

Refugees without Assistance: English-Language Attainment and Economic Outcomes in the Early Twentieth Century

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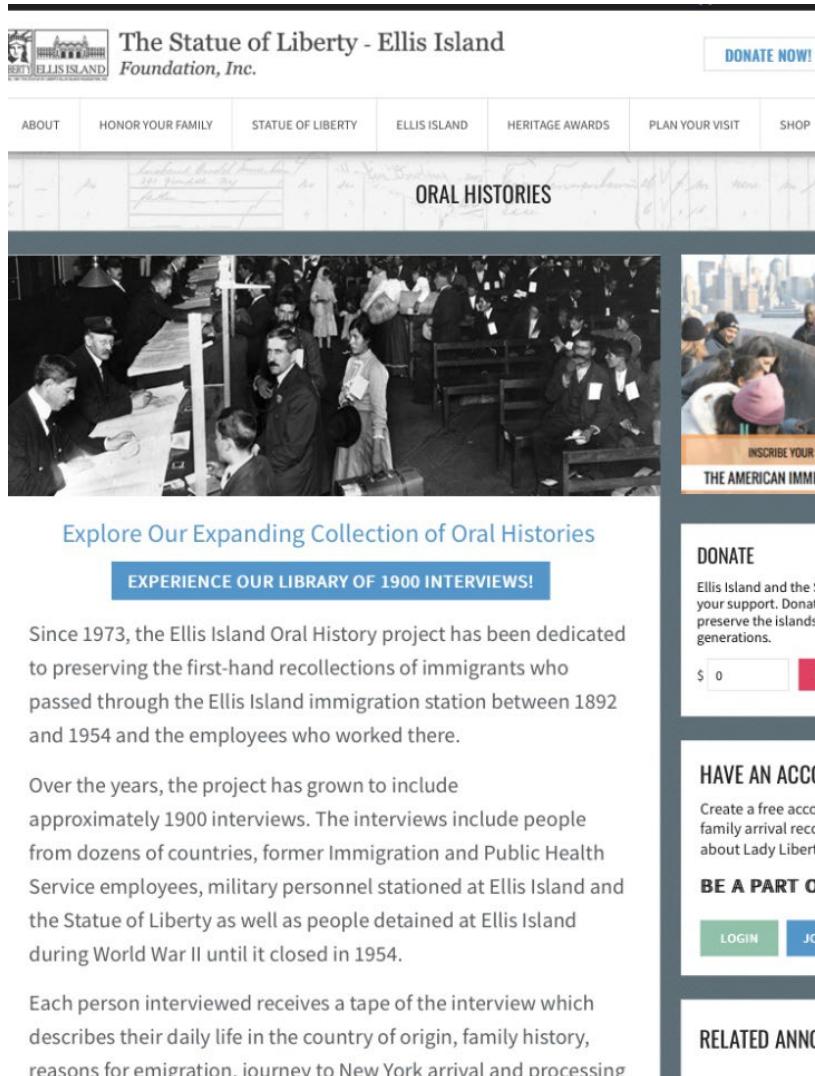
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Refugee assimilation without assistance

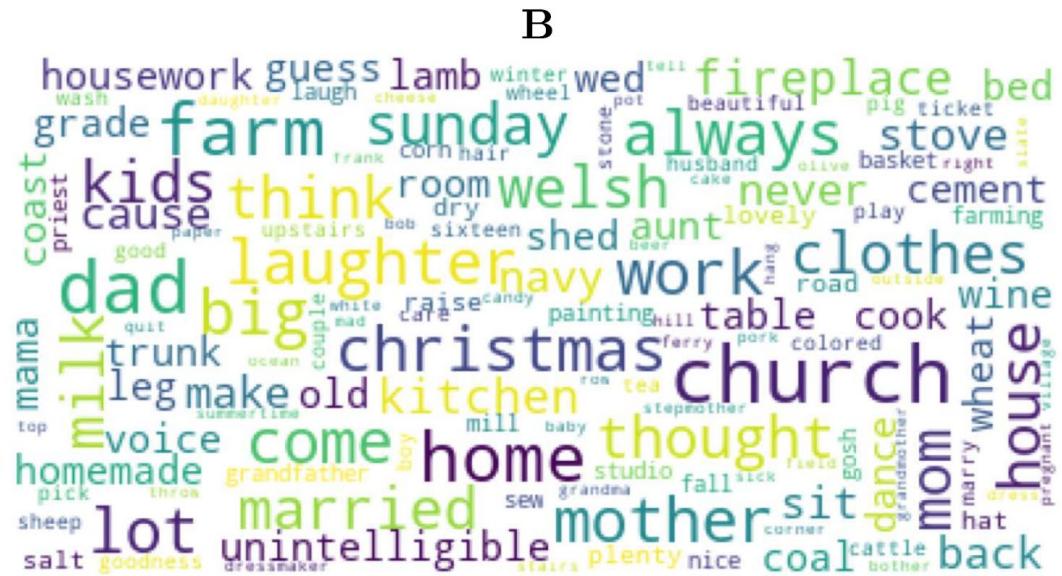
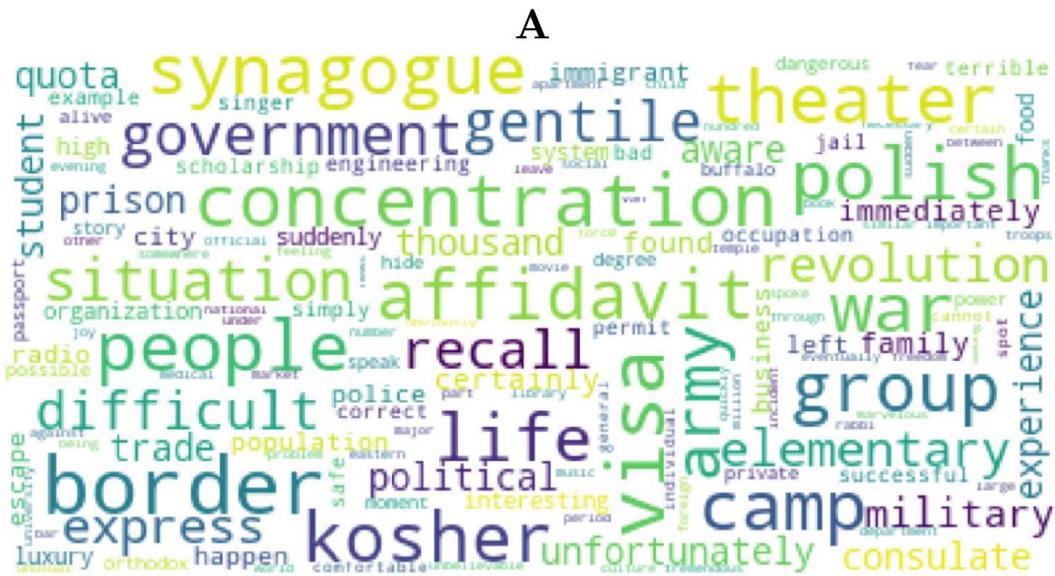
- Modern studies: Refugees to US assimilate faster than non-refugees (Chin and Cortes, 2015; Brell, Dustmann and Preston, [2020](#))
- Is this due to government supports or refugees' own investments?
- We classify new sample of immigrants by refugee status during the Age of Mass Migration before the rise of government assistance (c. 1920)
- We find that stronger assimilation for refugees than for non-refugees
 - Higher English proficiency than others from same country and religious group
 - Better depth of vocabulary but not more likely to lose accent

Oral histories from Ellis Island Foundation



- 1,200 interviews with transcript and audio files
- Classify reason for move ($\sim 25\% = \text{persecution}$)
- Code pre-migration attributes: Religion, urban status, father occupation. Also collect country of origin and year of arrival.
- Measure English ability: Vocabulary, syntax, accent
 - Exclude childhood arrivals
- Match to 1940 Census for income, etc.

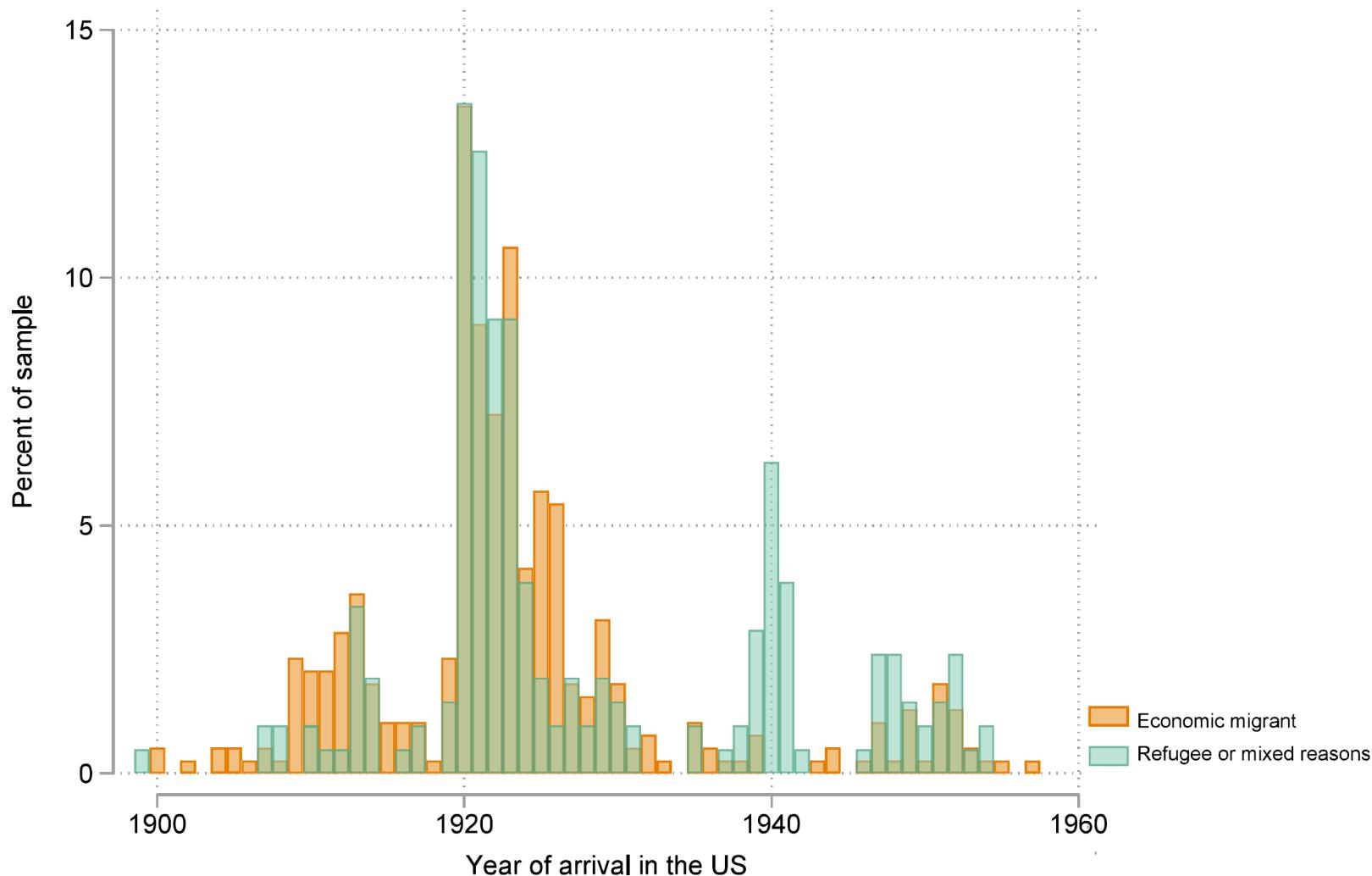
Coding refugee and non-refugee immigrants



Reasons for fleeing

- Pogroms (Jews)
- Genocide (Armenians, Syrians)
- World War I (most of Europe)
- Rise of Fascism (Italy), Rise of Nazism (most of Europe)
- Natural Disasters (parts of Europe)
- Revolutions (Russia)
- Other conflicts (Civil wars, political dissidents, etc)

Arrival years of refugees and non-refugees in sample



Vocabulary: Age of Acquisition (AoA) score

(Kuperman et al., 2012)

PD: "I'll tell you why. My father went away from the army.
AoA 2.79 4.26 4.35 3.97 2.72 4.11 5.07 4.44 3.98 7.15

The, you know, the Russian Army with the, uh, the Japanese Army was fighting at that time. He was a soldier in the Russian Army, you know, and he didn't want to stay there, and he came over here in 1905, my father. Then after a couple, two years more, so he took my mother and three boys up, you understand, three brothers."

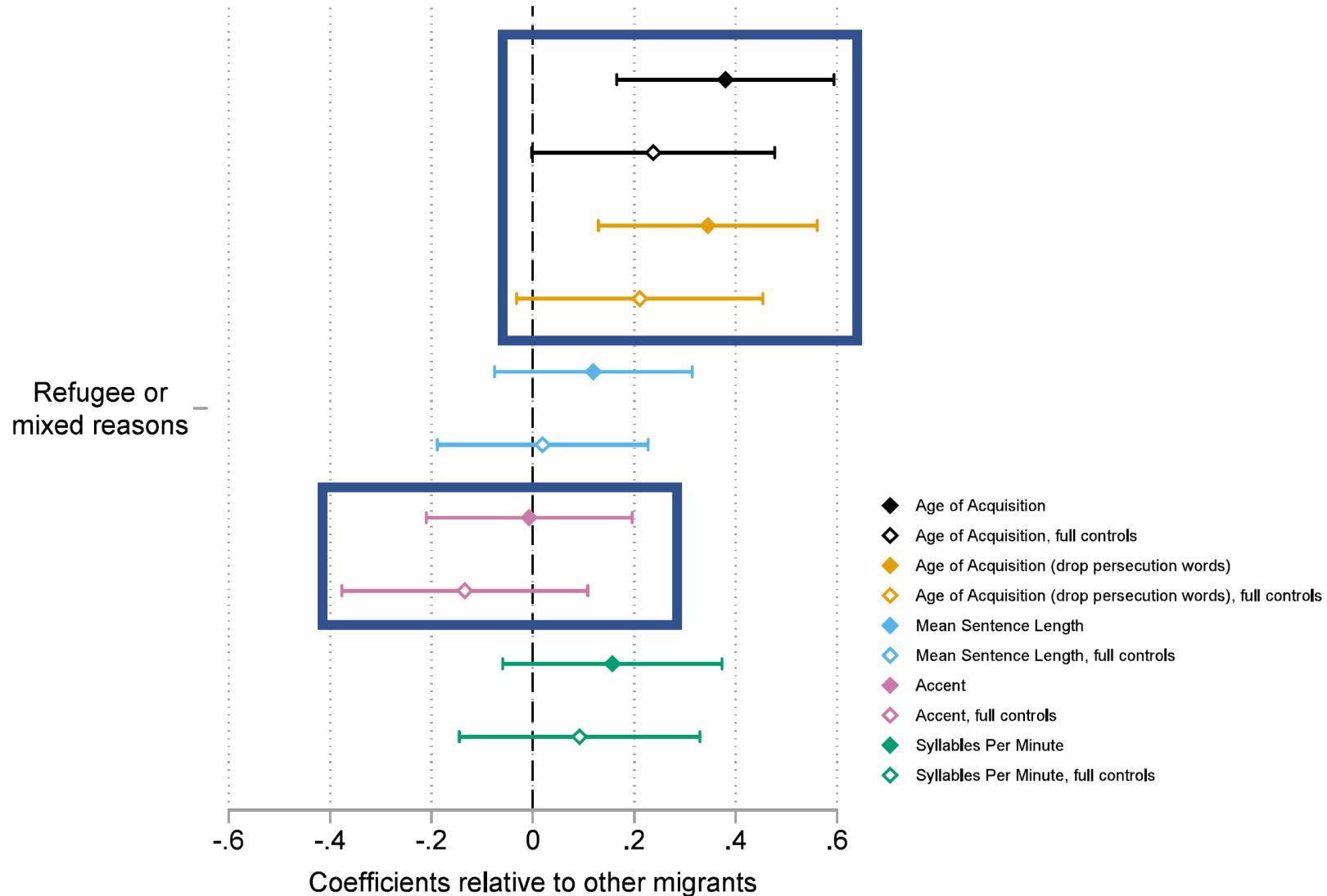
Mean AoA: 4.62

MH: "And, of course, at that time the Revolution was brewing.
AoA 4.57 4.55 7.34 4.04 5.53 5.16 3.98 10.00 9.06

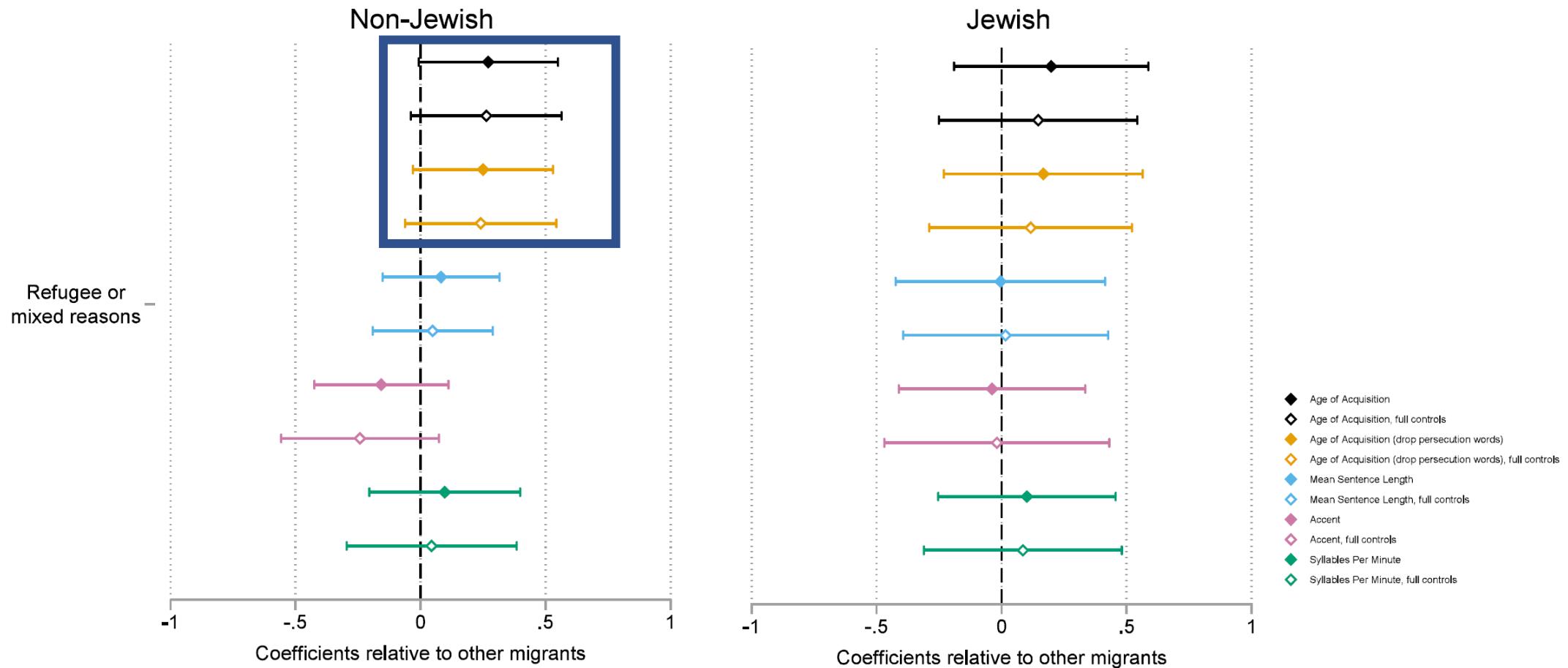
I was born in 1914. I think it's important that I indicate the date, March 22, 1914. And it was prior to the Russian Revolution and things were becoming very hectic. And, and all of a sudden the Revolution comes, in 1917, and, uh, we're, we're all in a state of upheaval, a terrible hunger ensured that, uh, thousands of people were just dying like flies."

Mean AoA: 5.72

Refugees acquired stronger vocabulary; no evidence of losing accent



Results are not being driven by Jewish migrants



Our new English proficiency measures are associated with higher income

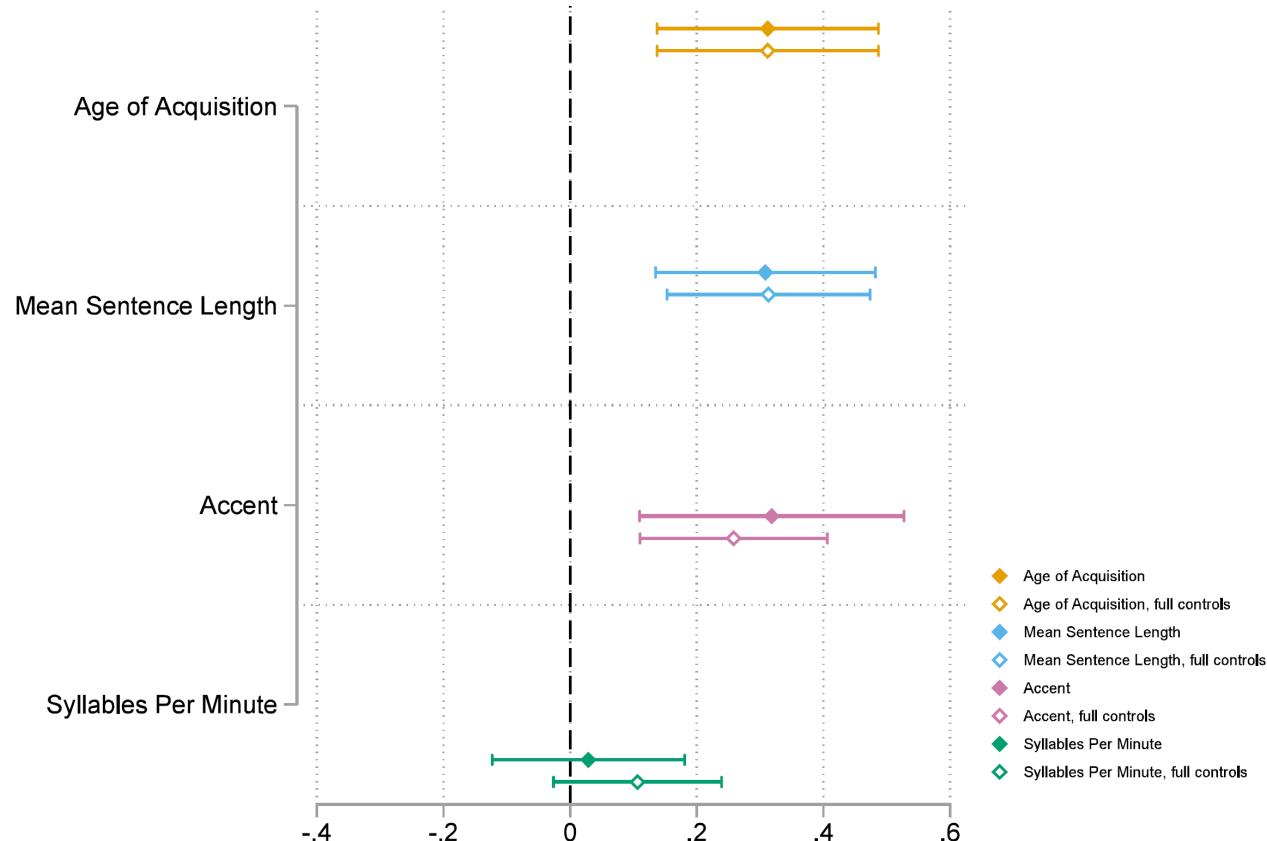


Figure 9. Regressions of logarithm of income on linguistic measures, English speakers included. This figure documents the results of four regression models where logarithm of income is regressed on (i) Age of Acquisition ($N=277$, $N=218$ with full controls), (ii) Mean Sentence Length ($N=277$, $N=218$), (iii) Accent ($N=243$, $N=193$) and (iv) Syllables Per Minutes ($N=238$, $N=189$). Linguistic measures have been standardized. Controls include age, age squared, arrival period, birthplace, gender and an indicator for arriving before or after the age of 12. Added controls in regressions with “full controls” include father’s pre-migration occupation, pre-migration urban status and religion. Results are weighted by the propensity of

Similar pattern in modern data (New Immigrant Survey)

Table 3. Association between refugee status and English fluency in the New Immigrant Survey

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Panel A: Outcome: Speaks any English				
Refugee	0.0168 (0.031)	0.0793** (0.032)	0.0797** (0.032)	0.0714* (0.037)
Recent English class			0.0691*** (0.015)	0.0489* (0.028)
Pre-US English class			0.103*** (0.013)	0.0491** (0.024)
Adjusted R ²	0.351	0.416	0.433	0.299
Panel B: Outcome: Speaks English Well				
Refugee	-0.108** (0.045)	-0.0465 (0.042)	-0.0333 (0.042)	-0.0284 (0.053)
Recent English class			-0.151*** (0.018)	-0.122*** (0.042)
Pre-US English class			0.156*** (0.018)	0.120*** (0.038)
Add'l Control	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sample Type	Full	Full	Full	In US \geq 2 yrs
Adjusted R ²	0.347	0.391	0.420	0.379
No. of Obs.	2938	2938	2938	654

Note: All regression specifications include fixed effects for departure timing and country of origin, as well as controls for age, age squared, and gender.

Additional Controls includes years of schooling prior to immigration, rural/urban, and religion. Specifications 1-3 use the full sample, where as specification 4 includes only immigrants who have been in the US for at least 2 years. Refugee = 1 for immigrants with Refugee or Asylee visa status. Recent English class is defined as a current English class or one taken within the past year. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

- Immigrants who reported leaving Europe in response to war, violence or persecution attained *higher* English proficiency than immigrants from the same countries of origin and religious group who came for economic opportunities
- This pattern is consistent with stronger incentives for refugees to invest in their human capital