

Title: Patterns of uw, U, and ow fronting in Reno, Nevada

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A number of changes are affecting the modern American vowel system, allowing a clear distinction of regional dialects according to vowel space. Curiously, the majority of these distinguishing vowel changes are affecting front and low vowel sub-systems exclusively, with little in the way of radically distinct changes affecting back vowels. This relative similarity in the national back vowel picture does not suggest a stable back system. In fact, it is the uniformity of the types of changes affecting back vowels across U.S. dialects that is particularly striking.

As part of a larger research program exploring the diffusion of back vowel fronting across regional dialects and its related linguistic and social conditioning, this paper will examine back vowel fronting in the Western United States, as realized in Reno, NV. Earlier work performed in the South (Fridland and Bartlett 2006) found widespread fronting in the BOOT and BOOK classes, regardless of ethnic or gender group affiliation. Fronting of the BOAT class was much less prevalent, occurring predominately in younger White speakers. Work in the North (Anderson and Milroy 1999, Anderson, Milroy and Nyguyen 2002, Ash 1996, Labov 1991, 1994, 2000) suggested high back vowel fronting affected the Northern dialect region as well, although BOAT class fronting was rarely reported. In both these regions, the environmental constraints operating in back vowel shifting also appear, from initial studies, to be quite general, namely with alveolar, velar and palatal consonants promoting fronting and labial and lateral contexts inhibiting fronting. However, Memphis speakers with very advanced fronting often showed complete fronting of all tokens in each class, mediated by ethnic membership. A few studies have also looked at back vowel fronting in the West (Fought 1999, Hall-Lew 2004, Luthin 1987), attesting to the occurrence of both /uw/ and /ow/ fronting in that region. However, there has not been much research on the how widespread such fronting is in different areas of the West nor on the similarity of the shift there with that occurring elsewhere in terms of linguistic conditioning.

The current paper explores the realization of back vowel fronting in these three classes in the Reno area, with a particular interest in determining whether these same linguistic constraints are at work, suggesting a fairly universal and natural shift pattern driving fronting across regions. Preliminary results suggest that BOOT, BOOK and BOAT class fronting are quite widespread in Reno and share much of the environmental patterning found elsewhere.

Finally, in addition to examining the productive patterns of shift in the area, the perceptual salience of back vowel shifts among Reno residents will also be explored using synthesized vowel formants rated for pleasantness and education measures. Due to the association of BOAT class fronting with Southern California speech, and Reno residents general avoidance of California association, it is expected that they will show particularly downgraded ratings of fronting involving the BOAT vs. the BOOT class, despite productive use of the variant.

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