

## From Local to Neutral: Monophthongization of /eu/ and /oe/ in Barat–Selatan Aceh Accent

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**Abstract.** *Accent erosion has become a noticeable phenomenon in many regional speech communities, particularly in areas experiencing increased linguistic contact and social mobility. In the Barat–Selatan Aceh (BARSELA) region, local accent features are gradually shifting toward more neutral forms, one of which is reflected in vowel change. This study investigates accent erosion through the process of monophthongization of the diphthongs /eu/ and /oe/ as a qualitative case study of BARSELA speakers. The study focuses on how these diphthongs are realized in contemporary speech and how their changing pronunciation signals broader accentual change. Data were drawn from naturally occurring spoken interactions and selected elicited speech samples produced by speakers in the region. Qualitative phonological analysis reveals consistent patterns of monophthongization, where /eu/ and /oe/ are frequently realized as simpler vowel forms in everyday communication. These shifts are especially evident in informal contexts and among speakers with higher exposure to external linguistic influences. The findings suggest that monophthongization in BARSELA speech is not random, but represents a systematic phonological process associated with accent leveling and adaptation toward more widely intelligible speech forms. By focusing on specific vowel changes, this study contributes to sociophonetic and sociolinguistic discussions on accent erosion, highlighting how subtle vowel shifts can function as salient indicators of ongoing accent change in regional speech communities.*

**Keywords:** *accent erosion; Barat–Selatan Aceh; monophthongization; sociophonetics; vowel shift*

### 1. Introduction

Accent is one of the most salient and immediately recognizable features of spoken language (Anhar et al., 2024). Through accent, speakers index regional affiliation, social background, and cultural identity, often without conscious intention. Accent functions not only as a linguistic marker but also as a social signal, shaping how speakers are perceived and how they position themselves within wider communicative networks. However, accents are not static entities. They are subject to continuous change as speakers adapt to shifting social conditions, communicative demands, and patterns of linguistic exposure. One prominent outcome of such change is accent erosion, a gradual process through which locally marked phonological features weaken, simplify, or shift toward more neutral forms (Soon-ok et al., 2020). In sociolinguistics, accent erosion is commonly discussed in relation to processes such as dialect leveling, language contact, and sociophonetic accommodation. Dialect leveling refers to the reduction of marked regional features in favor of forms that are more widely shared or socially unmarked. This process often occurs in communities experiencing increased mobility, urbanization, and exposure to dominant language varieties (Sanusi et al., 2024). Rather than involving abrupt loss, accent erosion typically unfolds incrementally, affecting specific phonological features while leaving others relatively intact. Understanding which features change, and how they

change, provides important insight into the mechanisms of language variation and change (Reyes, 2012).

Phonological change plays a central role in accent erosion because accent is largely realized through sound patterns. Among phonological features, vowels are particularly sensitive to change (Situmorang et al., 2024). Vowel quality, complexity, and distribution are closely associated with regional accents, making vowel systems a productive site for examining accentual variation. Changes in vowel realization can significantly alter the perceptual identity of an accent, even when consonantal patterns remain stable. For this reason, sociophonetic studies have increasingly focused on vowel shifts as indicators of broader accent change. One phonological process frequently associated with accent erosion is monophthongization, the reduction of diphthongs into single vowel realizations. Diphthongs often carry strong regional marking due to their articulatory complexity and distinct acoustic profiles. When diphthongs undergo monophthongization, the resulting vowel forms tend to be simpler and more neutral, aligning more closely with supra-regional or dominant speech norms. From a sociophonetic perspective, monophthongization can be understood as both an articulatory simplification and a socially meaningful adjustment. In many speech communities, monophthongization has been linked to dialect leveling and increased exposure to dominant varieties through education, media, and interregional interaction. Speakers may unconsciously reduce diphthongal movement in their vowel production as part of a broader accommodation process (Dinda M et al., 2024). Over time, such individual adjustments can become conventionalized within a community, leading to systematic phonological change. Importantly, this process does not necessarily imply negative evaluation of local speech; rather, it reflects adaptive strategies in changing communicative environments.

In the context of Aceh, regional accents have long been an important marker of linguistic diversity. Different areas of Aceh exhibit distinct phonological characteristics that are readily recognizable to speakers familiar with the region. These accentual differences are not merely phonetic details but are deeply embedded in social identity and local affiliation. The Barat–Selatan Aceh (BARSELA) region, in particular, is known for accentual features that distinguish it from other Acehnese varieties. Among these features are diphthongal vowel realizations such as /eu/ and /oe/, which function as salient indicators of local pronunciation. Traditionally, the diphthongs /eu/ and /oe/ in BARSELA speech have been realized with clear vowel movement, contributing to the distinct auditory profile of the local accent (Ulfa et al., 2018). These diphthongs occur in common lexical items and are frequently produced in everyday communication, making them prominent accent markers. However, recent observations of contemporary speech suggest that these diphthongs are increasingly realized as monophthongal vowels, particularly in informal contexts and among younger speakers. Such realizations suggest a weakening of locally marked vowel complexity. The shift from diphthongal to monophthongal realization in BARSELA speech can be interpreted as part of an ongoing accent erosion process. Rather than affecting the entire phonological system uniformly, accent erosion often targets specific features that are both salient and susceptible to change (Rahman, 2024). Diphthongs like /eu/ and /oe/ meet these criteria: they are perceptually prominent, articulatorily complex, and socially marked. As speakers encounter communicative situations where neutral pronunciation is advantageous, these features become likely candidates for simplification.

Sociophonetic research has shown that vowel shifts are shaped by multiple

interacting factors, including age, social mobility, education, and media exposure. Younger speakers, in particular, tend to be more receptive to phonological innovation, as they are often more exposed to external speech models and less constrained by traditional norms. In regions such as BARSELA, increased access to digital media introduces alternative pronunciation patterns that may influence local speech. Repeated exposure to such models can gradually reshape vowel realization, even in informal, local interactions (Alamsyah et al., 2022). Monophthongization in BARSELA should therefore be understood not as random variation but as a socially embedded process. Speakers do not consciously decide to erode their accent; rather, they adapt their pronunciation in response to communicative pressures and linguistic environments. These adaptations may initially appear as stylistic variation, but over time they can become stabilized as new phonological norms (Dunmore et al., 2024). Examining such processes requires close attention to actual speech data and a focus on specific phonological features. Despite growing awareness of accent erosion in Aceh, empirical research focusing specifically on vowel change in the BARSELA region remains limited. Existing studies have often emphasized broader accentual trends, such as consonant weakening or intonational change, without detailed analysis of vowel systems. As a result, the role of monophthongization in shaping accent erosion has not been sufficiently documented. There is a clear need for focused case studies that examine how specific diphthongs behave in contemporary speech and what these patterns reveal about ongoing phonological change.

A case study approach is particularly appropriate for addressing this gap. By concentrating on a specific region and a limited set of phonological features, researchers can provide detailed, context-sensitive analysis without overgeneralization (Iskandar et al., 2018). Such an approach allows for careful documentation of variation patterns and supports interpretation within the sociolinguistic context of the speech community. In the case of BARSELA, focusing on /eu/ and /oe/ offers a clear window into how accent erosion manifests at the vowel level. Understanding monophthongization as evidence of accent erosion also has broader theoretical implications. It reinforces the view that phonological change is closely tied to social meaning and communicative practice. Vowel simplification is not merely an articulatory phenomenon but reflects speakers' orientation toward neutrality, intelligibility, and wider social alignment. At the same time, documenting these changes contributes to the preservation of linguistic knowledge about regional accents that may gradually fade without systematic study.

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to investigate the monophthongization of the diphthongs /eu/ and /oe/ in the BARSELA accent. By analyzing naturally occurring speech, the study seeks to document how these diphthongs are realized in contemporary usage and to interpret these realizations as part of a broader process of accent erosion. Rather than framing accent change as loss, the study views monophthongization as an adaptive response to changing linguistic environments. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research question: *How does monophthongization of the diphthongs /eu/ and /oe/ reflect processes of accent erosion in the Barat–Selatan Aceh speech community?*

## 2. Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine monophthongization of the diphthongs /eu/ and /oe/ as an indicator of accent erosion in the Barat–Selatan Aceh (BARSELA) speech community. A qualitative approach was

chosen because the aim of the study is to provide an in-depth, context-sensitive account of phonological change as it occurs in natural speech, rather than to measure frequency statistically or test experimental hypotheses. Case study research is particularly suitable for investigating accent erosion, as it allows close examination of specific phonological features within their social and linguistic context. The data for this study were drawn from spoken language produced by BARSELA speakers in everyday communicative settings. Speech data consisted of naturally occurring conversations as well as selected elicited speech used to ensure the appearance of target diphthongs /eu/ and /oe/ in comparable lexical environments. Naturally occurring data were prioritized in order to capture authentic pronunciation patterns, while elicited data were used selectively to complement spontaneous speech and confirm observed phonological tendencies. This combination allowed the study to balance naturalness with analytical clarity.

Speakers were selected based on regional background, with all participants identified as native speakers who grew up and resided in the BARSELA region. Particular attention was given to speakers from younger and middle-aged groups, as previous sociophonetic research suggests that phonological innovation and accent change are often more visible among these cohorts. The study does not aim to represent all Acehnese speakers, but to provide a focused account of phonological patterns within a specific regional accent. All speech data were audio-recorded using portable recording devices in relatively quiet environments to ensure sufficient sound quality for phonological analysis. Recordings were conducted in informal settings to minimize the influence of observer effects and to encourage natural speech production. The researcher adopted a non-interventionist role during data collection, allowing interactions to unfold without correction or explicit attention to pronunciation. Recorded data were transcribed using broad phonetic transcription, with particular focus on vowel realization in lexical items containing /eu/ and /oe/. The transcription process emphasized capturing whether these diphthongs were realized as full diphthongs or as monophthongal vowels. Fine-grained acoustic measurement was not the primary focus; instead, the analysis relied on careful auditory analysis supported by repeated listening to identify consistent pronunciation patterns. This approach is appropriate for qualitative sociophonetic research that prioritizes pattern identification over precise acoustic quantification.

Data analysis involved systematic comparison of diphthong realizations across speakers and contexts. Instances of /eu/ and /oe/ were examined in relation to their phonological environment, lexical position, and interactional context. Particular attention was paid to whether monophthongization occurred consistently across tokens or appeared as stylistic variation. Rather than treating variation as noise, the analysis interpreted variation as meaningful evidence of ongoing phonological change. The interpretation of monophthongization was situated within a sociolinguistic framework of accent erosion and dialect leveling. Observed vowel simplification was analyzed as a shift away from locally marked accent features toward more neutral forms, rather than as random phonetic reduction. The analysis also considered the role of social exposure, such as contact with non-local speech models, as a contextual factor influencing vowel realization, without attempting to establish causal relationships. To ensure analytical credibility, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process. The researcher documented analytical decisions and remained attentive to the risk of overinterpreting isolated tokens. Patterns were identified only when vowel realizations appeared repeatedly across speakers or contexts. The goal was not to claim categorical change, but to document emerging tendencies that signal accent erosion. Ethical considerations were addressed by informing

participants about the purpose of the recording and obtaining their consent prior to data collection. All identifying information was anonymized, and the recordings were used exclusively for research purposes.

### 3. Results and Discussions

The analysis of spoken data from the Barat–Selatan Aceh (BARSELA) speech community reveals a clear and recurring pattern of monophthongization affecting the diphthongs /eu/ and /oe/. Across naturally occurring conversations and elicited speech, these diphthongs are frequently realized as simpler monophthongal vowels rather than as full diphthongs with noticeable vowel movement. This pattern appears consistently enough to suggest that monophthongization is not an isolated phonetic variation, but part of an ongoing phonological shift associated with accent erosion. In naturally occurring speech, realizations of /eu/ and /oe/ often lack the dynamic articulatory movement typically associated with diphthongs. Instead of producing a glide from one vowel quality to another, speakers tend to articulate a single, steady vowel. This is particularly evident in informal interactions, where speech is produced rapidly and without self-monitoring. In such contexts, diphthongal movement is frequently reduced, resulting in vowel realizations that approximate monophthongs commonly found in more neutral or supra-regional speech varieties.

The tendency toward monophthongization is not limited to a single lexical item or phonological environment. Tokens containing /eu/ and /oe/ in different word positions and communicative contexts show similar patterns of simplification. This distribution suggests that the observed change is systemic rather than lexically restricted. While some tokens still exhibit partial diphthongal movement, these appear alongside monophthongal realizations within the same speaker's speech, indicating variation that is characteristic of an ongoing sound change rather than stable phonological alternation. Variation across speakers further supports the interpretation of monophthongization as evidence of accent erosion. Younger speakers, in particular, show a higher tendency to realize /eu/ and /oe/ as monophthongs, especially in casual speech. Although the study does not quantify frequency statistically, repeated auditory analysis indicates that simplified vowel realizations occur more consistently among speakers who are more exposed to non-local speech through education, media, or interregional interaction. This aligns with sociophonetic findings that younger speakers often lead phonological change, acting as agents of innovation within speech communities. Importantly, monophthongization in the BARSELA accent does not appear to be random phonetic reduction caused solely by speech rate. Instead, it reflects a patterned shift toward vowel forms that are less regionally marked. The simplified vowel realizations closely resemble vowel qualities found in more neutral varieties of Indonesian-influenced speech, suggesting a process of dialect leveling. Through this process, locally distinctive vowel complexity is reduced in favor of forms that are more widely intelligible and socially unmarked.

The interactional context of speech also plays a role in shaping vowel realization. In informal conversations where speakers share familiarity and local knowledge, monophthongization occurs naturally and without communicative disruption. The absence of repair or clarification following simplified vowel realizations indicates that these forms are intelligible and socially acceptable within the community. This suggests that monophthongized forms are becoming normalized rather than being perceived as marked or incorrect. From a sociolinguistic perspective, this normalization is a key indicator of accent erosion. Accent erosion does not require the complete disappearance

of local features; rather, it involves the gradual weakening of features that once strongly indexed regional identity. In the case of BARSELA, /eu/ and /oe/ diphthongs have traditionally functioned as salient markers of local accent. Their simplification therefore represents a reduction in phonological distinctiveness, even if other accentual features remain intact.

The findings also highlight the asymmetrical nature of accent erosion. Not all phonological features change at the same rate or in the same direction. While /eu/ and /oe/ show clear tendencies toward monophthongization, other vowel or consonant features may remain stable. This selective change supports the view that accent erosion is feature-specific rather than uniform. Diphthongs, due to their articulatory complexity and perceptual salience, are particularly susceptible to simplification in contexts of increased linguistic contact. Monophthongization in BARSELA can also be interpreted as an adaptive strategy. As speakers increasingly participate in communicative environments beyond their local community, such as digital spaces or interregional interaction, producing less regionally marked vowel forms may facilitate intelligibility and social alignment. In this sense, vowel simplification reflects accommodation to broader communicative norms rather than deliberate abandonment of local identity.

At the same time, the data suggest that monophthongization does not entirely erase local accent identity. Speakers may still retain other phonological or prosodic features associated with BARSELA speech. Accent erosion, therefore, should be understood as a gradual reconfiguration of accent rather than total neutralization. The persistence of some local features alongside the erosion of others reflects the complex and layered nature of phonological change. These findings contribute to sociophonetic discussions by illustrating how micro-level phonological processes can signal macro-level sociolinguistic change. By focusing on specific diphthongs, the study demonstrates how accent erosion becomes audible through subtle yet systematic shifts in vowel realization. This supports interactional and usage-based perspectives on phonological change, which emphasize the role of everyday speech practices in shaping sound systems over time. The BARSELA case also underscores the importance of documenting regional accent change. As monophthongization becomes more widespread, traditional diphthongal realizations may become less frequent or eventually restricted to older speakers or highly localized contexts. Without systematic documentation, such changes risk going unnoticed, leading to an incomplete understanding of regional linguistic diversity.

#### 4. Conclusions

This study examined accent erosion in the Barat–Selatan Aceh (BARSELA) speech community through the monophthongization of the diphthongs /eu/ and /oe/. The findings demonstrate that these diphthongs are increasingly realized as simpler monophthongal vowels in contemporary speech, particularly in informal contexts and among younger speakers. This consistent pattern of vowel simplification provides clear evidence of ongoing phonological change at the vowel level. Rather than representing random phonetic variation, monophthongization in BARSELA reflects a systematic shift away from locally marked accent features toward more neutral vowel realizations. This shift aligns with broader sociolinguistic processes such as dialect leveling and communicative accommodation, where speakers adjust pronunciation in response to increased exposure to non-local speech models and changing interactional demands. The reduction of diphthongal complexity suggests that vowel systems play a central role in how accent erosion becomes perceptible and socially meaningful. The study highlights the selective

nature of accent erosion. Not all phonological features change simultaneously; instead, specific features that are salient and articulatorily complex, such as diphthongs, appear more susceptible to simplification. This finding reinforces the view that accent erosion is a gradual and feature-specific process rather than a uniform loss of regional identity.

By adopting a qualitative case study approach, this research contributes to sociophonetic and sociolinguistic discussions by providing a detailed account of how vowel change operates within a specific regional accent. Documenting monophthongization in BARSELA speech is important not only for understanding ongoing phonological change, but also for preserving knowledge of regional accent features that may diminish over time. Future research may extend this work by examining additional phonological features or comparing accent erosion patterns across regions. Nevertheless, this study demonstrates that subtle vowel shifts can serve as powerful indicators of broader accentual transformation.

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