

The Canadian Shift in Toronto

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Previous studies disagree on the trajectory of the Canadian Shift (CS) across speech communities in Canada. The first study to investigate the shift (Clarke, Elms and Youssef 1995) focused primarily on southern Ontario and described CS as a drag chain triggered by the merger of the low back vowels /ɑ/ and /ɔ/ and resulting in the lowering of the lax front vowels /ɪ, ε, æ/, as well as the retraction of /æ/. While these findings are somewhat supported by Labov, Ash and Boberg (2006), other recent instrumental studies suggest that CS is primarily characterized by retraction of /ɪ, ε, æ/ rather than lowering, in both urban centres (most notably Montreal in Boberg 2005, but see also Hagiwara 2006 for Winnipeg) and in several communities throughout Ontario ranging in size (Lawrance 2002, De Decker 2002). The current study provides the first large scale, apparent time instrumental account of the lax front vowels in the English of Toronto—the largest city in Canada—enabling the synthesis of these seemingly disparate previous findings into one cohesive analysis that relies on the *cascade model of diffusion* (Labov 2001: 285) as its theoretical basis.

Formant measurements were collected from conversational data produced by 36 speakers from the *Toronto English Corpus* (Tagliamonte 2003-2006) stratified by sex and age group (the pre-WWII generation, baby-boomers, and speakers born after 1965). Preliminary results from one-way ANOVAs performed on a sub-sample of female speakers across all age groups confirm that the primary characteristic of CS in Toronto for the past seventy years at least has been lowering. The most pronounced change in apparent time is found in the F1 of /ɪ/ between the youngest speakers and all others, while the F1 of /ε/ distinguishes all three age cohorts, albeit less sharply. This pattern is consistent with Clarke et al.'s (1995) hypothesized drag chain led by /æ/, because /æ/ shows the least change over apparent time, while /ɪ/ shows the most and /ε/ is intermediary.

Conversely, we find no evidence for retraction in progress. Instead, a comparison of F2 means between /ɪ, ε, æ/ and the stable point vowels /i/ and /ɑ/ shows all three lax vowels to be centralized for all speakers, even the very oldest. It is, therefore, likely that retraction did occur in Toronto, but has stopped, possibly for both phonetic and phonological reasons. Adopting the cascade model, which posits that sound change begins in urban centres and spreads outward to progressively smaller cities and towns, we thus argue that reports of robust retraction in mid-size communities (Winnipeg) and rural areas, or linguistically isolated cities (Montreal), reflect an older stage of the shift.

This study reveals the Canadian Shift to be a process that has unfolded in stages, and identifies lowering without concomitant retraction as its most innovative change. Moreover, the lax vowel system of Toronto appears to be reaching stability, as no retraction has occurred recently, and the most vigorous movement occurs only at the top of the chain, suggesting that CS is in its terminal stages.

References

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