

## Forks In The Road

When speakers of neighboring dialects become so separated by migration that communication between them is sharply reduced, it is not unexpected that their linguistic systems will also diverge. But linguistic divergence of neighboring dialects is harder to explain when they have remained in full contact during the period of change. This is the situation that prevails along the North/Midland boundary in the United States (Labov, Ash and Boberg 2006) as well as the boundary between the North and Canada.

The key to such divergence may be found in linguistic *forks in the road*, situations where a structural instability can be resolved in one of two likely directions, and one at least of the forks is a unidirectional change. Such a situation has recurred several times in the history of English in the fronting or backing of the long low vowel /a:/.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century U.S., the opposition of /o/ and /oh/ appears to have been unstable for two reasons: it depended entirely on length, and the environments of contrast were limited to a small set of consonants. The situation was resolved in one of two directions. In New England, western Pennsylvania, Canada and the West, the two low back vowels were merged. In three other areas, strong differences of quality were developed through the raising of /oh/ in the Mid-Atlantic States, the fronting of /o/ in the Inland North, and the development of a back upglide in the South. These sound changes led to chain shifts which like the low back merger, were irreversible, and so led to continuing divergence of neighboring dialects.

A more puzzling case concerns the divergence of conditioning environments for the raising of /æ/ in North America. In two thirds of the continent, /æ/ before /d/ is considerably higher than /æ/ before /g/, but in that situation is reversed in the other third, an area covering much of Canada, the North Central states, and part of the Inland North. In this respect, /g/ differs strikingly from /k/, which disfavors the raising of a preceding /æ/ more than /t/ in every region. The special behavior of /g/ may be related to the phonetic constraints on the maintenance of voicing for velars. The period of air flow across the vibrating vocal cards can be lengthened by the fronting of the place of constriction of the stop, and in other studies of consonant shifts, such fronting has been found to be unidirectional.

The paper will draw geographic and phonetic data to support this reasoning from the records of the Atlas of North American English.

### References:

Labov, William, Sharon Ash and Charles Boberg. 2006. *The Atlas of North American English*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.