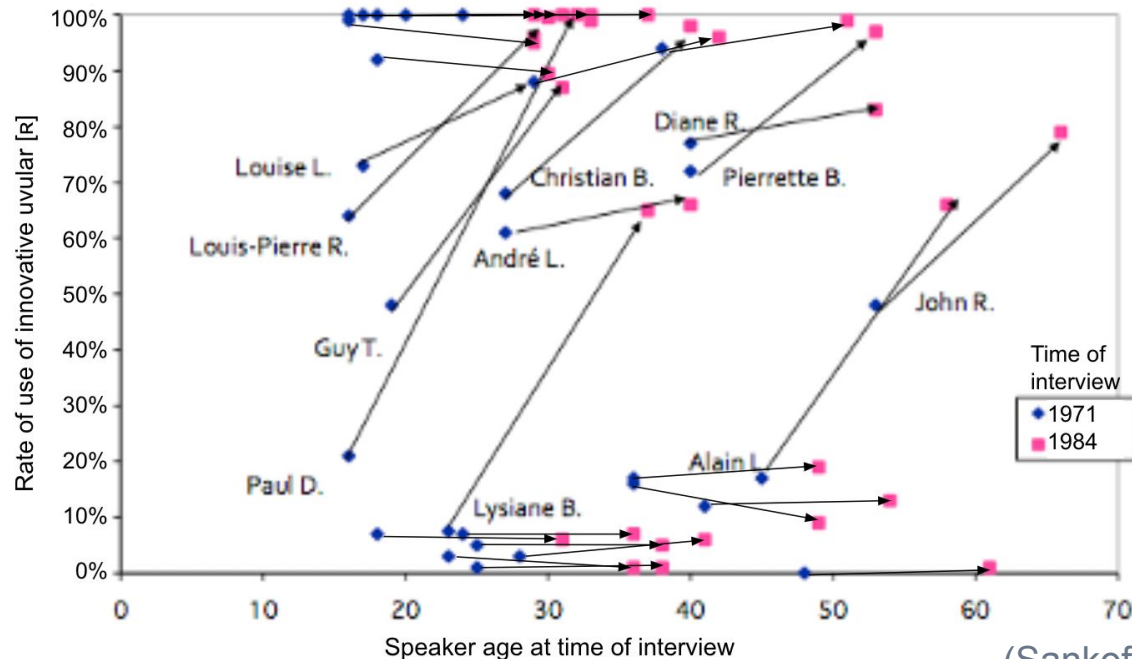# Style and the lifespan

Laurel MacKenzie, New York University
RePARC Kick-off Meeting, 9 November 2023

Longitudinal sociolinguistic research has found that many language users can **change** aspects of their language **over their lifespans**.

But longitudinal studies often have stylistic confounds:

- changes of interviewer

- changes of interview location

- changes of topic…

…meaning that it can be difficult to disentangle lifespan change from style-shifting.

At the same time, perfectly controlling the interview context is difficult. More feasible is intentionally eliciting multiple styles during data collection.

(Rickford & Price 2013, Gregersen et al. 2018, Rickford 2021, Wagner 2021)

⇒ Longitudinal data from multiple styles is **methodologically** important.

Another advantage of deliberately collecting longitudinal data from different styles is that it can shed light on whether and how **speakers' stylistic range can change over their lifespan**.

- This in turn can help us better understand how older speakers use socially meaningful variants. (Pichler et al. 2018)

⇒ Longitudinal data from multiple styles is **theoretically** important.

In this talk, I present longitudinal data from two styles over a very long lifespan in order to assess **whether and how a speaker's stylistic range can change as they age**.

Sir David Attenborough

(image source)

Why and how might stylistic range change over the lifespan?

- With some variables, speakers get **more vernacular** in later life.

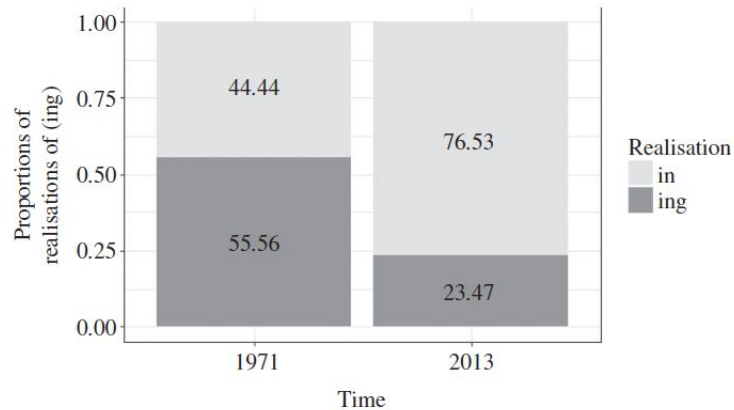Later life brings "a weakening of the pressure to conform to societal norms." (Coulmas 2013:72)

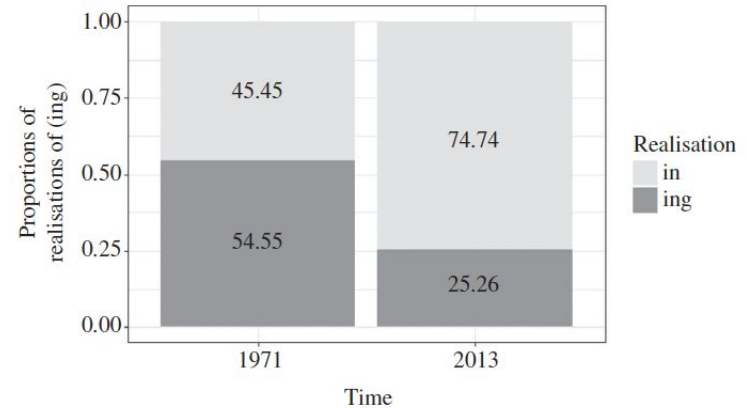**Figure 3:** Distributions of (ing) for Edith in 1971 and 2013.

**Figure 6:** Distributions of (ing) for Rob in 1971 and 2013.

Working-class speakers; stable variable; *-in'* variant associated with casualness

(Mechler & Buchstaller 2019:7, 9)

Why and how might stylistic range change over the lifespan?

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Later life brings "a weakening of the pressure to conform to societal norms." (Coulmas 2013:72)
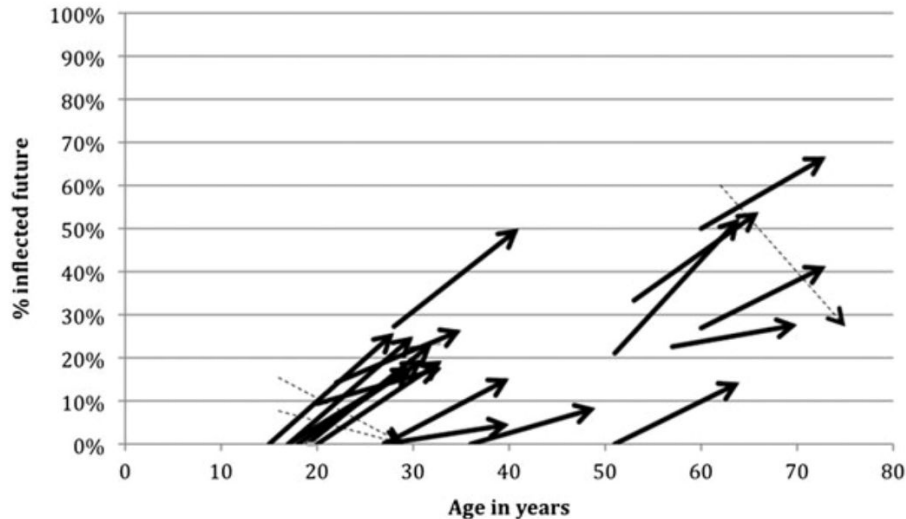
With these variables, I predict that **stylistic range would decrease** over the lifespan.
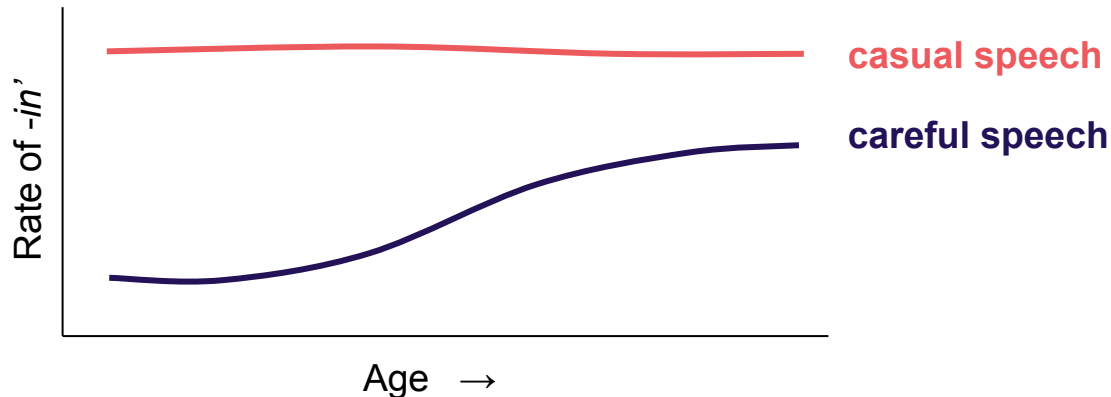
Why and how might stylistic range change over the lifespan?

- With other variables, speakers get **more formal** in later life.

"[Inflected future] is perhaps a marker of adult speech, appropriate to the more formal discourse characteristic of this life stage." (Wagner & Sankoff 2011:299)
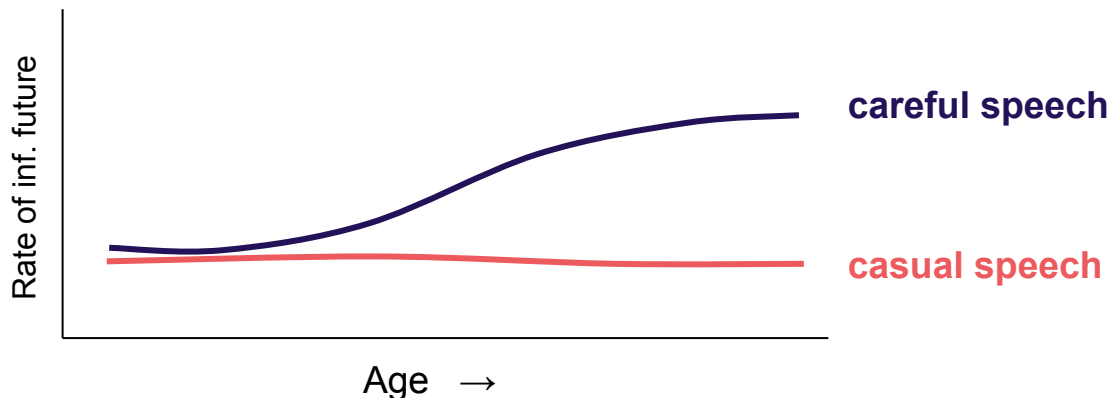
Why and how might stylistic range change over the lifespan?

- With other variables, speakers get **more formal** in later life.

"[Inflected future] is perhaps a marker of adult speech, appropriate to the more formal discourse characteristic of this life stage." (Wagner & Sankoff 2011:299)

With these variables, I predict that **stylistic range would increase** over the lifespan.

Indeed, only older speakers show stylistic differentiation with this variable. (Sankoff & Wagner 2020)

The pattern we see will depend on the social meanings of the variants under study and a speaker's social characteristics.
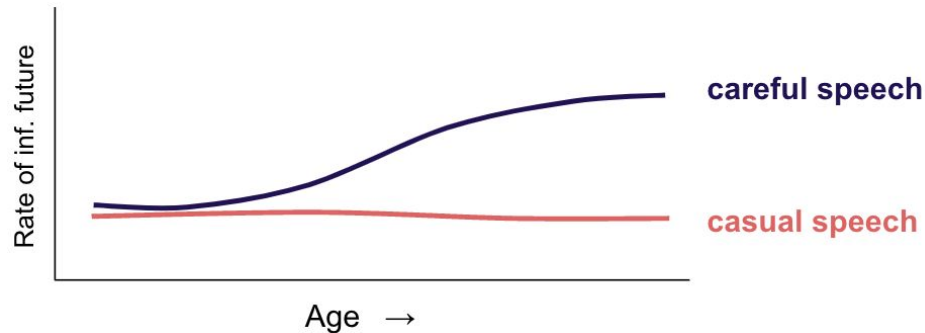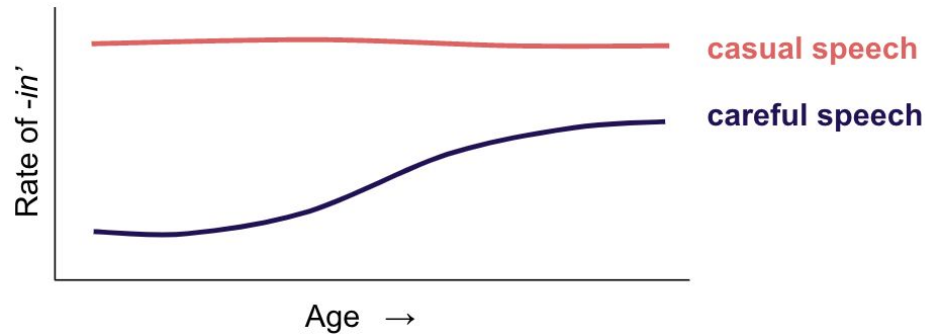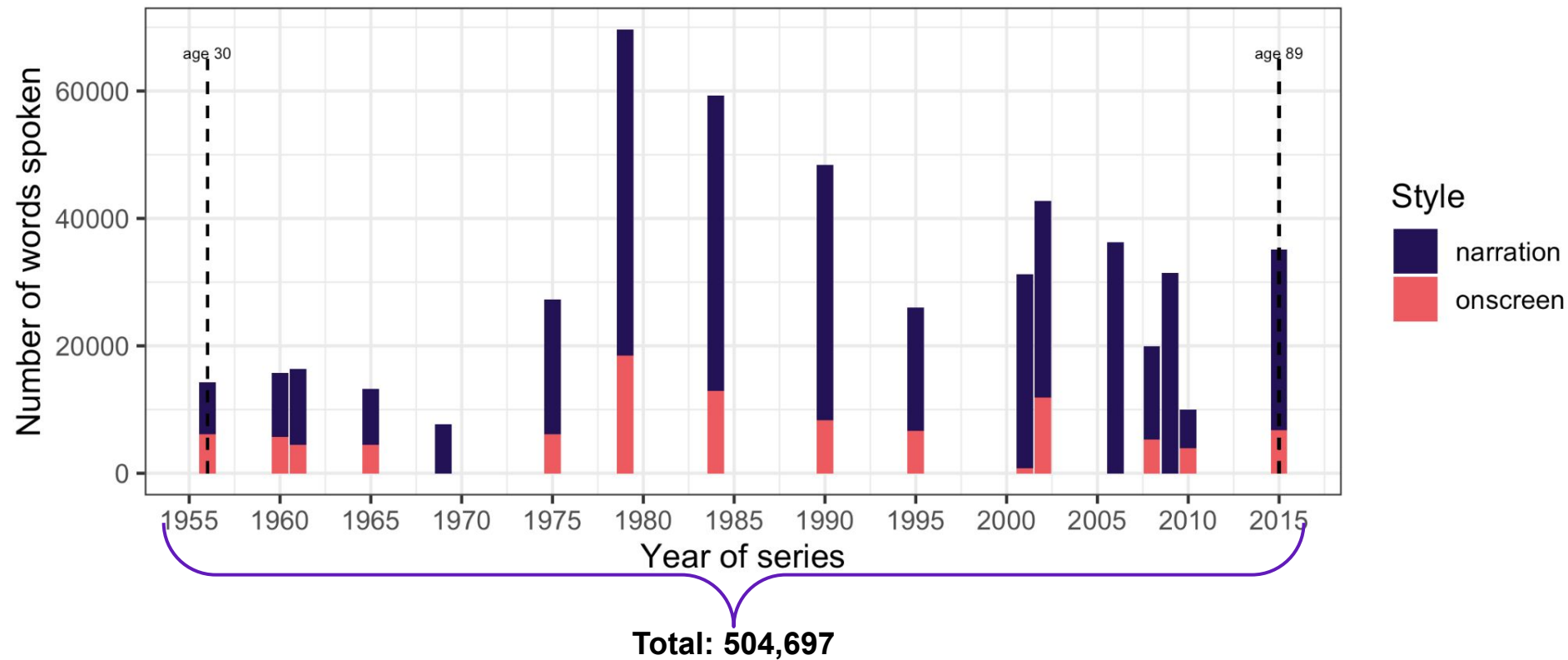
Sir David Attenborough

- English narrator of nature documentaries beginning with *Zoo Quest* (1954), most recently *Our Planet II* (2023)

- Born 1926, London (age 97)

- Educated at Cambridge

- Speaker of Received Pronunciation (RP)

The Attenborough Corpus: 60 years of documentaries sampled at ~5 year intervals.
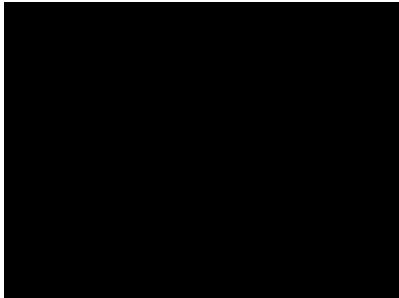
Stylistic differentiation: pre-recorded **narration** vs. (semi-)extemporaneous **onscreen** speech.

1956
narration
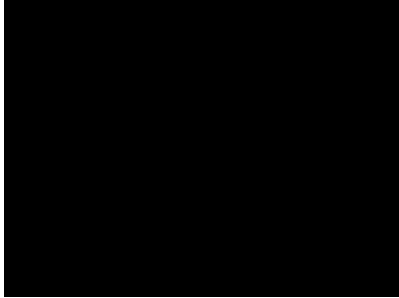
onscreen

2015
narration, onscreen

The variable: realization of word-internal /ɹ/ as [ɾ].

ve<u>r</u>y va<u>r</u>ied   🔊 1961   🔊 1979   🔊 1995

fo<u>r</u>est's cho<u>r</u>us   🔊 2006

The variable: realization of word-internal /ɹ/ as [ɾ].

- Coded…
  - …as a binary (tap vs. approximant)
  - …by ear, with reference to the spectrogram, mostly by MG; ca. 18% coded by MG + LM to check reliability
  - Worse inter-annotator agreement in the four earliest series; all coding disagreements in those series scrutinized and agreed upon (or omitted) by the two coders

The variable: realization of word-internal /ɹ/ as [ɾ].
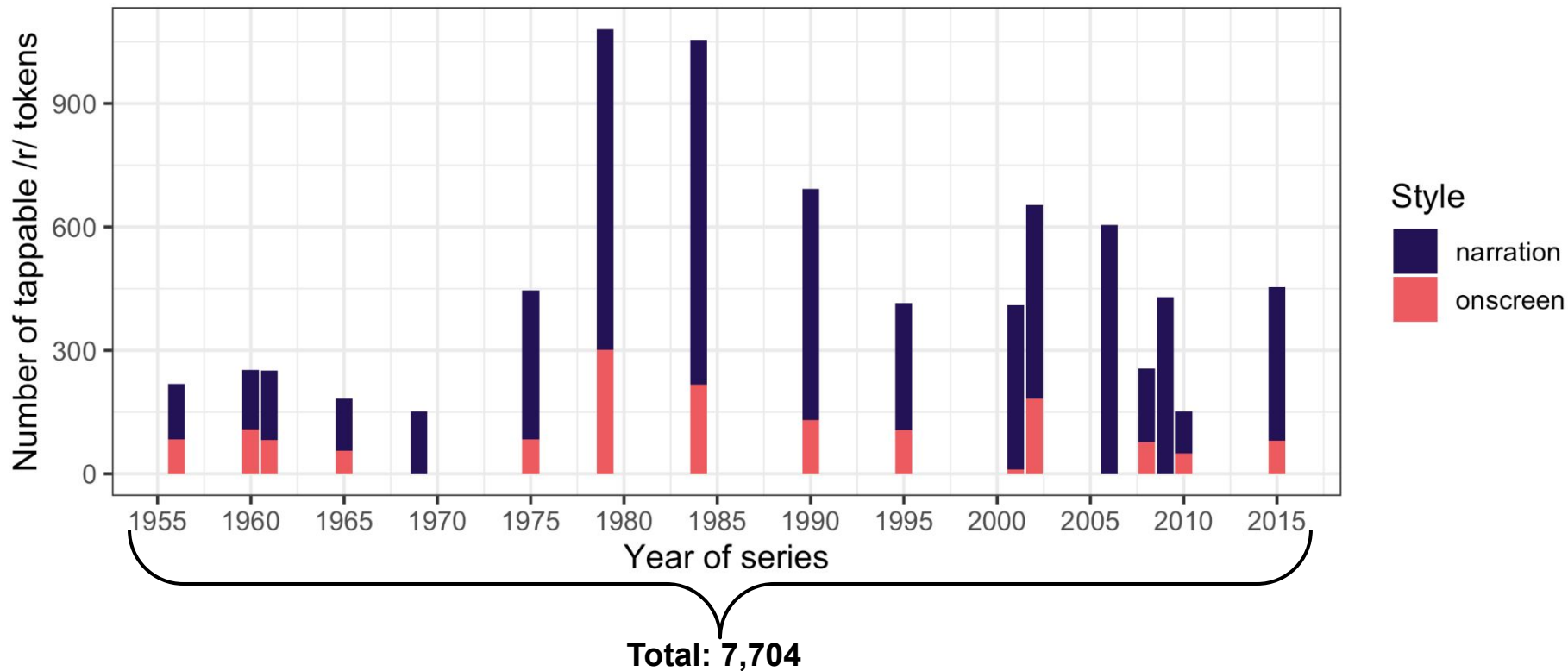
The variable: realization of word-internal /ɹ/ as [ɾ].

● Change over time:

>   **Loss of word-internal /ɹ/-tapping** is among the "**changes almost complete**" in Received Pronunciation, i.e. changes "which are now typical of almost all speakers" of that variety. (Cruttenden 2014:83)
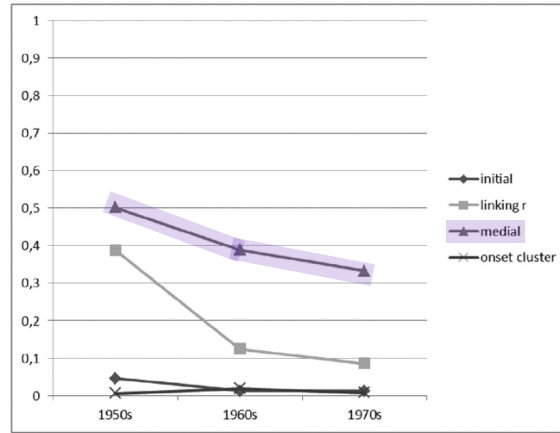

Figure 3.3 Trends in rates of tapped and trilled /r/ by word position according to decade of recording.

(Fabricius 2017:54)

# The variable: realization of word-internal /ɹ/ as [ɾ].

- Social profile:
    - "typical of some varieties of [**upper-crust** Received Pronunciation]" (Wells 1982:282)

    - "has **upper-class** connotations" (Hughes et al. 2012:46–47)

    - may "convince and seem **authoritative, elegant, or noble**" or "seem **over-played, outdated and over-the-top**," based on social media commentary (Fabricius 2022:178)

Research questions:

1. Does Attenborough show **stylistic differentiation** of variable /ɹ/-tapping as expected given its social profile?

2. If so, does he show this **consistently over his lifespan**?

Modeling /ɹ/-tapping over time with GAMMs.

- Generalized Additive Mixed Models are a type of regression model that can capture a **non-linear relationship** between the response variable and some continuous predictor variable(s).
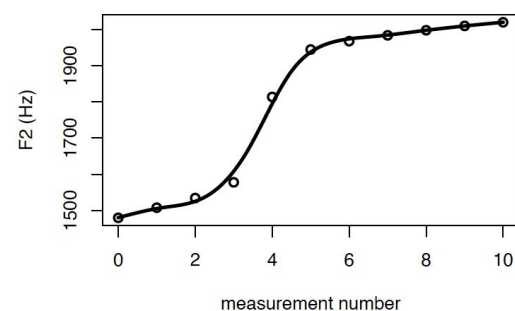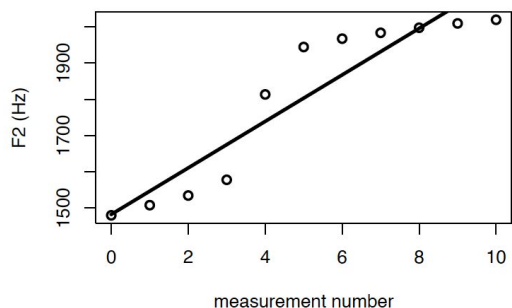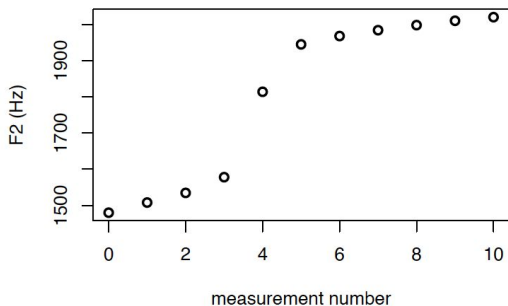
(Sóskuthy 2017)

Modeling /ɹ/-tapping over time with GAMMs.

- GAMMS are ideal for capturing **wiggly** trajectories, like those found in multi-time point lifespan work.

Figure 1: Rate of stylistic fronting in Sigfússon's speeches.

(Stefánsdóttir and Ingason 2018:169)

Modeling /ɹ/-tapping over time with GAMMs.

- GAMMS are ideal for capturing **wiggly** trajectories, like those found in multi-time point lifespan work.
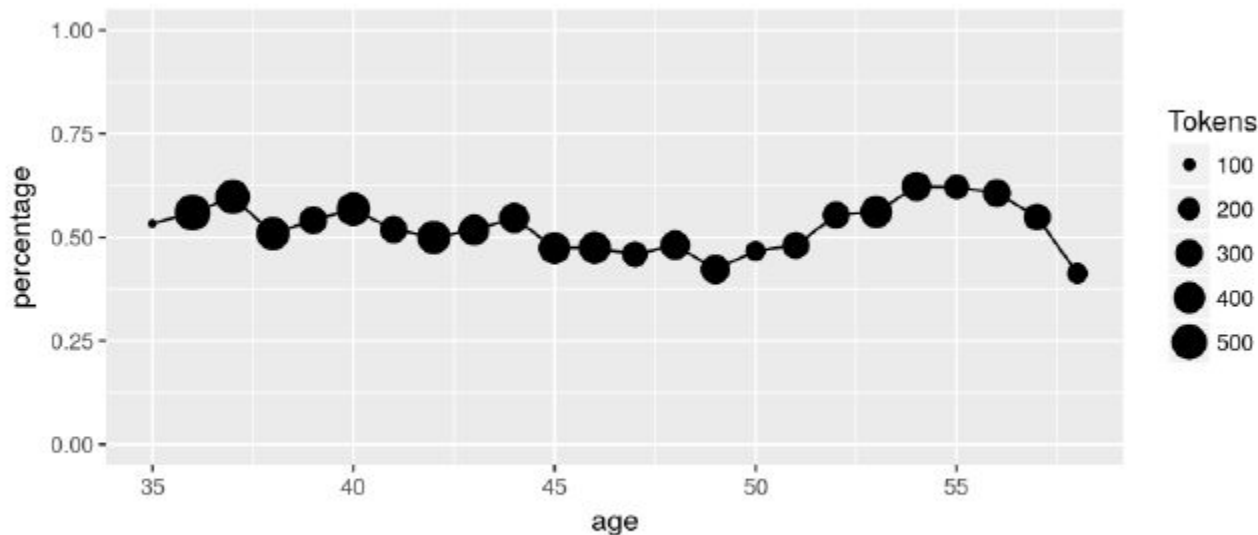
- In addition to capturing wiggly trajectories, GAMMs allow for continuous/categorical fixed effects, interactions between those and the wiggly predictor(s), and random effects.

Significant effects in the Attenborough GAMM:

- More tapping **morpheme-internally** (e.g. *va<u>r</u>iation, a<u>r</u>ea, cha<u>r</u>acter*) than morpheme-finally (e.g. *disappea<u>r</u>-ing, nea<u>r</u>-est, sto<u>r</u>-age, po<u>r</u>-ous)*

- More tapping at **faster rates of speech** and when **surrounding vowels are shorter**

- More tapping **earlier in an episode**, though this effect varies across the years

Significant effects in the Attenborough GAMM:

- More tapping in **narration** than in onscreen speech
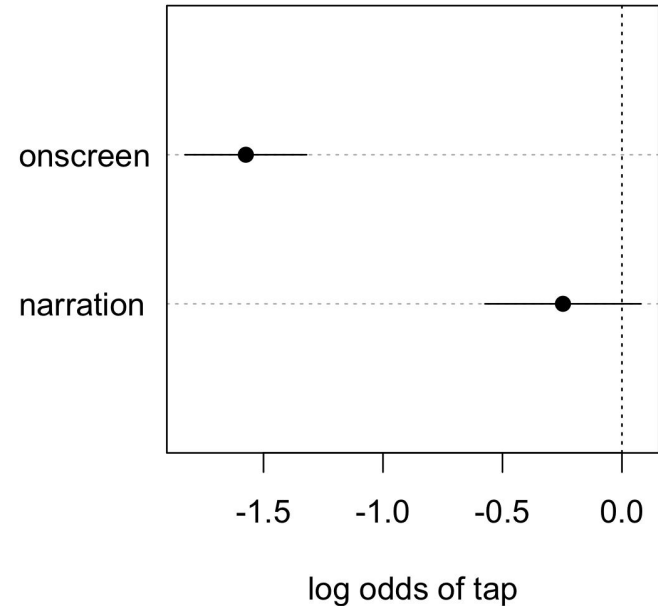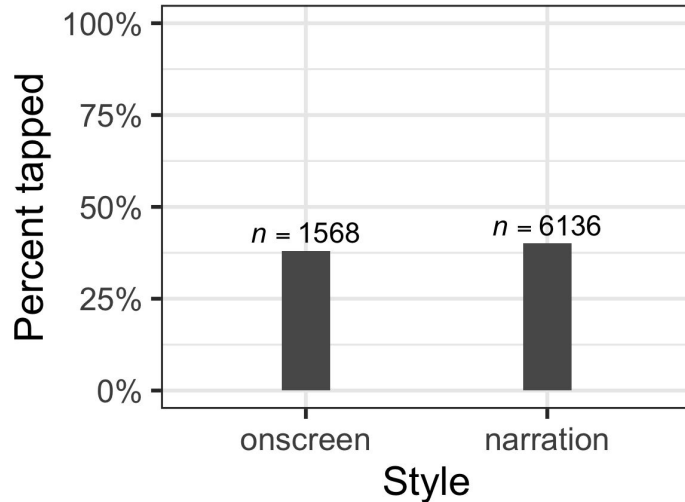
Significant effects in the Attenborough GAMM:

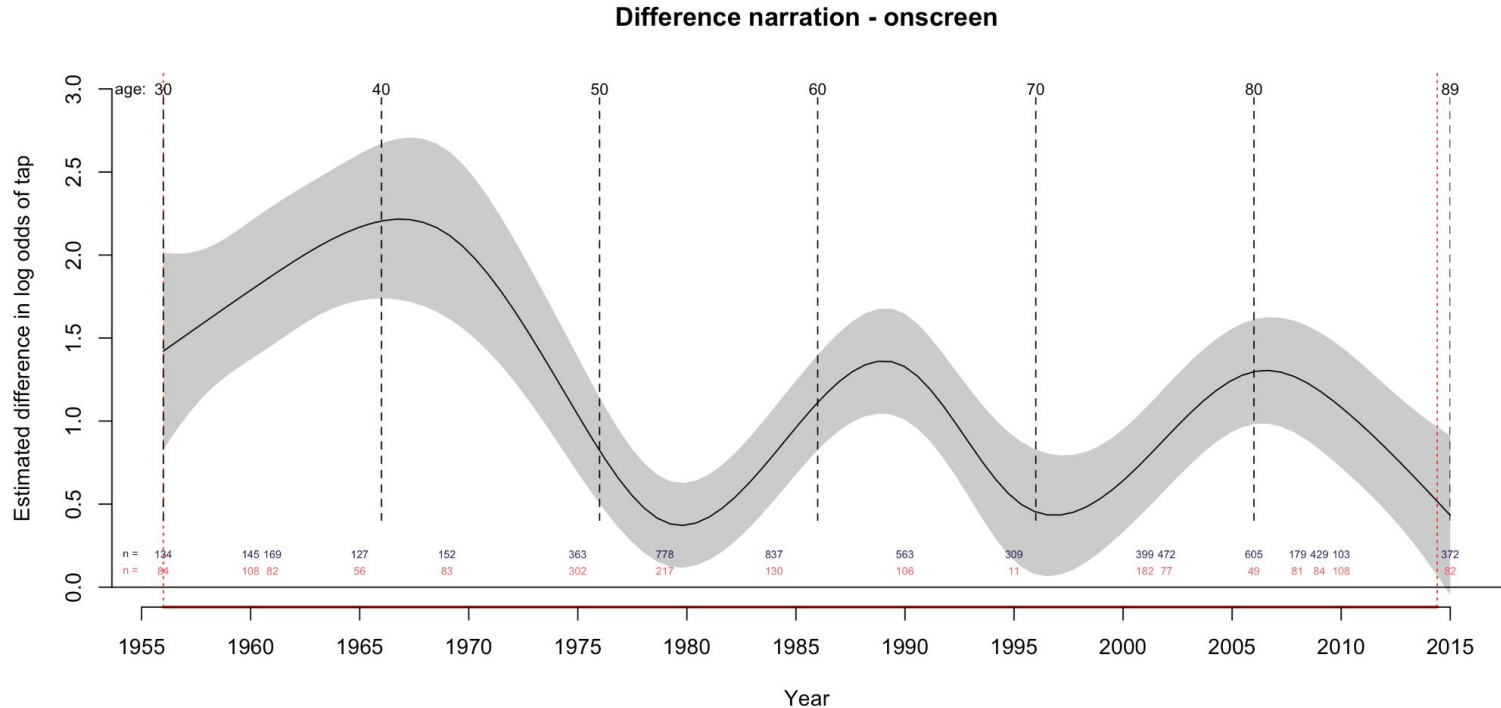- A significantly wiggly pattern over time in **narration** only
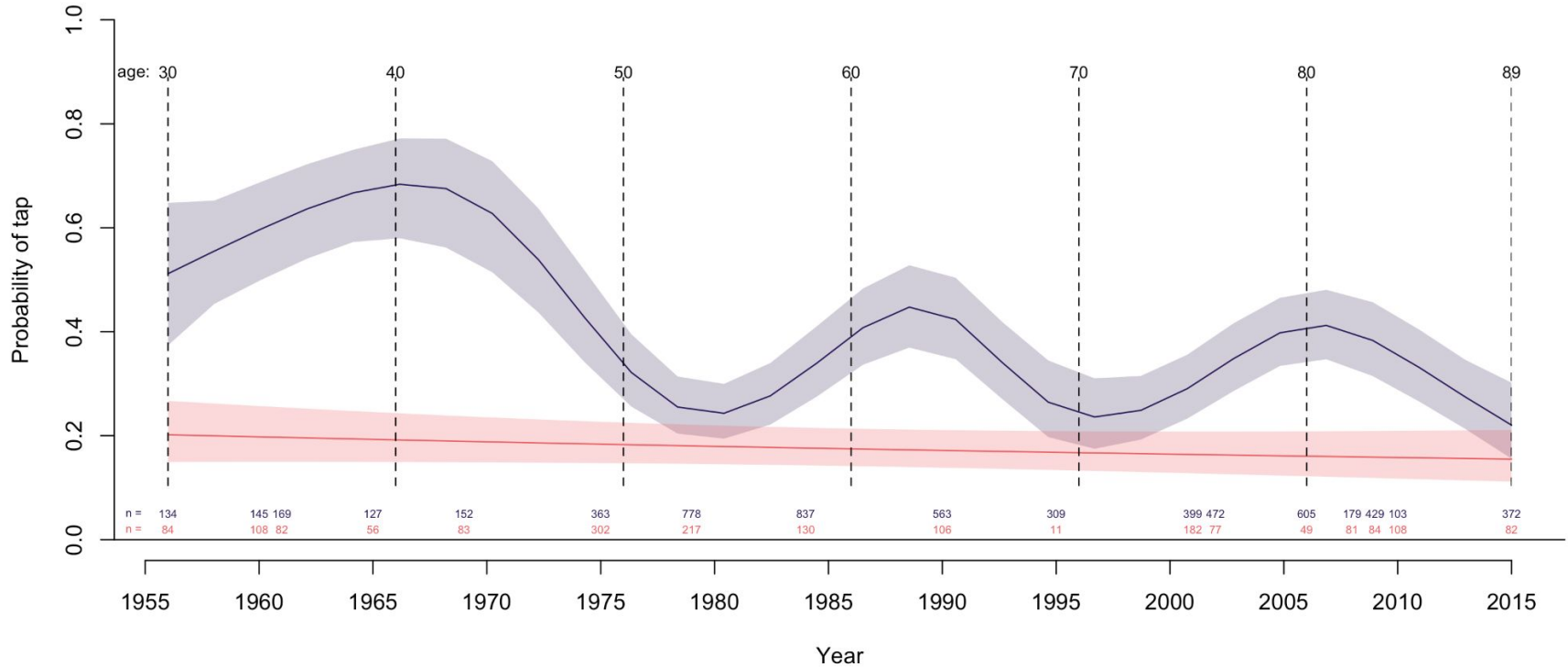
Significant effects in the Attenborough GAMM:

- A significant difference between styles which **diminishes** over his career

Difference narration - onscreen

Significant effects in the Attenborough GAMM:

- A significant difference between styles which **disappears** at the last time point
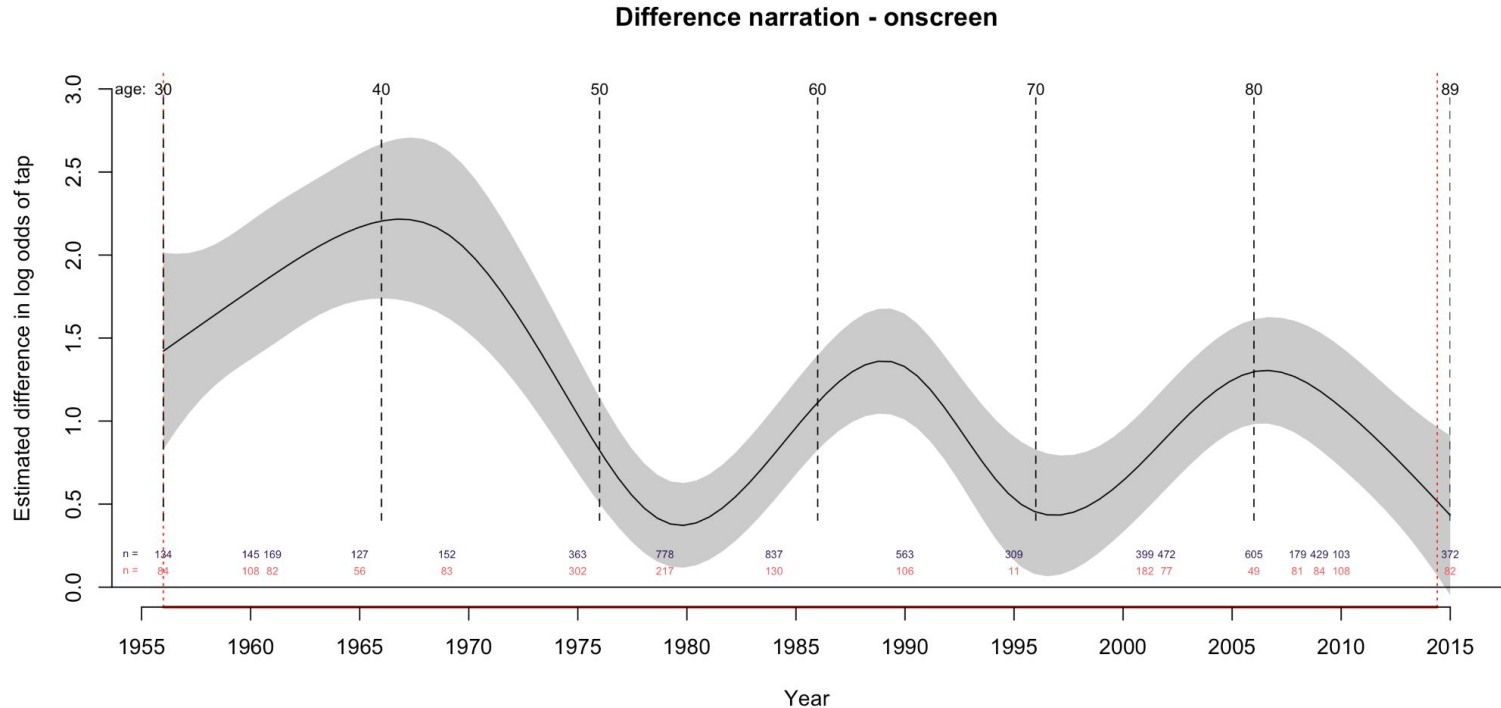
Difference narration - onscreen

Research questions:

1. Does Attenborough show **stylistic differentiation** of variable /ɹ/-tapping as expected given its social profile?

   Yes! Overall more tapping in **narration** than onscreen style.

2. If so, does he show this **consistently over his lifespan**?

   No! Sizeable stylistic differentiation in the first decade of his career **diminishes**, to **disappear** at the final time point.

   → Why?

What can explain the decreasing stylistic range?
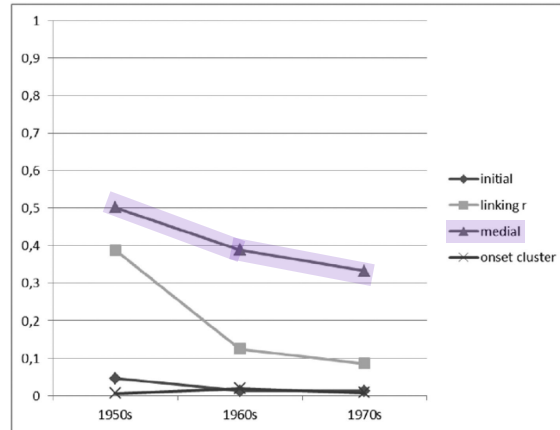
- Change in the community?

Figure 3.3 Trends in rates of tapped and trilled /r/ by word position according to decade of recording.

(Fabricius 2017:54)

Perhaps as the community abandons [r], it becomes less useful as a stylistic marker…

…or Attenborough wishes to avoid its negative, old-fashioned associations.

What can explain the decreasing stylistic range?

- Change in the community?
- Reduced social pressure to use formal variants in later life, as linguistic marketplace pressures ease?

Early 1960s: BBC producer

1965: head of BBC2

1968–1973: BBC Television Director of Programmes

1963: postgraduate work in Anthropology, London School of Economics

narration
onscreen

What can explain the decreasing stylistic range?

- Change in the community?
- Reduced social pressure to use formal variants in later life, as linguistic marketplace pressures ease?

Early 1960s: BBC producer

1965: head of BBC2

producer, director, scriptwriter, researcher, presenter

1968–1973: BBC Television Director of Programmes

presenter only

1963: postgraduate work in Anthropology, London School of Economics
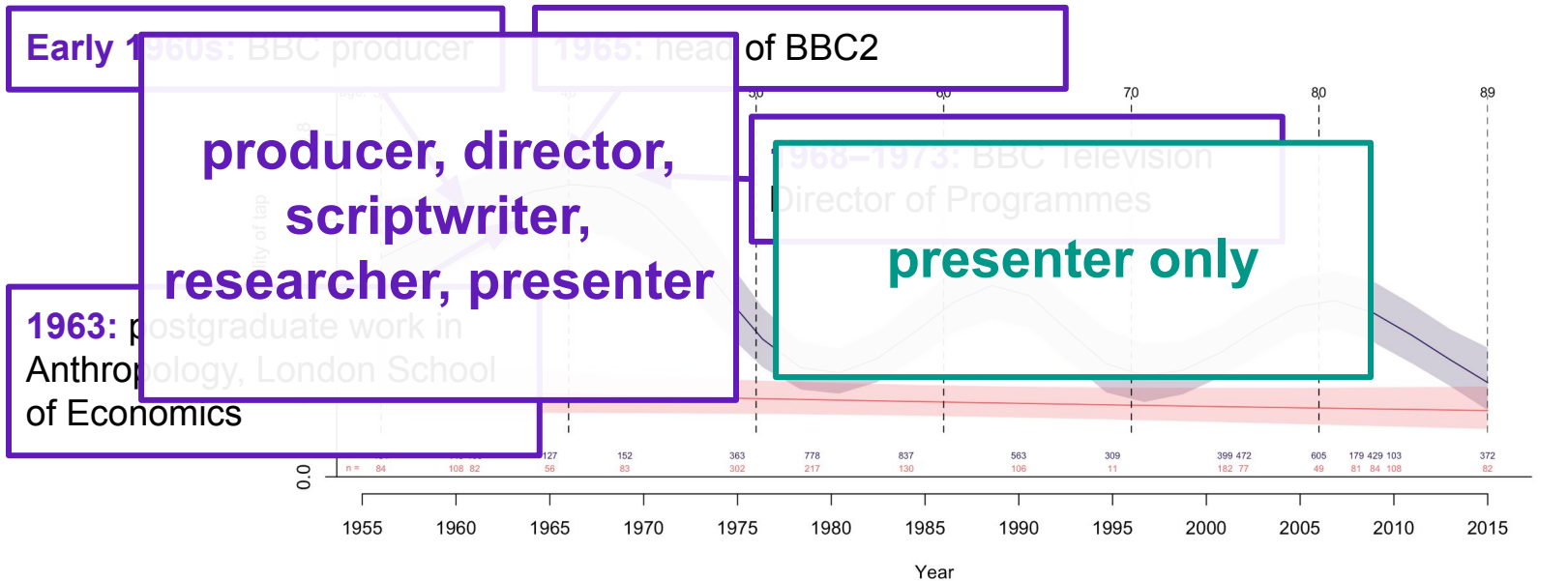
narration
onscreen

Year
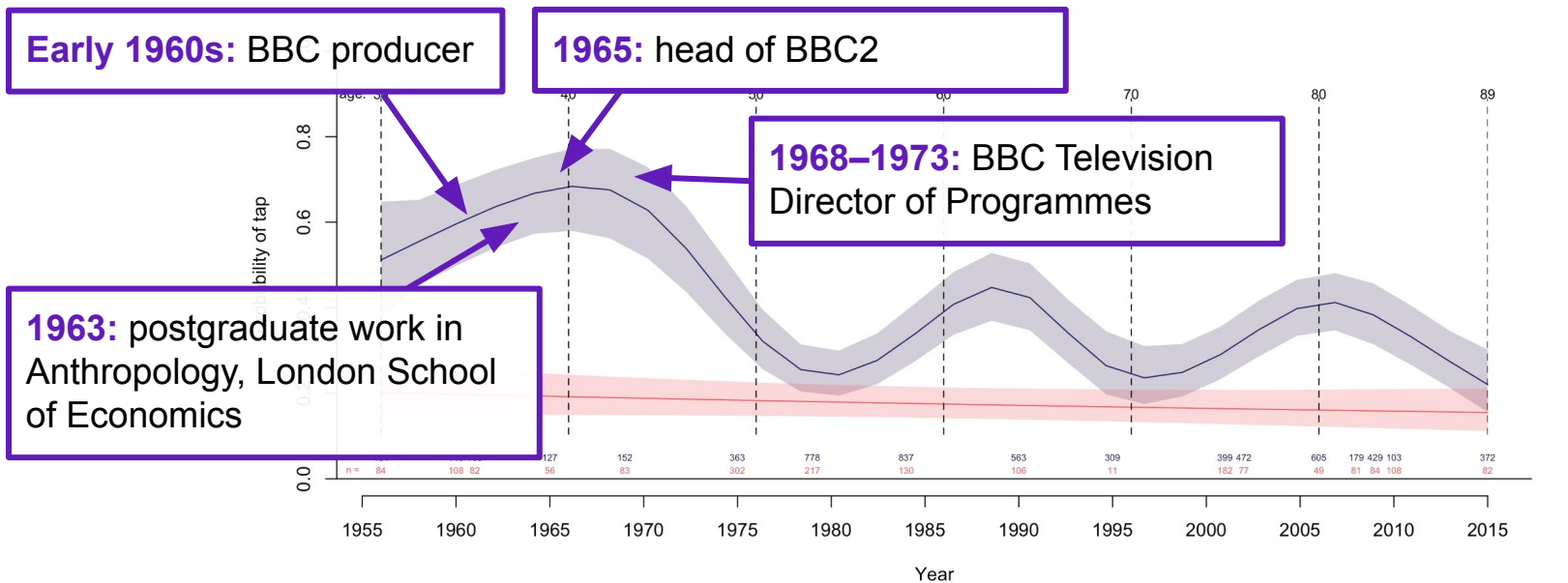
What can explain the decreasing stylistic range?

- Change in the community?
- Reduced social pressure to use formal variants in later life, as linguistic marketplace pressures ease?

Not immediately clear how we can disentangle these without also comparing his behavior on a **community-stable**, socially-marked variable,
or a changing variable that is **not socially-marked**.

Conclusions

- A speaker's stylistic range can change as they age.

- Put differently, lifespan change can be style-specific.

- Methodological implication: Stylistic confounds across time points may cause us to miss lifespan changes. (Gregersen et al. 2018a, b)

- Theoretical implication: Language users remain sensitive to the social meanings of linguistic variants throughout later life.

- Data from additional variables can help us disentangle motivations for stylistic shifts.

Implications for RePARC

- Importance of establishing the **social meaning** and **diachronic trajectory** of variants in order to interpret lifespan change
  - Social media commentary, for instance in reaction to speeches by different-accented politicians, may be a useful source of explicit attitudes

- Awareness of potential **stylistic confounds** across interviews
  - Eliciting different styles may help contextualize earlier-time point data

- Recognition that lifespan change may appear in **only one style**
  - Perhaps lifespan change represents a permanent style shift?

- Importance of **career trajectory** as a potential driver of lifespan change
  - Interviewees can reflect on changes in responsibilities and attitude toward their work
    (Stefánsdóttir and Ingason 2018:169)

Thank you!

(image source)