Assignment 1 (due Tuesday, February 5 in class)

I. *Marry*, *Merry*, *Mary* and *Murray* in American English Accents

In class, we observed that mergers amongst vowels are a common occurrence across the accents of English. We also observed that vowels often behave differently before [r] in English accents. An interesting case of vowel merger before [r] in American English involves the vowels in the words *marry*, *merry*, *Mary*, and *Murray*. It is often said that American English speakers merge the vowels of the first three words, so that they are pronounced identically. However, this is not true for all American English speakers—for some of us, at least some of these words are pronounced differently from the rest. And in some accents, *Murray* is pronounced identically to some of the first three words.

Find 5-6 people who come from different regions of the country, and ask them to pronounce these words. (You can "ask yourself" too.) Transcribe the vowels that appear in each person's pronunciations of the words, observing which are pronounced the same and which are pronounced differently. What patterns of merger and distinction do you observe? Do you see any correlations between these patterns and the regions from which your speakers originate?

II. Phonemic Mergers in African American English

The following data illustrate several mergers that have affected the consonantal phonemes /θ f/ and /ð v d/ in certain varieties of African American English.

thing	[θɪŋ]	*these*	[diz]
bath	[bæf]	*bathe*	[bev]
ether	[ifə]	*either*	[ivə]
month	[mʌnf]	*smother*	[smʌvə]
three	[θərɪ]	*that*	[dæt]
Bethlehem	[bɛfləhɪm]	*bother*	[bɑvə]
both	[bof]	*smooth*	[smuv]
think	[θɪŋk]	*this*	[dɪs]
birthday	[bərfdeɪ]	*father*	[fɑvə]

Give a precise description of these mergers. In particular, be sure to identify: (i) the phonetic environment(s) in which each merger occurs, and (ii) any larger generalizations that emerge concerning these changes: can a more general description of these mergers be provided that refers to natural classes of speech sounds? Finally, briefly discuss the overall consequences of these changes for the consonantal phoneme inventory of African American English.

III. A brief history of English /ʒ/

The most recent addition to the English consonant inventory is the voiced palato-alveolar fricative /ʒ/. Its appearance in the pronunciation of English words followed a two-step process:

1. During the seventeenth century, the voiced alveolar fricative /z/ came to be pronounced as [ʒ] immediately before the voiced palatal approximant [j]; elsewhere, its phonetic realization remained [z].

    seize [siz]   vs.   *seizure* [siʒjər]

    close (verb) [kloz]   vs.   *closure* [kloʒjər]

2. Soon afterwards, [j] was lost after [ʒ], which paved the way for modern-day pairs like the following:

    closer (noun, as in *the closer*) [klozər]   vs.   *closure* [kloʒər]

    Additionally, borrowings from French resulted in pairs like the following:

    bays [beɪz]   vs.   *beige* [beɪʒ]

Discuss the effects that each of these steps had on the consonantal inventory of English. In particular, did the changes merely affect the inventory of consonantal speech sounds (= allophones) or did they affect the inventory of consonantal phonemes? Briefly justify your answers.

IV. Variation in English diphthongs

In the following dialect of English there is a predictable variant [əɪ] of the diphthong /aɪ/. What are the phonetic environments in which [əɪ] occurs? What generalizations emerge concerning these environments?

bite	[bəɪt]	*fight*	[fəɪt]	*time*	[taɪm]
tie	[taɪ]	*buy*	[baɪ]	*type*	[təɪp]
ride	[raɪd]	*rice*	[rəɪs]	*ninth*	[naɪnθ]
rise	[raɪz]	*file*	[faɪl]	*fire*	[faɪr]
write	[rəɪt]	*life*	[ləɪf]	*bike*	[bəɪk]