

The Canadian Shift: Coast to Coast

Historically, Canadian English has been classified as belonging to a broad North American dialect area that includes most of the Western and Midland United States (the “3rd dialect” of Labov (1991)). However, accumulating evidence suggests that certain vocalic features of Canadian English serve to set it apart from the remainder of this expansive dialect region. These features include the oft-stereotyped *Canadian Raising* (Chambers, 1973); and the *Canadian Shift* (CS) first proposed by Clarke et al. (1995). They described the CS as the retraction of /æ/ (‘bat’), motivated by the merger of /o/ (‘cot’) and /oh/ (‘caught’), and subsequent downward movement of /e/ (‘bet’) and /i/ (‘bit’). While these two processes have been shown to unify speakers from Vancouver to Montreal, Labov et al. (2006) found no evidence for the CS in the Maritimes, effecting the exclusion of this region from their Canadian dialect area. The present study examines the validity of this exclusion. Furthermore, we examine the phonetic direction of the CS, which has come into question since Clarke et al.’s original description. In particular, Boberg (2005) claimed that the CS in Montreal is better characterized as a set of parallel retractions of the front lax vowels. The present study compares two geographically disparate Canadian regions, Vancouver and Halifax, to evaluate competing characterizations of the CS.

The current research involved the analysis of the three CS vowels and the merged low-back vowel /o-oh/ which is proposed to trigger the CS. Tokens were collected from word-list data via digitally-recorded in-person interviews with twenty-six speakers. These were acoustically analysed using CSL (*Computerized Speech Lab*) to provide for reliable comparison between the regions. These data were then analysed with respect to the age of the participants to establish a diachronic pattern in apparent time.

In contrast to previous findings, the CS was found to be present in Halifax, with the vast majority of tokens surpassing the shift thresholds as defined by Labov et al. This leads us to recommend the inclusion of this area in the broader Canadian dialect region. The Halifax speakers were, however, shown to be less advanced in the CS than their Vancouver counterparts. This may indicate that the CS is spreading from larger urban centres to smaller ones. An apparent-time analysis demonstrates that the CS is currently active in both Vancouver and Halifax, although it is not necessarily following an identical path in each region. In particular, while the data from both regions support a chain-shift analysis (rather than one of parallel retraction), Vancouver demonstrates stronger retraction of /æ/ and lowering of /i/ and Halifax shows diagonal movement of all three vowels. The persistence of different shift patterns even in such comparable samples suggests that the several previous descriptions of the CS need not be seen as competing, but rather as reflecting the Shift’s susceptibility to regional—and perhaps social—variation. The overarching similarities between regions on opposite coasts, however, seem to indicate that the CS is indeed a Canada-wide phenomenon, simultaneously unifying speakers of Canadian English and defining much of Canada as a dialect region distinct those of the United States. As such, it seems likely that the CS functions as a salient marker of Canadian national identity.

References

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