

Dialectical Variation in Contra Dance

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Abstract

Spoken language usually exhibits dialectical variation. Most of the variation is phonological, with specific sounds being pronounced differently in different regions. This is not, however, specific to speech; we find the same thing in contra dance. Contra is composed of short figures comparable to phonemes, and the patterns of variation in these figures suggest regional and social dialects. As with spoken dialects, the variation is not large enough to keep people from different regions from being able to dance with one another; regional differences tend to be largely alternate conventions about hand placement as opposed to full body movement. Contra dance has other parallels with natural language and this paper argues that linguistic methods are generally applicable. Thirty two weekly or monthly dances and four dance festivals, mostly restricted to the Eastern United States, were examined for this paper, providing data for isogloss maps of the variant forms. From these maps one dialect, a north eastern one, is apparent but the data suggests a dialect continuum for interpreting the variation over the rest of the studied area.*

If I tell someone “that table is black” I am communicating something about the properties of a particular table, and perhaps through pragmatics I communicate something more by

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drawing their attention to the table or its color. There is further information in the phonemes of my statement, however, that tells the listener that I am a male American from New England between the ages of 12 and 30. Imagine a language that could not be used to communicate arbitrary information or anything more than identity and group membership. Such a language would of course be useless for most purposes, but for understanding the way dialects form, spread, and interact it would be very useful. Contra dance is very nearly such a language.

1 Data Collection and Methodology

For this paper I collected data on variations that might have regional components from many types of sources. I had originally intended to discuss not only current variation but also changes in the dialects over the past 80 years. There are no published works on variation in contra dance, but there are books that describe how to dance. None of the ones I found gave descriptions of where specific variants were common, but they would sometimes describe only one or two ways to do a figure that I had seen vary from place to place. I took that as evidence that in their home region the dance was done that way. These books, mostly dating from the 1930s through 1950s, provided some data from the early revival stage.

I also conducted several interviews interviews, both in person and by e-mail, with longtime dancers and people who had danced when they were younger. This gave me some idea of the state of dancing in the late 1960s through the end of the century. Unfortunately, while they were aware of other, mostly structural, changes¹ my informants mostly did not have very clear memories of how figures had changed.

Because my data on past variation was so limited I ended up restricting my scope to the present. I tried to visit as many dances as I could, managing to visit 23 dances in 9 states.

¹These included the increase in “equal turn contras”, the decrease in the number of squares danced, and the near abandonment of the *proper* formation in favor of the *improper* one.

I wrote notes after each dance and have put summaries for each dance in Figure 14 near the end. I also was helped by informants at other dances who took notes on the dance forms there. Information for dances in the grid marked as ‘‡’ is from these helpful informants and I have not verified it.

2 Comparison With Other Forms

I originally decided to look at contra dance both because I had some experience with it, dancing occasionally since I was a small child, and because it had several features which suggested to me that linguistic methods would be applicable. Over the course of a dance each dancer interacts with nearly everyone in their set. Most of these interactions involve some form of physical contact, usually simultaneously initiated, the demands of which put a strong limiting force on variation. If one person tries to put their hand in one position for a star and another other does something incompatible they will need to shuffle their hands until they get something that works, and if one of the positions is viewed as non-standard at that dance, dancers doing that one will have substantial social pressure to start using the standard form. See Figure 6 for diagrams of the two common star hand positions.

Another factor limiting variation is the short time allocated for each figure. Most figures are no more than eight beats long, limiting them to four seconds.² There is not time for negotiation, so dancers almost always do something standard. The variations that require coordination between multiple people all have common manners of leading or suggesting them. The main exception to this is the swing which can be as long as 16 counts (8 seconds) and provides more time for communication. For experienced dancers most variations are lead and not discussed, but an inexperienced dancer or someone dancing with one might ask if a variation would be acceptable or warn the person that they were going to lead it,

²This assumes 120 beats per minute and tempos vary by band, caller, and tune. The normal range is around 115 to 125 bpm, which would give 4.21 to 3.84 seconds for a four count figure.

letting them learn what the lead was like. I believe this ability for some communication, combined with the greater frequency of swings, results in the high amount of variation in swings relative to other two person figures.

Much of this is in marked contrast to many other forms of dancing. Performance dance is usually much more rigid, requiring specific movements from each person at each time. While there is some variation it is not generally at the individual dancer level but instead at the level of the choreographer or teacher. The variation is usually intentional, with the changes being used to achieve some stylistic goal, and the variant is consistently executed from performance to performance. This is not particularly interesting linguistically because it is not much like a speech community; the dancers do not choose how they will dance, and what choice there is is made ahead of time.

The standard formal social dances are exclusively partner dances. They all have couples in a lead-follow relationship dancing unchoreographed but standardized patterns. This partner-centric style is also used by many less formal dances, including Scandinavian, Latin, Swing, Cajun, and other varieties. In these communities, people tend to dance with a much smaller number of partners, often only one. Interacting with such a small number of people limits the social communication aspects of the dance to the point where they are probably not of much linguistic interest.

Popular dances, despite their weaker natural limitations on variation and strong emphasis on individuality, might be prove fertile to linguistic analysis. There it a lot of interaction between dancers, and while the constraints are much looser variation is somehow limited. There are somewhat standard ‘moves’ and the spread and popularity of these could be examined. It is also promising that people rarely learn this form through teaching; speech is not learned in classes. This dance form, however, is so varied that it would take a tremendous amount of work to analyze it well. A proper analysis would require documentation of a very large number of dancers in a large number of places, determining which idiolect patterns, if

any, might cluster into dialect patterns.

There are forms similar to contra dance, both historically and synchronically, sharing many figures but different in execution. These would include English country dance (ECD), Scottish country dance (SCD), and Irish set dancing. These are all pre-choreographed group social dances, all revived in the early 20th century as part of the British Isles folk revival. They are distinguished from contra somewhat by being no longer ‘live’. That is, there is a correct and historically justified way to do every figure and variation is discouraged. This restriction is much stronger than that of contra and makes them not very useful for studying sociolinguistic aspects of dance. There is some overlap between these dances and contra in terms of participants, however, and because they have similar figures they are a possible source for figure variants.

Another form similar to contra dance, even more closely related than ECD, is the modern western square dance (MWSD) or club square dance. MWSD is organized by the Callerlab organization, which trains and certifies callers, standardizes calls, and determines which calls should comprise a *program* or dance level. MWSD has a much larger set of figures and several programs of dancing. To dance in most square dance clubs a dancer must know all the calls from the mainstream program or the larger and more difficult plus program. The mainstream program contains 100-130 calls.³ Callerlab recommends at least 58 hours of instruction for the mainstream program. [Callerlab, 2006]

With these dance forms as a backdrop, several features stand out as essential in contra dancing in order allow application of linguistic methods:

1. People dance with everyone in the community as neighbors and a large number of people as partners also. This is

³This is the number of calls that would be involved if one were to count them the way one usually counts contra dance calls. Callerlab says there are 52 items in the basic and 17 more in the mainstream programs, though some of them are not explicitly calls and others have multiple distinct forms that would in contra dancing be treated as separate calls.

2. Physical contact and caller-led choreography put strong constraints on allowable movements.
3. Most contra dances are learned by the dancers only for that dance and then forgotten, keeping variation at the figure level and not the dance level.
4. New dancers do not learn to contra from lessons⁴ but instead by participating in the regular dances and being helped along.
5. Contra dancing has no central authority determining the standard way to execute calls. There is only local consensus on how to execute each figure, with some regional consistency.

3 History

In order to understand the variation currently present and the impulses behind changes it is useful to have some understanding of the history of the dance. Contra has existed in some form for several hundred years, though the modern form which this paper focuses on is a much more recent development.

Contra dance inherits most strongly from ECD as danced by early settlers. The longways or *contra* formation is standard in ECD and many of the figures are similar. Most figures can be traced directly to English figures and so would be cognates. For example, *allemande left/right* and *dosido* derive from what in modern ECD are *turn by the left/right* and *back to back*. There are some figures which are more akin to loan words, being additions to contra in the 1980s from ECD. These include *gypsy*, *hey*, and *mad robin* [Nankivell, 2005] This parallels recent borrowings in English from modern German (*ersatz*, *über-*): even though English descends from German, these words did not come to English through that path.

⁴At some dance nights there are half hour *beginner's workshops*, but these are neither mandatory nor universal.

French dances in the Quadrille or *square* formation⁵ were brought to what is now French Canada by the French between the mid 1600s and the early 1700s. These dances expanded south in popularity until the English-originated longways and French-originated squares were both danced in many parts the New England region.

French influence in the US during and after the Revolutionary war helped to further spread Quadrilles. Around the time of the war of 1812, when people were particularly anti-British, the longways dances were accordingly very unpopular and the French-influenced squares spread. [Dart, 1995] In many places the two formations existed alongside each other, and even now an evening of contra dances will often include one or two traditional squares.⁶

In the later half of the 1800s, contra and square dances were displaced in urban regions by couple dances, such as the polka and waltz that were becoming more fashionable. Some rural communities, mostly in New England and Appalachia, continued to dance the traditional dances, but dances were held only infrequently and lost popularity over time. In the South, the decline was particularly strong; religion was becoming a bigger part of the culture, and dance and secular music were widely preached against as immoral.

By the 1920s and 1930s there were only a small number of communities still dancing the traditional contra and square dances. These were mostly in rural New Hampshire, though there were still people in many rural areas who remembered the old dances. Western dances, almost always only squares, were in a little better shape. There were still occasional dances held in many places and there were many callers, but the callers were getting old and few new people were learning to call. In the South dancing had continued to decline, and all over the country organized and formal dances were giving over to jazz and swing. Social dancing

⁵In the square formation four couples comprise an independent set. The dancers stand in couples in a circle with the women to the right of their partners.

⁶Even calling the dance night a “contra dance” is relatively new. Until at least the 1970s the dances were referred to as “square dances” even though both contra and square dances would be danced. This may have changed because the people dancing contras and traditional squares wanted to distinguish themselves from the MWSO dancers who had become the primary referents of the term “square dance” or perhaps because of the declining popularity of the square formation in favor of the contra formation.

on the whole was also becoming less popular in the face of more modern entertainment.

Around this time several people began to travel around the country, documenting the traditional dances. They would collect dances from both the (few) groups that still danced and the people that used to call, and they published several collections of these dances. In 1926 Henry Ford published “Good Morning – After a Sleep of Twenty-five Years, Old-fashioned Dancing is Being Revived by Mr. and Mrs. Henry Ford”. In 1937 Ralph Page and Beth Tolman published “The Country Dance Book”. [Tolman and Page, 1937] Lloyd Shaw collected western square dances which he taught to his demonstration team, the Cheyenne Mountain Dancers, and also published as “Cowboy Dances” in 1939. [Shaw, 1939] These books allowed more people to become callers and dance teachers, but it was not really until the square dance explosion of the 1950s that the expansion really took off.

During World War II the army decided that square dancing would be a good form of recreation for the troops, and many GIs picked it up and wanted to continue dancing recreationally after returning home. There were also many recently married couples looking to participate in some social activity that would let them meet other couples while still spending time together. Square dancing expanded to meet this need, with large numbers of new callers, new books [McNair, 1951] [Mayo, 1943] [Kraus, 1950], and records with and without calls. People began to form square dancing clubs and dance regularly.

These square dance clubs mixed traditional Western, New England, and Southern squares with new calls to make a new form, generally called modern western square dancing (MWSD). The addition of those new calls was on the caller level, with a mix of calls ‘discovered’ from rural communities and calls ‘invented’ anew. With all these new calls, there were soon several hundred calls where there had been only a few dozen. There was some work to standardize the dance so people could better move between clubs, and this resulted in the formation of Callerlab in 1974 and the creation of several *programs*, from *basic* to *challenge* which would separate the calls and provide a clear order for learning them. Clubs also began holding

classes for couples that wanted to learn, usually requiring them before a couple could join as club members.

This boom in square dancing was followed by a reasonably severe bust. From the beginning of the clubs only one age group, the parents of the baby boomers had been involved, and while the clubs did provide classes, they tended to take so long that prospective dancers would lose interest. Making things worse, many clubs made bad compromises with teaching time, such that while people would officially ‘learn’ all the figures in a program they would not have much experience either with the way figures could be combined or with dancing at speed. Many of the dancers these classes produced and certified as knowing a program were not actually able to dance in a club at that program level. MWSD remained and remains large, but it has not regained the numbers it had at its peak.

For much of its post-revival existence contra has been somewhat close to MWSD. Some figures in contra dance, such as the ‘*star promenade to butterfly whirl*’ figure combination and the pair of twirls, *box the gnat* and *California twirl*, come from MWSD. Other aspects of the contra dance community, such as the strong resistance to standardization, the insistence on keeping the dancing at a level where a person who has never danced before could show up on any night and have a good time, and the insistence on live music are at least in part responses to perceived flaws in the MWSD culture.

The contra revival has been much slower and less extensive than the spread of MWSD. Even though MWSD has been facing many years of decline, it is still much more widespread than contra dance. The modern contra dance community comes from the side of the American folkdance revival that resisted the modernization of the squares and continued to do traditional contras and squares until the early 1980s. During this time there was a lot of expansion, primarily to large east coast cities and to college towns. The dance style and community did not remain constant and by mid 1980s it was no longer the traditional aspect of the dances that held the community together. In fact, by this point there had been enough

changes that the older style of contra dance was rarely done anymore. Similarly, traditional squares were in decline, replaced by more contras. Some of the flourishes and variations above are very old while others weren't around even in the 1970s, but for most of these data is very limited and most of what I have been able to look at is present variation.

4 Overview of Contra Dance

Contra dance is a traditional American dance form. It is a social group dance done in *sets* or pairs of lines. The dancers all have *partners* with which they form *couples* and in these couples they dance with successive *neighbor* couples. There is a 64-beat⁷ dance pattern which is repeated once with each pair of neighbors and fifteen to thirty times total. The *caller* usually has the dancers walk through the dance once or twice without music in what is (unsurprisingly) called a *walkthrough*. This serves the purposes of giving the dancers some idea of what is going to happen, letting the *calls* or *prompts* be only reminders, ensuring that the dance is not too difficult for the group, and letting the caller take extra time to teach tricky points or figures which may be new to some. Once the dance begins, the caller will verbally prompt each figure just before it is supposed to be started (*calling* the dance) until it looks like the dancers have the dance fully internalized.

4.1 Formation

Contra is generally danced in one or more *sets* or *contra lines*. Figure 1 shows a single contra set in *improper* formation, with the gents as circles and ladies as squares, *ones* in grey, *twos* in white.⁸ This formation is called *improper* in opposition to an older, now uncommon,

⁷Contra is usually danced to 32 bar AABB jigs and reels. Even though jigs are in $\frac{6}{8}$ and reels are in $\frac{4}{4}$ and so one time through the dance should be 192 or 128 beats, when I say *beat* in this paper I am referring to half measures. This usage is relatively common in describing contra dance and likely derives from contra being a walking form in which the steps are on the half measure.

⁸The *ones* or *actives* face down the set, usually away from the band. In older dances the actives did most of the moving and while the *twos* or *inactives* were in a less prominent role as participant, audience, and

proper formation in which all the men are in one line and the women are in the other, people across from their partners.

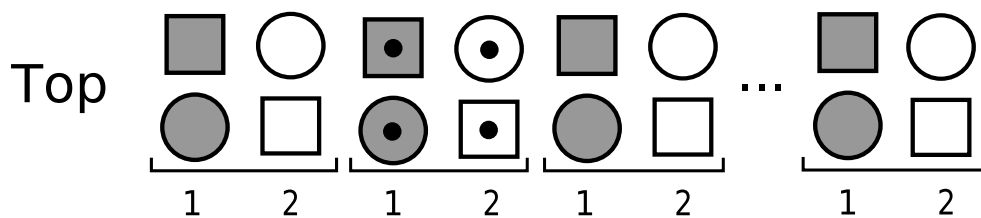


Figure 1: Standard improper contra formation.

The set is divided into four person *minor sets*. Each of these sets is called a *hands four* and consists of a pair of ones and a pair of twos. After one time through the music the ones and twos will have switched places so as to move on to new neighbors. This is called *progression* and the result of progressing from the state shown in Figure 1 is shown in Figure 2. Note that the dotted couples are now dancing with new neighbors. Also note that there are couples at the *top* and *bottom* of the set that do not have anyone to dance with. These couples wait out one time through the dance, *cross over* to the opposite side of the set, then enter in again as the opposite number. In Figure 3 they are shown crossed over and with coloring indicative of the role they will have upon reentry.

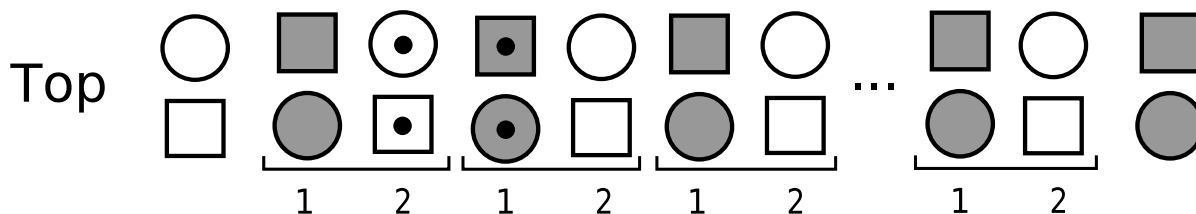


Figure 2: Everyone progressed one place from Figure 1.

During the course of the dance this formation will be only generally held to, with various figures deforming it and permuting the dancers. Each time the music returns to the beginning, however, the dancers are briefly in this formation. There are several other formations⁹ in which a dance can start, but these forms only modify where the dancers are at that particular placeholder.

⁹These include *proper*, *Beckett*, *ocean wave*, *tidal wave*, and *indecent*, though there are others.

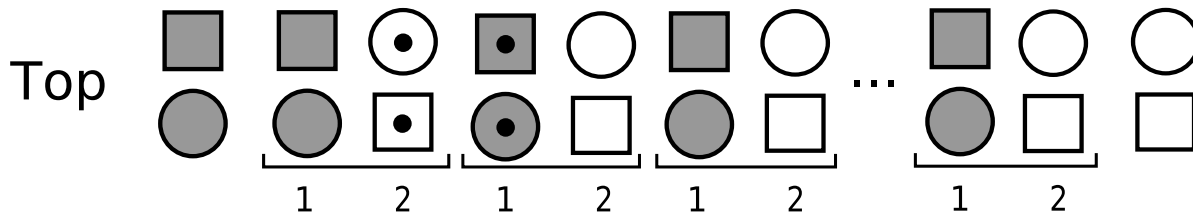


Figure 3: After the people out at the ends in Figure 2 cross over.

point in the dance.

5 Figures and Variation

Contra dance has around 30 figures, which can be combined in most orders to create a dance as long as they effect a progression. These figures can involve two people, four people, or even the whole set. With whom these figures can be danced is somewhat complicated in the case of two and four person figures. The general rule for two person figures is that they can be danced with anyone: partner, neighbor, *shadow*¹⁰, or anyone else. While figures that are not symmetric with respect to gender, such as the promenade and box the gnat, could be danced with a dancer of of the same gender or with genders reversed this almost never happens. There are also two figures, the gypsy and the swing, that are perceived as especially romantic or flirty and traditionally are not called for people of the same gender. Even more restrictive was the pre-1970s approach to the promenade, where it was a figure done only with one's partner. There are now no figures in modern contra dance that are only done with a partner. The decision to call a dance with a same gender gypsy or neighbor promenade is not, however, made at dancer level and so is not the level of variation I am looking at here.

Four person figures are somewhat simpler. They are always four people, almost always of alternating genders. The most common arrangement is for the figure to be done by

¹⁰Someone who is not your partner but who you do one or more figure with each time through the dance. Almost always the opposite gender.

the current hands four but combinations seem to be limited only by the restrictions of progression.

Most of the observed variation in these figures lies somewhere between two extremes: *regional* and *flourish*. Regional variations tend to locally not show variation, and people who do not move are often not aware that variation exists. The regional variants of a figure tend to vary in hand and arm positions only and are usually of similar complexity. At the other end of the spectrum, a flourish is a variant which exists in contrast to and coexists with some standard form. Usually people at given regularly meeting dance will have a consensus on the standard form and this form will be taught during beginners workshops and in walkthroughs. During difficult or *no-walkthrough*¹¹ dances a flourish will often be omitted. In the figure descriptions below I include information on all the regional variations I have noticed, with notes on flourishes when they have at least some regional component.

There are more figures in contra dance than I will describe below. Most of those have not been included because I did not see regional variation in their execution. The Wikipedia article on contra dance has good descriptions of the dance figures and includes most of the figures that I have left out. [Wikipedia, 2006]

5.1 Dosido

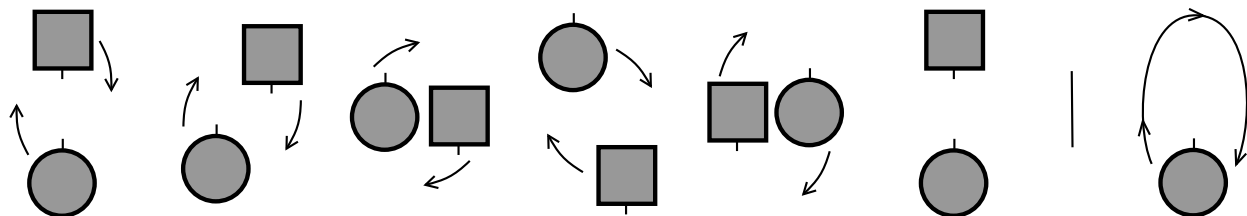


Figure 4: A dosido and the elliptical track of a dosido.

The dosido is likely the best known figure in American folkdance. In the simplest form,

¹¹Sometimes callers will not have a walkthrough for a dance, instead teaching the whole dance by, once people are in formation and ready, signaling the band to play and beginning to call. These dances tend to be slightly simpler but because they require more attention initially, flourishes are less common.

two people walk around each other in an ellipse where they walk forward to the left, pass right shoulders, backs, left shoulders, and then end up where they started. The dancers face always in the direction they started. This variant is shown in Figure 4. Many people, however, follow this path but spin as well. This varies some by age and experience, with younger people tending to spin more and spin faster and inexperienced people being less likely to spin (it can be confusing).

5.2 Swing

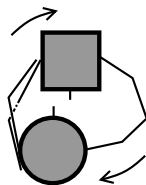


Figure 5: A swing in ballroom position.

While the swing does not seem to vary strongly at a regional level, it does exhibit a very large amount of flourish variation. Common to all swings, two people hold on in some position and spin around a central point until the end of a musical phrase. The number of times they go around can and does vary, with younger dancers and more experienced dancers usually going faster and hence more times around. Figure 5 shows a couple in the most common position, called “ballroom hold”, in which the man’s left and woman’s right hands are joined, the man’s other arm is around the woman below her shoulder and the woman’s other arm is around the man above his shoulder. There are many other holds used in swings, but the ballroom position has been the standard everywhere I’ve looked. There is also some variation in the footwork of the swing. Most commonly people will use a “buzz-step”, in which the inside (right) foot stays on or near the ground and is pushed around in a small circle while the left foot does the main work. Many callers teach the step by comparing it to riding a scooter and pushing with the left. When both dancers can buzz-step well they can rotate several times faster than people can walking. It usually takes new people a while to learn this

step, being the only non walking footwork in the whole dance, and before they've learned it they usually walk instead. Some people have told me that in some areas the standard form is walking, but they've not known specific dances. There are other flourishes that some experienced dancers do, usually lead by the man, and often coming from swing dance, but these seem not to have a strong regional component.

5.2.1 Star

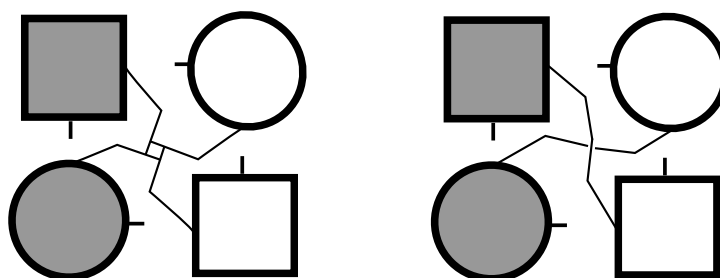


Figure 6: Wrist grip and hands across left hand stars.

There are two main forms of the star, *wrist grip* and *hands across*. Either can be either a *star right* or a *star left*, depending on which hand the dancers are to put in. In a wrist grip star left, each dancer turns to face counter clockwise around the group of four, puts in their left hand and holds onto the wrist of the person in front of them. Their wrist is likewise held by the person facing them. In a hands across star, by contrast, one faces the same way but holds onto the hand of the person opposite. Sometimes the caller will suggest that dancers should use a specific star form for a specific dance if it works better, but in most communities there is a standard form and it is used unless otherwise specified.

Unlike the cases of promenade and right and left through (see below) where only two dancers need to use the same convention, in stars four need to. This makes stars particularly troublesome in boundary regions or when people from different areas dance together. In Little Rock, and possibly other places, the star form is a central lump, where people all stick their

hands in and hold on to whatever's there. When questioned¹² one dancer claimed the wrist grip star was too complex to be formed in time. It is also possible the the lump form is a result of people being unable to agree on whether to use a wrist grip or hands across star and compromising.

5.3 Balance

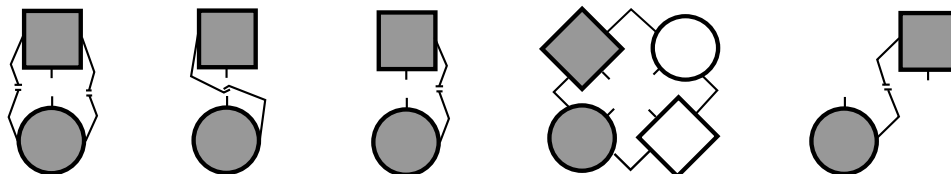


Figure 7: Two person (two hand, right hands, swing hands), ring, and wave balances.

There are three different but similar figures that are all forms of the balance: two person balance, balance the ring, and balance the wave. The different hand positions for these are shown in Figure 7. What they all have in common is that the dancers hold hands, go forward for two counts, and come back for two counts, often making noise with their feet. The stomp pattern most commonly emphasizes counts two and four, though some people do more complex patterns. While I would like to examine the sound patterns for balances to see if there are regional differences it would be a large task and is beyond the scope of this paper.

The hand positions for two person balance positions depend primarily on whether the following figure is a swing. The balance where the dancers take right hands is older and is standard. It can be used any time the caller calls *balance* with a single other person, though is slightly awkward for going into a swing. In a swing the woman's right hand is in the man's left. So if the man knows that a swing is next and extends his left hand for the balance he can take the woman's right and entering the swing becomes more comfortable without any

¹²Thanks to David German for being helpful and inquisitive.

change on the woman's part. This is marked as a *swing hand* balance in Figure 7. Alternatively, the dancers can use two hands for the balance and drop the man's right and woman's left just before going into the swing. This variant requires participation from both dancers but in the case where either person is unfamiliar with this form it collapses into one of the other two other two person balances without problematic confusion. I do not have much data on the prevalence of these variations, just an impression that they are based mostly on experience level and how good the dancer is at remembering which figure will follow the balance. If and when I look at the footwork patterns for balances I will look at this as well.

5.4 Long Lines

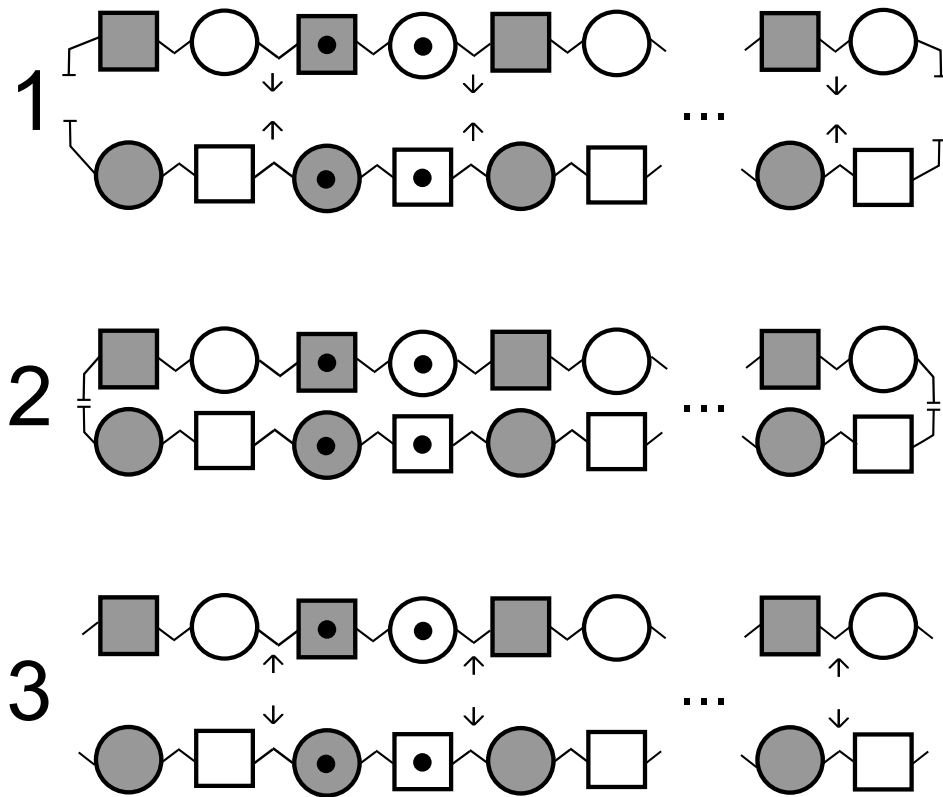


Figure 8: Long lines forward and back.

In the dance figure “long lines forward and back”, usually called simply as “long lines”, dancers form two facing lines, with hands joined along, go forward for four beats, and go

back for four. This is shown in Figure 8. It is common in many places for the dancers at the ends of the lines to clap free hands across the lines on beat four, and this is shown in the diagram. This variation does not lend itself well to study because it happens only at the ends of lines. As such I do not have much data on it, though it is definitely standard in greater Boston and Philadelphia.

One aspect of this figure which has a very large amount of variation, both individual and between areas, is the footwork. In some places people simply walk forward for four steps and back for four while in others people emphasize specific counts with stomps. This is closely correlated with people making noise on balances, enough that at all the places I have been the people who made noise on one also made noise on the other. Generally younger people and males are more likely to make noise and are louder, though this is not at all universal.

While balances and long lines both often have foot noise and it is almost always the same people making noise on both, the stomp patterns are not the same. In long lines most people only make noise on the four forward beats, and the simple patterns are usually stamps on the first four beats, only on the last two half beats, or only on beat four. There is sometimes emphasis on beat eight as well. These vary some by region, especially whether to have emphasis on beat eight, but I do not have good data on this.

There is no explicit gender requirement on this figure, and it is possible to have people of the same dancing gender next to each other in line. This is not very common, however, mostly due to the use of the improper formation as standard. In an improper dance the genders start off alternating and usually stay alternating for the whole dance. It had been standard for a long time that when people of opposite genders held hands the man's would face up and the woman's down. Because people almost never had to hold hands with people of the same dancing gender, the standard expanded to provide male and female hand positions that were self-incompatible.

5.5 Courtesy Turns

In a standard *courtesy turn* the couple takes the position labeled “courtesy turn” in Figure 12 with left hands joined in front of the man and right hands joined behind the woman, turning halfway around with them men walking backwards. These turns are used to change they way the woman is facing and move the woman from one side of the man to the other. Commonly, couples will twirl instead, tracing the same figure but with the woman spinning under the man’s raised left hand. Traditionally¹³ the man is supposed to ‘offer’ the twirl by lifting his left hand a small distance and then the woman ‘accepts’ the twirl by helping lift her hand or ‘rejects’ it by not allowing it to raise. In some places this is never done, in others it is very rare and is done only by experienced or younger dancers. Still other places, such as Boston and Greenfield MA, very few men do not initiate twirls and very few women refuse to twirl. When asked, dancers do consider the twirl a flourish and would first teach a new dancer to do a ‘standard courtesy turn’, but this is not the only factor in determining whether a variant has become standard.

While in Boston I tested how standard the twirl had become by keeping my hand down and trying to initiate standard courtesy turns. While the adults did standard courtesy turns all the younger dancers, save the most attentive, did not notice and lifted my hand to twirl under anyways. This indicates that, at least among the Boston youth, the twirl has become the standard and we have the beginnings of a regional variation.

Alternately the twirl can be seen as a form of *age grading*, a concept in sociolinguistics to describe age dependent dialect patterns that hold up over an extended period, long enough that people who once spoke a ‘young person’ dialect begin to speak an ‘older’ one. By comparing greater Boston and Greenfield-area western Massachusetts we can see both age grading and dialect change in contra dance.

¹³Due to this variation being relatively recent, saying “traditionally” is a little strange. What I mean mostly is that a near consensus has developed across dance communities that this is what people should do.

In the mid 1970s, in both areas, it was common for the younger dancers to twirl on courtesy turns. In the Boston area there were a range of ages dancing, including some adults who had been dancing contras and squares since they were revived in Boston in the 1940s. These dancers did not pick up the twirl, staying with the standard courtesy turn. In western Massachusetts there were a very large number of college students dancing and very few older people. People have since aged thirty years, long enough that those who were college age youth are now in their fifties. Many are still dancing but a most of the dancers in both places were not dancing there thirty years ago. Remarkably, the dialect divisions in the two places are still about the same as they were. In western Massachusetts nearly all twirl while in greater Boston it is much more standard among the younger dancers. The difference is that in Greenfield there are no longer exclusively college students, yet twirling there is not closely correlated with youth. It appears that in the Boston area the twirl remained a dialectical feature of one age grade while in western Massachusetts it progressed to a local standard.

5.6 Right and Left Through

On a right and left through the dancers start in long lines facing across, without taking hands along the lines. For the first four counts dancers walk forwards, passing right shoulders with the person across from them. The second four counts are a courtesy turn. In some regions, people begin by extending their right hands to pull across, while in others hands are not used until the courtesy turn. In Figure 9, the square-dotted couples are shown doing a right and left through with hands, while the other couples all do not use hands. This figure has very strong regional variation, with a well defined line north of which hands are not used.

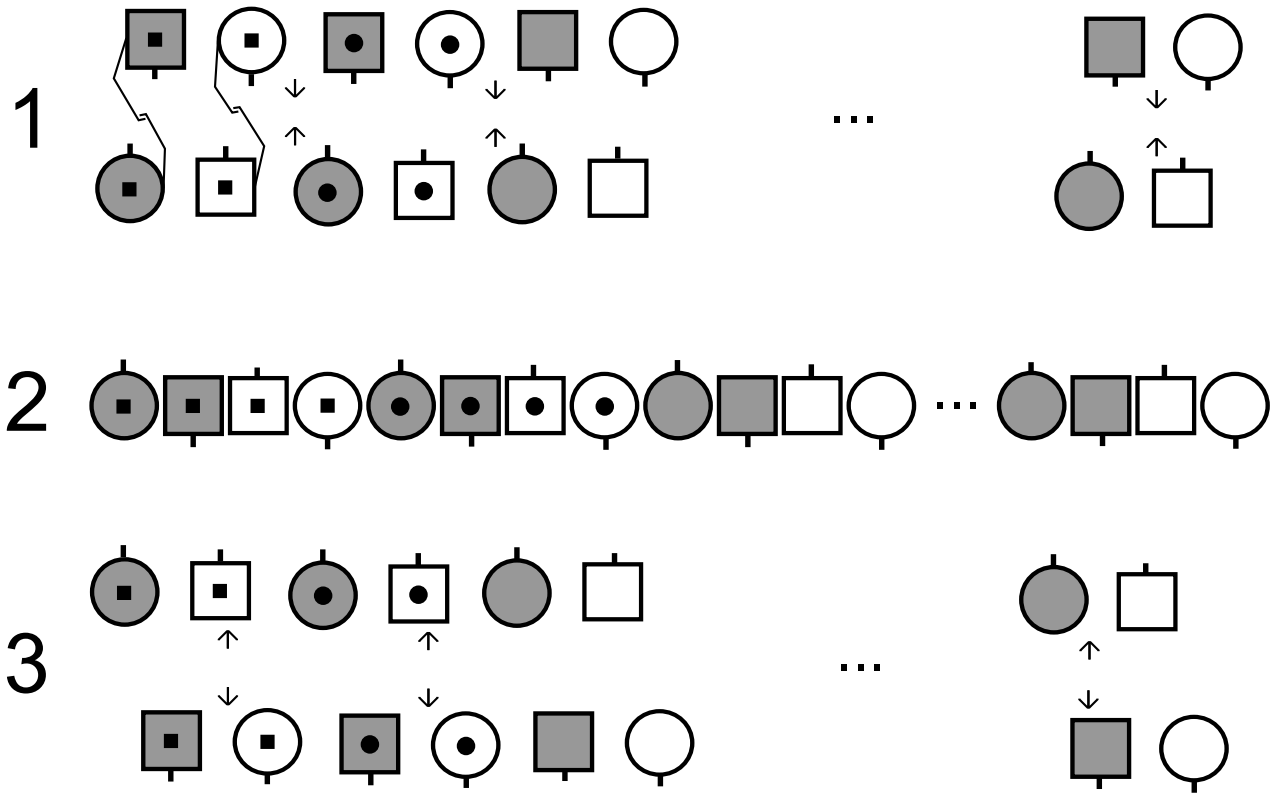


Figure 9: A right and left though, shown without the ending courtesy turn.

5.7 Petronella turn

A Petronella turn is a movement one place to the right around a ring, while spinning. These nearly always follow balancing a ring of four, as in Figure 10. After spinning to the right but before taking hands for the next balance some people insert a double clap. People clap most when the next figure is another balance. For some following figures, such as the swing or dosido, the clap is very uncommon. Clapping is a relatively recent development, introduced

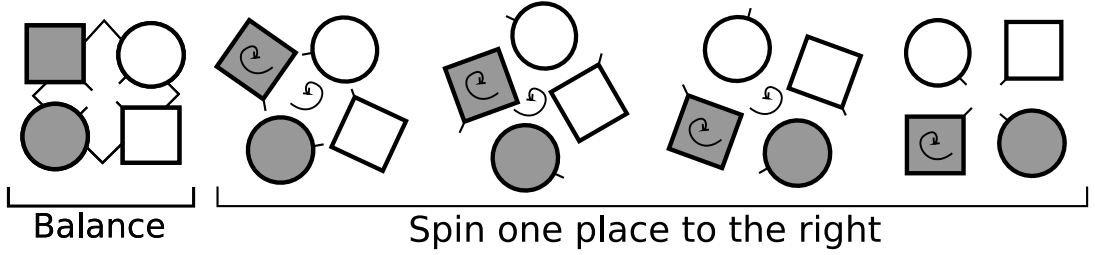


Figure 10: Balance the ring and Petronella turn.

in the 1970s, most likely in the north east. Unlike most variants, many people have strong opinions on clapping and some callers have actively tried to repress it.

5.8 Rory O'More

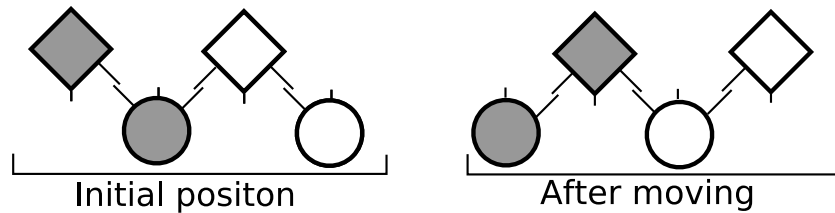


Figure 11: Slide or spin left as in Rory O'More.

Each dancer balances towards the person on their left and then away. Using their still joined hands to pull together, they past each other to end one place to their original left, catching right hands as they end. They then repeat the process in reverse to end where they started. The two positions are shown in Figure 11. Instead of sliding between these positions, many people now spin once around.

This figure, once a spin is added, begins to seem much like Petronella. It is not surprising, then, that in some places people will put in a clap after the spin just like some do in Petronella. This variant is not very common, and appears to be non-regional. Instead, when the music and mood fit well with clapping, someone will start clapping and others will follow suit. I have only heard this happen at two dances, but others report hearing it occasionally. This is a case where the restriction of physical contact is apparent: when followed by another balance, people usually spin to end up with their hands already joined for the coming balance. The clap prevents this as the hands are needed for clapping. If everyone claps or no one claps there is no problem, because no one ever has their hands out waiting for a beat while the other person claps. In Petronella, back before anyone clapped, people did the same thing, spinning to take hands. When clapping started, there was the same disconnect of some people waiting with their hands out and others clapping. By now

this has resolved itself to some clapping, others not, but no one putting their hands out at the original time. The Rory O'More spin and clap could go the same way or not.

5.9 Promenade

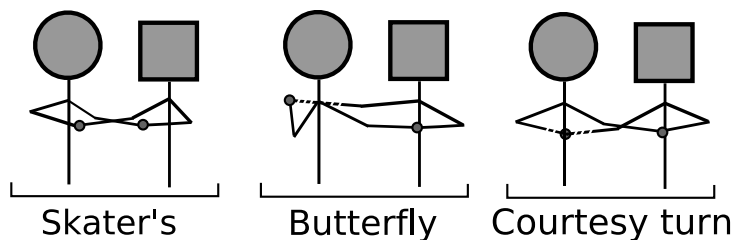


Figure 12: The three main promenade styles. Dashed lines go behind the dancers.

In a promenade a man and a woman walk along holding hands in one of three common positions, always with the lady on the right, left hands joined, and right hands joined. In the *courtesy turn* hold, the left hands are joined in front while the right hands are behind the woman's back at around waist level. In the *skater's promenade*, all four hands are in front. In the *butterfly promenade* the left hands are in front while the right hands are at the woman's shoulder, then man's hand going behind her neck. The particulars of these promenades may be better seen in Figure 12.

6 The Raw Data

Figure 14, at the end of this paper, holds most of the discrete data I collected about the dances I visited. I used many abbreviations, which I have defined below. Figure 13, also at the end, lists information about the dances in Figure 14.

- S, B, and CT for the *skater's*, *butterfly*, and *courtesy turn* styles of promenade.
- H and NH for *hands* or *no hands* on right and left throughs.
- WG, HA, and L for *wrist grip*, *hands across*, and *lump* stars.
- T and NT for *twirl* and *no twirl* on courtesy turns.

- C and NC for *clapping* and *no clapping* after Petronella spins.
- S and NS for *spinning* and *not spinning* on Rory O'More 'slide left's.
- N and NN for *noise* and *no noise* for foot noise-making in balances and on long lines.
- m-*X* for *mostly* form *X*.
- Dances I did not observe but am relying on informants for are marked with ‡.

7 Analysis and Future Work

Figures 15, 16, and 17 show the regional variation in promenade, right and left through, and star style, while Figure 18 puts all of this information on one isogloss-style map to bring out correlations in dance style. The clusters are reasonably clean, with contiguous regions being similar in most features. The main question is whether the variation is purely feature based or whether there are dialectal aspects. There are, however, only four figures included in the map, corresponding to the four figures in which I found strong regional variation. This lack of data makes it hard to generalize dialects, but it is clear that there is a strong north eastern dialect. This dialect is characterized by the absence of an initial pull-by right and left throughs, courtesy turn style promenades, wrist grip stars, and moderate amounts of foot-noise. It might be reasonable to additionally claim southern, western, and mid-Atlantic dialects, but that could also be overreading the data. I think the best interpretation for now is that there is a north east dialect and the variations from that dialect are locally consistent but not correlated with each other. This makes a lot of sense as contra did spread from the north east during the revival and the dialect used in all the revival books is this one.

This is also not very different from the way dialects behave in language. When there is little pressure to standardize on a dialect there tends to be a *dialect continuum*, where geographically close areas have linguistically close speech but the variant features do not cluster strongly into isogloss bundles. Modern languages often do have pressures to standardize, yielding coherent dialects, but contra dance seems to these pressures.

While current variation over 36 dances gives some information, it would be much more interesting and useful to determine the origins and interaction patterns of these dialects. This would require much more observation at dances as well as many more interviews with older dancers. I expect to be continuing this data collection, as this is a subject I am interested in, and will likely release updated versions of at least the maps as I get more data.

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State	Town	Name	Size (est)	Abbreviation
AR	Little Rock‡	-	25	LtRk
CT	New Haven	NOMAD Folk Festival	100	NMAD
DE	Arden	Butter Ball	400	BtrB
IL	Chicago‡	University of Chicago	-	UChg
IN	Bloomington‡	-	40	BIN
MA	Cambridge	MIT Folkdance Club	25	MIT
	Cambridge	VFW Hall (closed)	200	VFW
	Concord	Scout House	150	SctH
	Greenfield	Guiding Star Grange	150	GFld
	Medford	SpringStep	150	SStp
	Natick	New England Folk Festival	1000	NEFF
	MD	Baltimore	-	50
Glen Echo		-	120	GlnE
MO	St Louis‡	-	60	StL
NC	Black Mountain	Lake Eden Arts Festival	500	LEAF
	Swannanoa	Warren Wilson	200	WrnW
NH	Canterbury	Wind in the Timothy	10	Cbry
	Concord	-	20	CNH
NJ	Lambertville	-	100	Lbvl
	Lawrenceville	Rum and Onions XXVII	180	R&O
NY	Hillsdale	Falcon Ridge Folk Fest	350	FRFF
	Albany‡	-	50	Abny
PA	Elverson	-	65	Elsn
	Glenside	-	100	Glns
	Swarthmore	Swarthmore Folkdance Club	20	Swat
OH	Oberlin‡	-	-	Ober
	Cleveland‡	-	-	Clvl
	Columbus‡	-	-	Clmb
TN	Athens‡	-	-	Atns
TX	Austin‡	Carpenter's Hall	50	AuCp
	Austin‡	St. Paul's	70	AuSp
	Dallas‡	-	90	Dals
	Huston‡	-	35	Husn
VT	Brattleboro	Dawn Dance	400	DwnD
	Ferrisburgh	Champlain Valley Folk Fest	120	CVFF

Figure 13: Dance descriptions.

Dance	Prom.	R&L T	Star	Ct. Turn	Pet. Clp.	R O'M spin	Footnoise
Ltrk	S	H	L	NT	-	-	NN, N
NMAD	CT	NH	WG	T, NT	C	S	m-NN
BtrB	B	H	WG	T, NT	C	S	N, NN
Uchg	S	H	WG	T, NT	C, NC	-	m-N
BIN	B	H	WG	NT	C, NC	S	N
MIT	CT	NH	WG	m-NT	-	-	NN
VFW	CT	NH	WG	m-T	C	S	N
SctH	CT	NH	WG	m-T	C	S	N
GFld	CT	NH	WG	m-T	C	S	m-N
SStp	CT	NH	WG	m-T	C	S	N
NEFF	CT	NH	WG	m-T	C	S	N
Btmr	B, CT	m-H	WG	T, NT	NC	S	NN
GlnE	B	H	WG	T, NT	C	S	N, NN
StL	S, B	H	WG	m-NT	C	m-NS	N
LEAF	S	NH	WG, HA	m-T	C	S	N
WrnW	S	NH	WG, HA	m-T	-	S	N
Cbry	CT	NH	WG	NT	N	-	N
CNH	CT	NH	WG	NT	-	-	N, NN
Lbvl	CT, B	H	WG	T, NT	C	S	N, NN
R&O	CT, B	m-H	WG	T, NT	C	S	NN
FRFF	CT	NH	WG	m-T	C	S	N
Abny	CT	NH	WG	NT	m-NC	-	NN
Elsn	B, CT	m-H	WG	m-NT	C	S, NS	m-NN
Glns	m-B	m-H	WG	T, NT	C	S	m-NN
Swat	CT	H	WG	m-NT	C	S	N
Ober	CT	H	WG	m-NT	C, NC	m-S	NN
Clvl	m-CT	H	WG	m-NT	m-NC	m-S	NN
Clmb	S	H	WG	m-NT	m-NC	m-S	NN
Atns	S	H	WG, HA	m-T	-	-	N
AuCp	S	H	WG	m-T	m-C	NS	m-N
AuSp	S	H	WG	m-T	m-C	NS	m-N
Dals	S	H	WG	NT	m-NC	-	m-NN
Husn	S	H	WG	NT	m-C	NS	m-NN
DwnD	CT	NH	WG	m-T	C	S	N
CVFF	CT	NH	WG	m-T	C	S	N

Figure 14: Dance properties

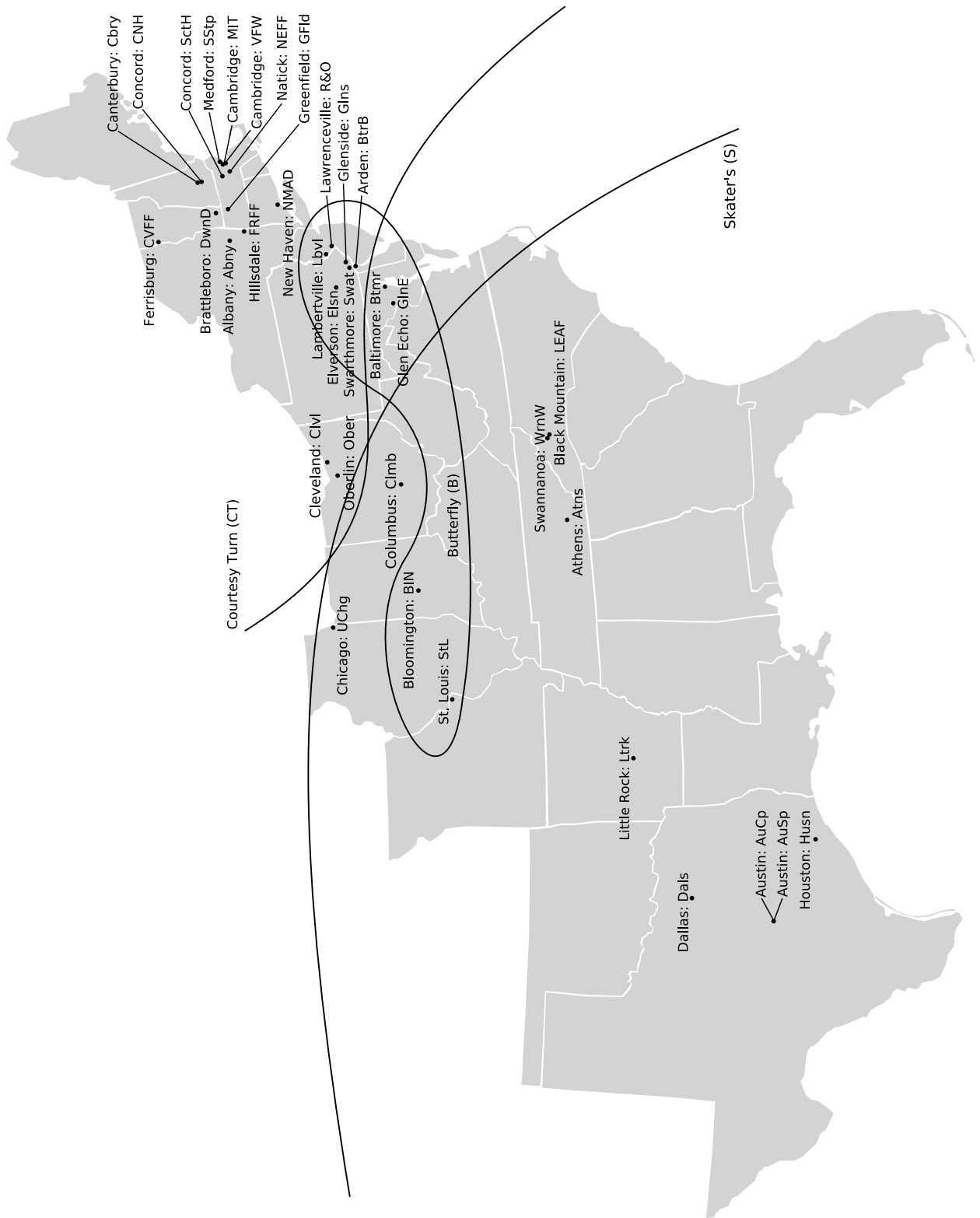


Figure 15: Promenade variants.

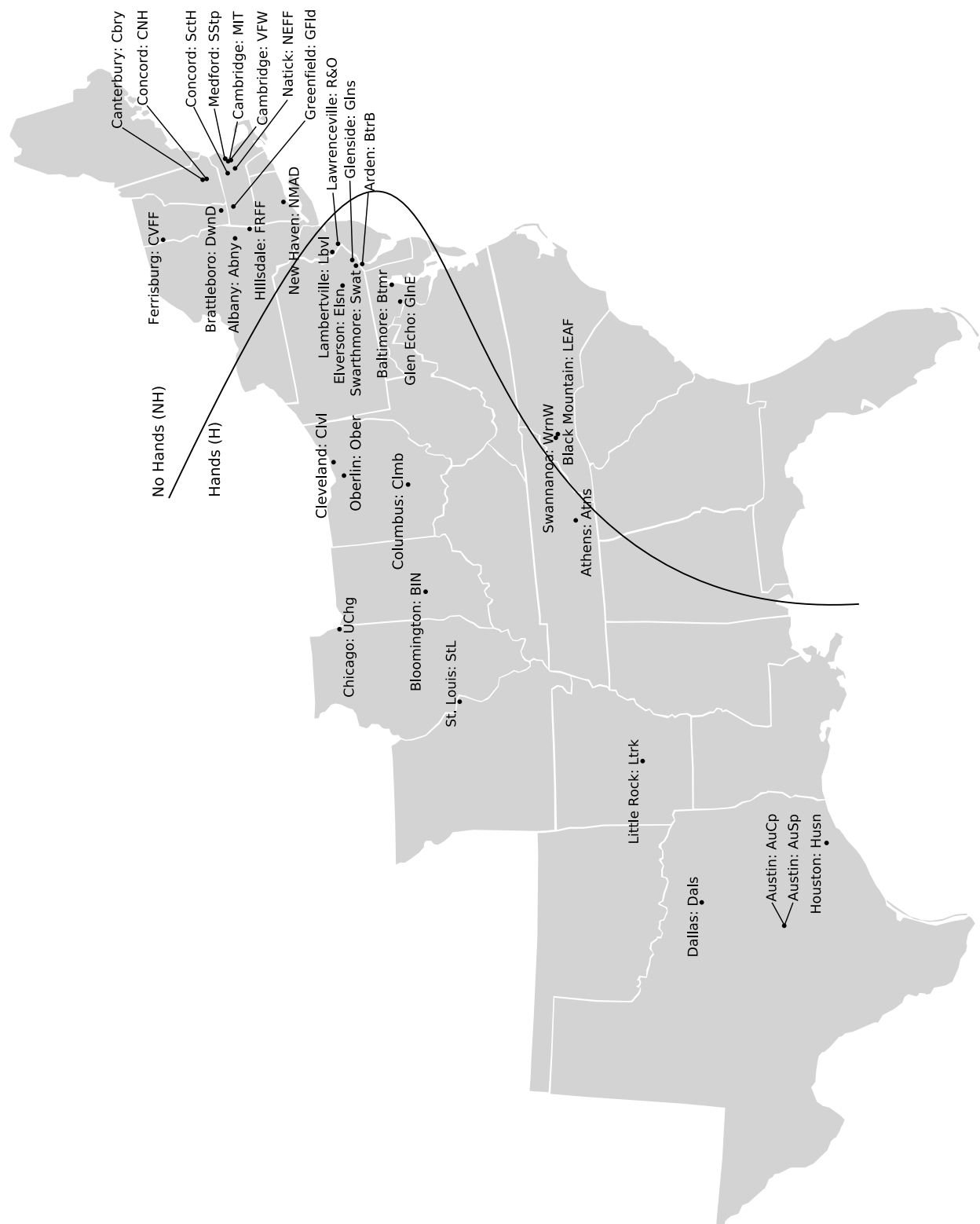


Figure 16: Right and Left Through Variants

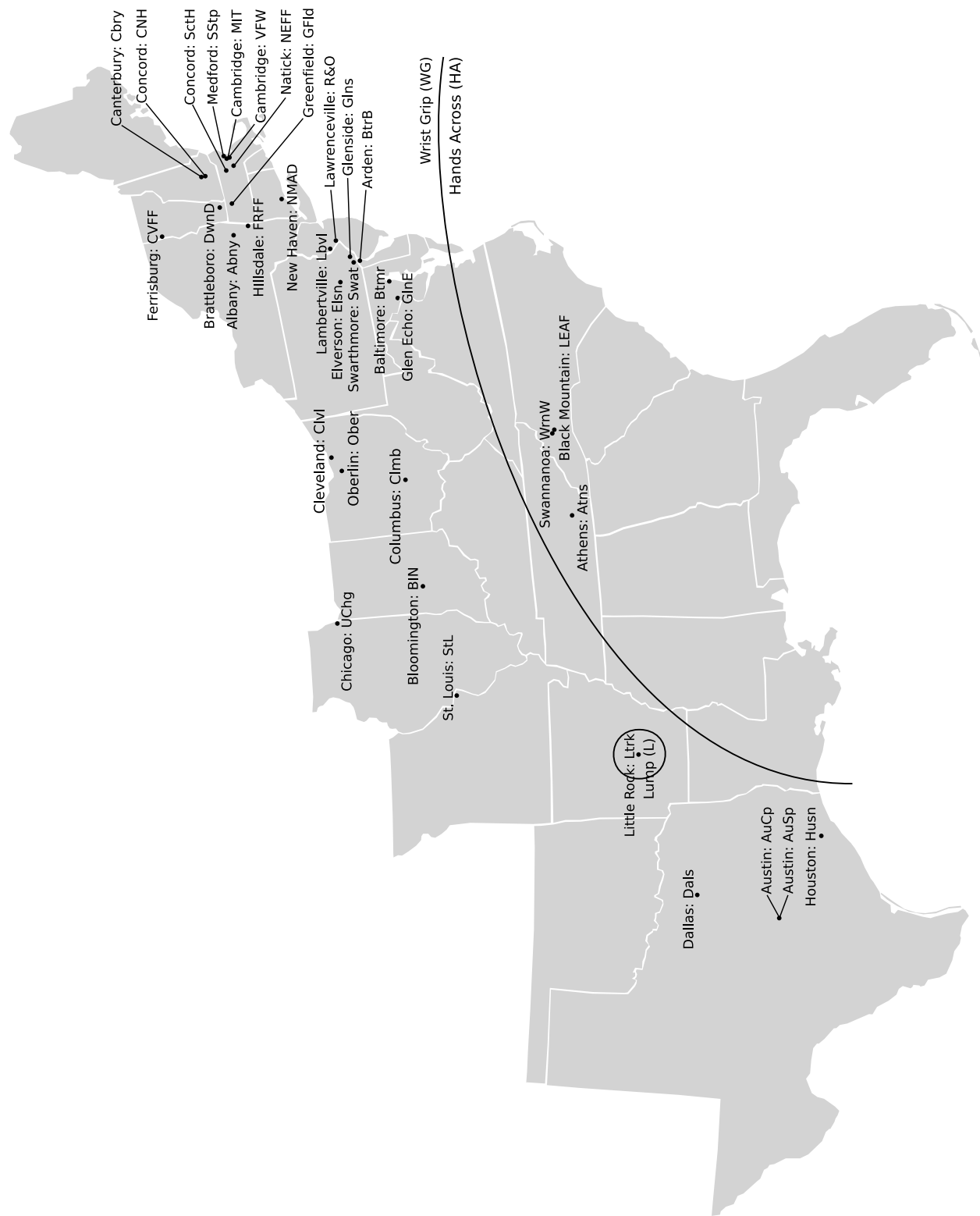


Figure 17: Star variants.

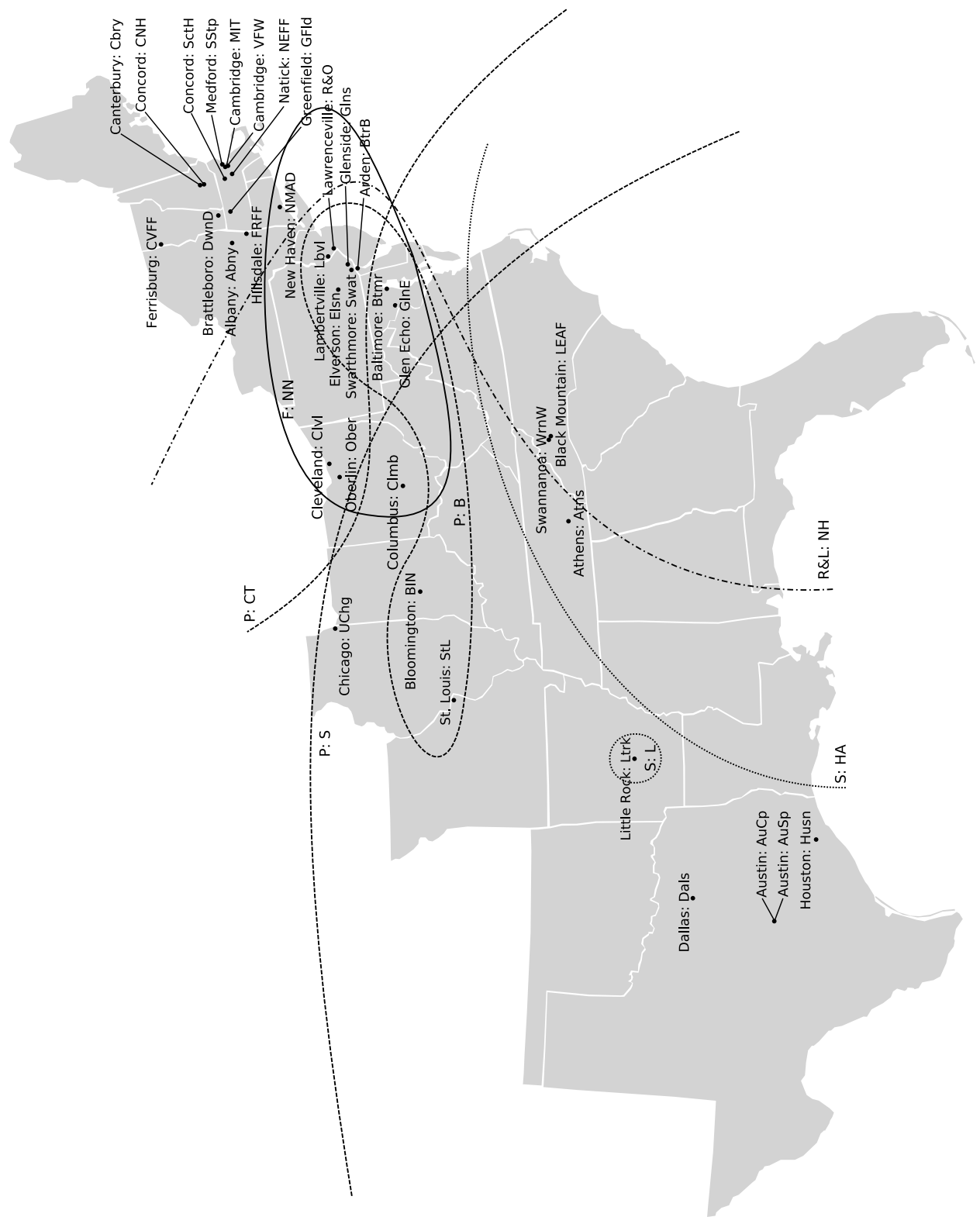


Figure 18: Full isogloss map for the studied area.