

Division and Unity in West Virginia Mergers

Kirk Hazen
Associate Professor
Department of English
West Virginia University

In order to inform the on-going dialogue about the Midlands region, this paper focuses on the composition of the dialect regions in West Virginia (USA) through analysis of two vowel mergers. Sociolinguistic interviews and word-list readings with 40 native West Virginians were collected; this paper presents impressionistic analysis of mergers in two sets of word pairs: The low-back merger, “cot . . . caught” and “hock . . . hawk”; the front-lax merger, “pin . . . pen” and “tin . . . ten”. Traditionally, the front-lax merger has been perceived socially as a Southern merger (Brown 1991) and the low-back merger on the east coast has not been perceived as a Southern merger (Herold 1990). Since its creation during the Civil War, West Virginia has been a state divided in its sociopolitical organization (Williams 2001). These two vowel mergers are the focus of investigation because they represent previously common features of this divide between Northern and Southern West Virginia.

Considering the sociogeographic background of the mergers and that West Virginia falls across several traditional dialect boundaries (e.g. Kurath and McDavid 1961) and is still divided, albeit in a different location, in more recent surveys (Labov, Ash, and Boberg Forthcoming), the preliminary hypothesis thus had two prongs to it: 1) That few speakers would have both mergers; 2) that geography would be the strongest social factor correlated with who had which merger. Results indicate that each hypothesis requires some modification. 19 of the 40 speakers (48 percent) have both mergers, a larger percent than originally anticipated. The geographical split between northern and southern West Virginia did reach a level of significance within chi-square tests but only for the front-lax merger, not for the low-back merger. In other words, the low-back merger has spread throughout the state whereas the front-lax merger remains slightly more geographically restricted (e.g. Not found in the northern panhandle of the state). The other factors demonstrating significance were the sex and the educational level of the speaker. Age also shows an important difference between younger and older speakers: 56 percent of younger speakers had both mergers compared with 13 percent of older speakers. The Ns are low for ethnicity, with only four African Americans in the sample, but no strong correlation appears.

These findings indicate that both vowel mergers are becoming more regular fare for an increasing percentage of West Virginians. As these vowel mergers invade each others' territories, West Virginia begins to find a type of dialect unity. With the sociogeographic overlap of these two mergers, a more unified dialect in West Virginia lends support to an enduring Midlands region in the US dialect landscape.

- Brown, Vivian R. 1991. Evolution of the Merger of /I/ and /E/ before Nasals in Tennessee. *American Speech* 66:303-15.
- Herold, Ruth. 1990. Mechanisms of merger: The implementation and distribution of the low back merger in Eastern Pennsylvania. University of Pennsylvania dissertation.
- Labov, William, Sharon Ash, and Charles Boberg. Forthcoming. Atlas of North American English. Mouton de Gruyter.
- Kurath, Hans, and Raven I. McDavid, Jr. 1961. *The Pronunciation of English in the Atlantic States*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P.
- Williams, John Alexander. 2001. *West Virginia: A History*. 2nd ed. Morgantown, WV: WVUP.