

7

Forks in the Road

7.1 The Concept of Forks in the Road

Chapter 1 divided the explanatory problems of linguistic change into two types. One is the existence of parallel developments after long separation – the problem confronted in comparing colonial Englishes of the Southern Hemisphere (Trudgill 2004). The other is the problem of explaining divergent developments in neighboring dialects that have never been separated – a common situation in North American dialectology. This chapter will examine cases of the second type and will attempt to characterize the common features of the forks in the road which lead to the increasing regional diversity of North American dialects.

Following the logic of Chapter 5, the identification of a triggering event is a terminal stage in the process of tracing, backwards in time, the linked series of changes that have affected a particular dialect. When we arrive at the triggering event, we are at the root of a branching process; otherwise all neighboring dialects would have followed the same causal path, and there would be no dialect diversity to deal with. If the triggering event turned out to be the geographic separation of two populations, there might be no problem to explain, for random variation and drift may very well account for the ensuing diversity. But the ANAE maps show sharp boundaries between speakers who have lived side by side for generations, in some cases even for centuries, with few physical or social barriers to communication. We have no reason to doubt the generality of Bloomfield's principle of accommodation, cited as [1] in Chapter 1. How, then, does it come about that neighboring dialects diverge rather than converge? This and the following chapter will put forward a general answer to this question, in the form of a two-stage model in which bidirectional changes are followed by unidirectional changes.

7.2 The Two-Stage Model of Dialect Divergence

Figure 7.1 displays this two-step model. The first stage, the development of bidirectional changes, depends on the existence of *forks in the road*, where an unstable linguistic situation may be resolved in one of two (or more) manners – often a choice that seems equiprobable, where small forces may lead the linguistic system to follow one route or the other. Such small forces may also induce one dialect to follow a different route from its neighbor. Given the unstable fluctuation of A and B in Figure 7.1, one group of speakers may adopt form A and the other form B.

Such equally balanced situations lead to bidirectional change, that is, to fluctuation in one direction or the other, often over considerable periods of time. The existence of a fork in the road does not in itself lead to divergence, since, under continual contact between the neighboring dialects, the principle of accommodation may lead to a resolution of the opposition in one direction or another, and to eventual convergence. Thus the dialect with form A may shift to B, or the dialect with form B may shift to A.

Lasting divergence occurs when the structural consequences of adopting A or B trigger further changes driven by the unidirectional principles of the last chapter, which are not easily reversed. In the domain of sound changes, these may be chain shifts, splits or mergers.

The upper half of Figure 7.1 will be instantiated and clarified in this chapter with examples of bidirectional changes ranging broadly over the history of English, from Old English to the current changes affecting North American English. The following chapter will deal with the developments in the lower half of Figure 7.1, where additional choice points will be found among unidirectional changes.

Two cases of fluctuating sound changes in the history of English will be examined in this chapter. They involve the pivot points in English vowel systems that largely determine the dynamics of North American English dialects: the low front short vowel /æ/ and the low back short vowel /ɒ/. In both cases there is a wide range of phonetic realization: for /æ/, from [i:ə] to [a]; and, for /ɒ/, from [u:ə] to [a]. In both cases phonemic oppositions are at issue: whether /æ/ is distinct from

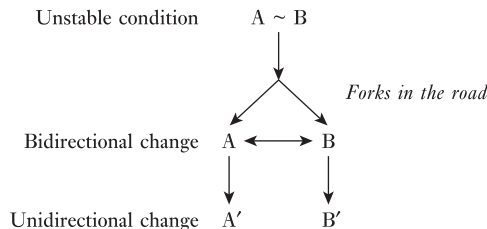
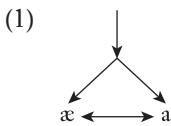


Figure 7.1 The two-stage model of divergence

/æh/; and whether /o/ is distinct from /oh/. The two situations appear at first glance to possess a striking front/back symmetry in both respects. But in actual fact front and back domains behave quite differently and have evolved in often divergent ways over the history of English.

7.3 The Fronting and Backing of Short *a*

The bidirectional changes to be considered here involve the alternation of a low front vowel [æ] with a low central vowel [a].



THE ORIGINAL FRONTING The English language belongs to the West Germanic branch, which inherited the low back short vowel **a* from Proto-Germanic. Old English, along with Old Frisian, fronted **a* to **æ* at a prehistoric stage (“Anglo-Frisian brightening”), but **æ* then reverted to **a* before back vowels. Thus Proto-West-Germanic **dag* (“day”) is realized in Old English as *dæg* (compare Old High German *tag*), but the plural is *dagas*; and Old English *fæder* (“father”) corresponds to Old High German *fatar* and to Old Saxon *fadar*. Subsequent changes, as well as re-analyses and paradigmatic levelings, made *æ* and *a* distinctive phonemes.

MIDDLE ENGLISH BACKING In late Old English and early Middle English, /æ/ shifted back to a low central [a], or even to back [ɑ], as shown by the change of spelling from *æ* to *a*. There was an extraordinary amount of dialect fluctuation, as explained by Wyld (1936: 110–12):

The OE spelling *æ* remains in West Saxon and Northumbrian consistently, also in part of the Mercian area, while it is raised to *e* already in Early Kentish. [...] The Midland texts of the same date invariably have *a*. [...] After the beginning of the 14th century, pure Southern texts have *a* as well, to the extinction of the true Southern type. The Northern and Midland *a* type becomes the predominant, and finally the sole type apparently throughout the whole country [...].

EARLY MODERN ENGLISH FRONTING The modern return to [æ] was again a slow process, marked by extensive dialect differentiation. Wyld summarizes this history as follows (ibid., 163–4):

So far as the testimony of the Grammarians goes, the old back sound remained in the “best English” throughout the 16th century. It is certain, however, that the sound

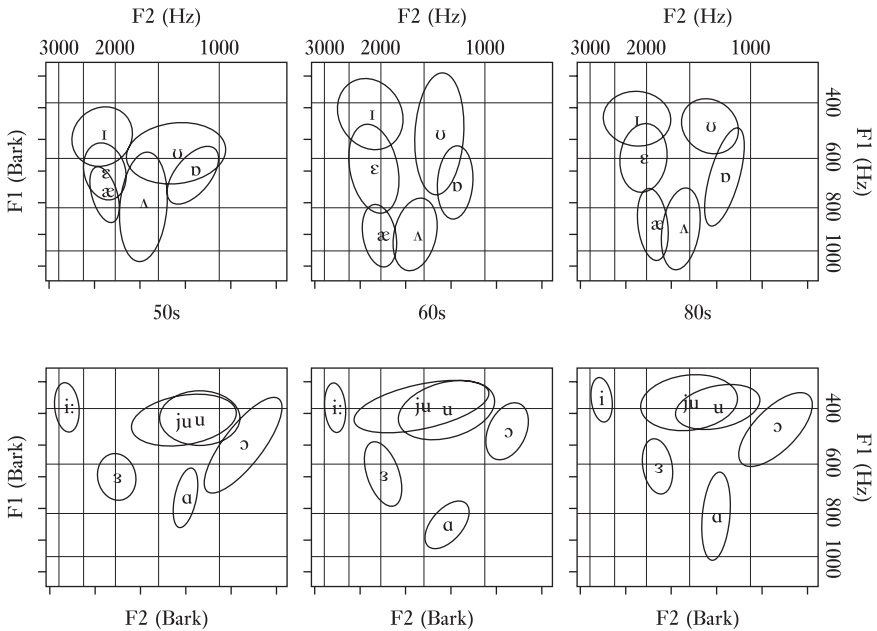


Figure 7.2 Backing of short *a* in Queen Elizabeth's short vowels (Harrington et al. 2000). Reprinted by permission of Cambridge University Press

had developed long before this. [...] A front pronunciation is pretty certain from Shakespeare's rhymes *scratch ~ wretch*, *neck ~ back*, both from *Venus and Adonis* [...]. The fronted type seems to have been introduced slowly into the Standard Language, and was not fully accepted until towards the end of the 16th century [...]. Once established, [æ] has remained unchanged.

RECENT BACKING IN THE UK Wyld's finding that short-*a* has remained unchanged as [æ] was premature. In the conservative Received Pronunciation (RP) of his time, short-*a* was often reported as [ɛ], but the recent trend among educated speakers is a widespread backing from [ɛ] to [æ̠]. This appears clearly in the Harrington et al. (2000) study of changes in Queen Elizabeth's vowels in her birthday messages from the 1950s to the 1980s (Figure 7.2). The overlap of /æ/ and /ɛ/ in the 1950s is replaced in the 1960s by /æ/ in low front position, with mean F2 of /æ/ lowering from about 2200 Hz in the 1950s to about 2000 Hz in the 1960s and to about 1900 Hz in the 1980s.

FLUCTUATION IN NORTH AMERICA The variations in short-*a* realization reported above for the United Kingdom are reflected in an even wider range of short-*a*

patterns in the United States. In the discussion of triggering events in Chapter 5, the Northern Cities Shift was linked to the formation of a short-*a* *koine* in Western New York State, the result of a mixture of radically different short-*a* systems during the population explosion associated with the building of the Erie Canal in the years 1817–25. Section 5.6 listed four such systems. One of these, the split short-*a* system of New York City, will not be considered here, for reasons to be developed in Chapter 15.¹

The bidirectional changes considered here are the shift from a low front vowel to a mid or upper high fronted ingliding vowel, and vice versa:

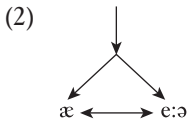


Figure 7.3 shows short-*a* distributions for three speakers from the New England area, which was the main source of westward migration to the Inland North. Figure 7.3a is the nasal system of Debbie T. of New Hampshire. Short *a* before nasal codas are well separated from all others, with no overlap in the two distributions. In contrast, the continuous short-*a* pattern of Elena D. in Figure 7.3b shows considerable overlap of oral and nasal codas. *Bad* is almost as high and front as *Dan*, and *bathroom* is close to *canvas*. The overall range is not as great as in Figure 7.3a, but many phonetic factors condition the position of a given token. Initial obstruent plus liquid produces the lowest and furthest back tokens, as in *black* and *slack*.

Among the New England short-*a* patterns one also finds some which appear to be precursors to the general raising of /æ/ in the Inland North. Figure 7.3c shows a general raising to lower mid position, with no tokens remaining in low front, but the separation between prenasal and preoral tokens is preserved. In fact this particular speaker, Phyllis P., is the only person outside of the Inland North who satisfies all the conditions of the NCS. Her short *a* is higher and fronter than her short *e*.² At the same time, Phyllis P. shows a solid merger of /o/ and /oh/, which is otherwise incompatible with the NCS. In this case the merger takes place in a strongly fronted position.

The continuous and raised nasal systems may be contrasted with short *a* in a fully developed NCS vowel system, as in Figure 7.3d. For Martha F. in Kenosha, Wisconsin, there is almost no difference in the distributions of prenasal and preoral tokens. Both types are intermixed in upper mid and lower mid position, with a small tendency for the prenasal tokens to be fronter.

An overall view of the range of short-*a* systems across New England and the Inland North appears in Figure 7.4, which plots the difference between the average F1 of preoral and prenasal tokens on the vertical axis, and the corresponding F2

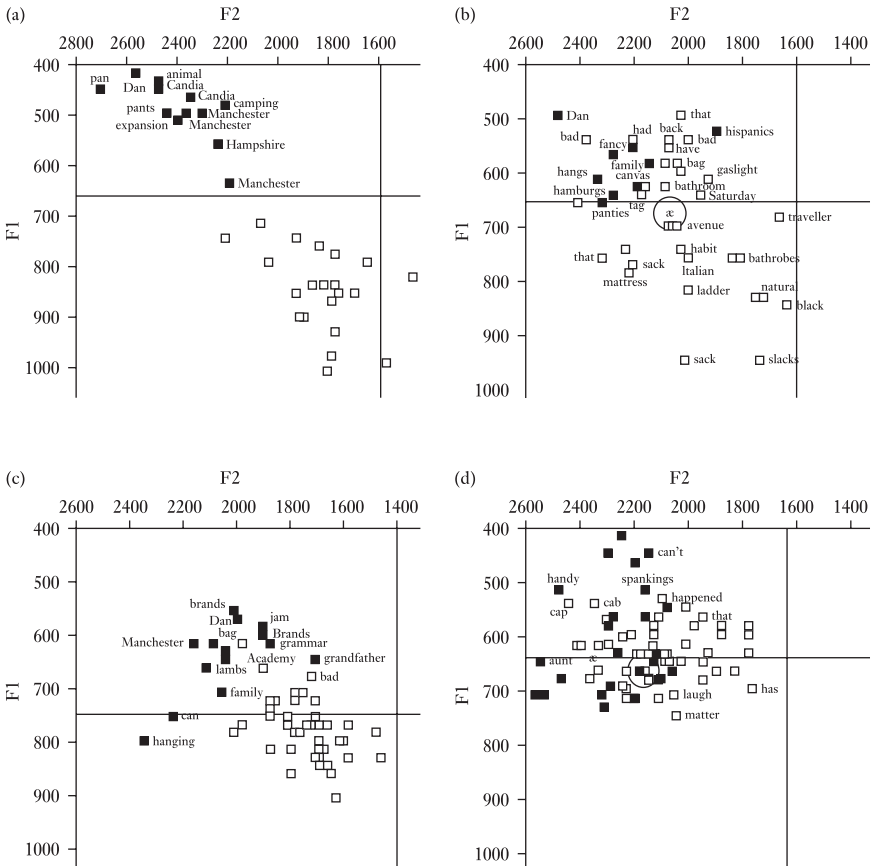


Figure 7.3a Nasal short-*a* system of Deb T., 34 [1995], Manchester, NH, TS 726

Figure 7.3b Continuous short-*a* system of Elena D., 70 [1995], Springfield, MA, TS 437

Figure 7.3c Raised nasal short-*a* system of Phyllis P., 53 [1995], Rutland, VT, TS 434

Figure 7.3d Raised short-*a* system of Martha F., 28 [1992], Kenosha, WI, TS 3

difference on the horizontal axis. New England speakers are displayed as open circles, and Inland North speakers as solid squares. The positions of the four speakers of Figure 7.3 are labeled. Deb T. is located squarely in the midst of the nasal system distribution, and Martha F. at the extreme of the Inland North, with minimal differentiation of preoral and prenasal allophones. The continuous and raised nasal systems are in the area of overlap.

When /æ/ remains in low front position, it is subject to backing to low central position, as we have seen in the discussion in Chapter 5 (see also Chapter 8).

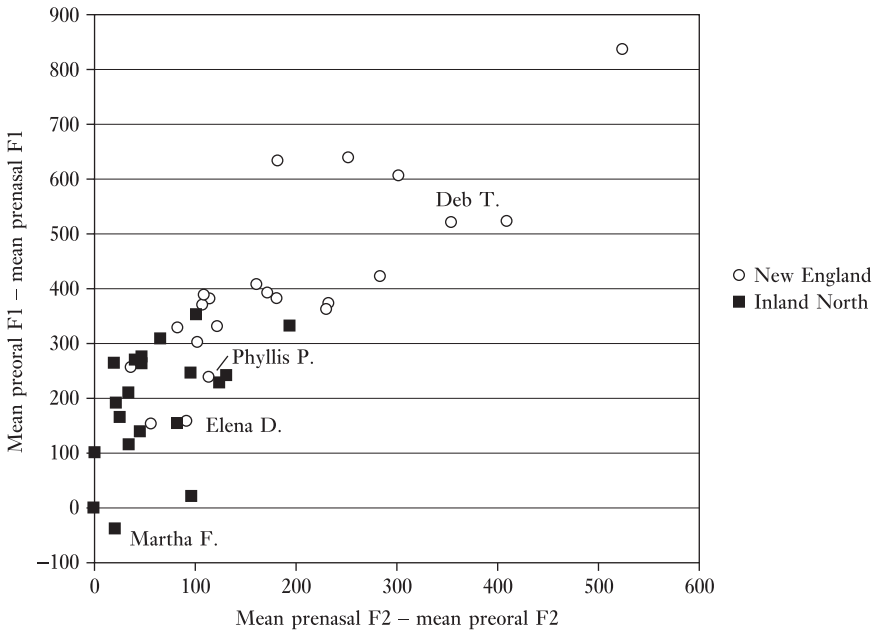


Figure 7.4 Differences between prenasal and preoral short-*a* tokens, as shown by mean differences in F2 and F1 for New England and Inland North speakers

7.4 Divergent Development of the /o/ ~ /oh/ Opposition

Chapter 5 traced two chain shifts – the Canadian Shift and the Pittsburgh Shift – to the creation of the highly skewed opposition of short *o* and long open *o* the result of a long series of historical accidents which were not intrinsically connected. This skewed opposition was the common inheritance of all North American English dialects, but not all dialects submitted to the subsequent merger. Chapter 11 of ANAE begins the classification of North American dialects by identifying three regions in which the merger of these classes is resisted: the Mid-Atlantic region, the Inland North and the South. The developments followed by these resistant regions involve several paths.

7.4.1 *The unrounding of /o/*

The first fork in the road is the rounded or unrounded realization of /o/, from [ɔ] to [ɒ] to [ɑ]. The rounded form of /o/ has long been dominant in Eastern New

England, a direct reflection of that dialect's predominantly Essex origins (Fischer 1989). The unrounding of /o/ was first observed in the United States by the spelling reformer Michael Barton (1830). Barton was born in 1798 in Dutchess County, New York, but traveled widely throughout New England and Montreal in teaching and promoting the phonetic alphabet he invented. Barton discovered that short *o* in his own New York State dialect did not conform to Noah Webster's description of short *o* as lower mid back rounded, but was rather an unrounded low vowel, more center than back. On the one hand, he found John Walker's scheme redundant "in making the sound of *o* in *not* and *a* in *far* to be different." He also argued with Burnap in Vermont that "the sounds of *a* in *all* and *o* in *of* were distinct." Barton's unrounded [a] became the norm in the United States for the North, the Mid-Atlantic, the Midland and the West. When this unrounded [a] merges with the /ah/ class of *father*, *spa*, *bra*, *pa*, *pajama* etc., it is best represented as /ah/, since the class as a whole includes stressed free vowels and is phonotactically distinct from the subset of short vowels.

However, the relation of [ɔ] to [a] is not unidirectional.³ Rounding of /a/, especially before nasals, is a widespread pattern. In many dialects of Old English, short *a* was spelled *o* before nasals, in *monn*, *begonn* etc. – a rounding that was later reversed as spellings reverted to *a*. Toon (1976) gives quantitative and lexical data on the change from *a* to *o* before nasals in West Saxon, and back to *a* with the decline of Mercian influence. Today the oscillation [ɒ] ~ [a] is a common variable in English dialects, with [ɒ] as the dominant prestige form in RP and unrounded [a] in local dialects such as that of Norwich (Trudgill 1972, 1974b). But Trudgill points out that the linguistic change moves in both directions. In Suffolk County the local form is rounded [ɒ], and Trudgill found that this phonetic realization was being increasingly imported into the Norfolk community by working-class men in close contact with the Suffolk norm. The low back merger of /o/ and /oh/ is realized as a lower mid back rounded vowel in many areas (New England, Western Pennsylvania, Canada).

The phonetic differentiation of /o/ and /oh/ as [a] and [ɔ] is not, then, sufficient to inhibit the merger of these classes as a single low back vowel. The unrounding of /o/ is a fork in the road that may be retraced. For instance Dinkin's recent study of New York State (2009) shows that the unrounding of /o/ can be reversed, even when the Northern Cities Shift is operative. Younger speakers in Western New York State, born after 1960, show a distinct tendency to shift central /o/ to the back, a tendency that does not appear in the Western portion of the Inland North.

In spite of the general tendency of mergers to expand, the low back merger is not an immediate prospect for all North American English dialects. Chapter 11 of ANAE identified three regions of consistent resistance to this merger: the Mid-Atlantic, the Inland North and the South. In each of these regions different phonetic developments are involved.

Figure 7.5 shows the mean vowel values for the dialects involved in these developments: Providence, New York City and the Mid-Atlantic dialects (Philadelphia,

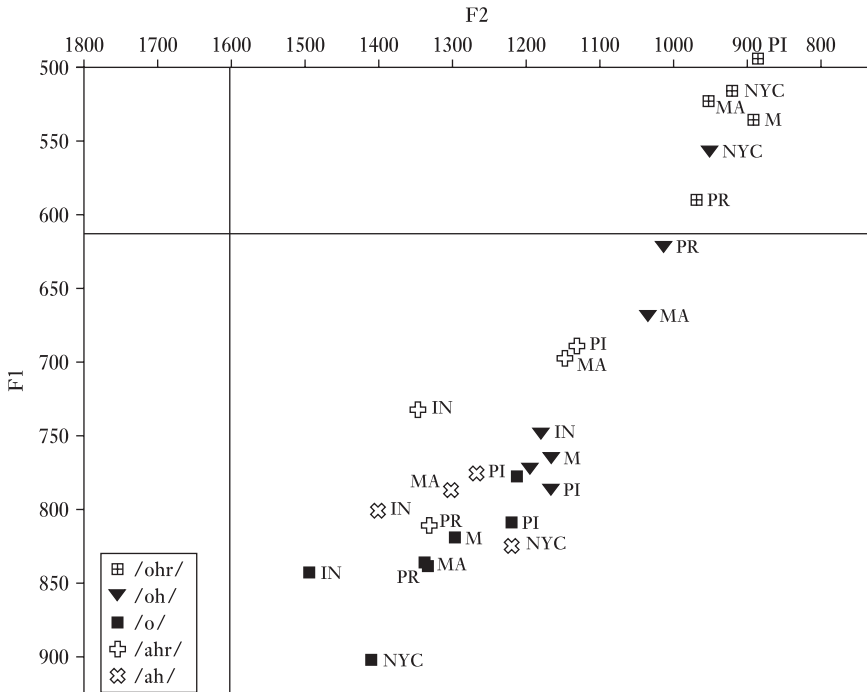


Figure 7.5 Raising of /oh/ in relation to /ohr/ and the low back vowels /o/, /ah/, /ahr/ for regional dialects of the Northeastern United States. IN = Inland North; M = Midland; MA = Mid-Atlantic; NYC = New York City; PI = Pittsburgh; PR = Providence

Wilmington, Baltimore). Within a narrow Mid-Atlantic corridor from Fall River, Massachusetts to Baltimore, /oh/ is raised to such a point that mean F1 is less than 700 Hz in the normalized ANAE grid. This upper mid rounded vowel (which actually becomes high in New York City) is much higher and backer than /ah/, the unrounded low back vowel resulting from the merger of /o/ with the class of *father*. As Figure 7.5 indicates, the backing and raising of /oh/ in New York City is associated with the parallel movement of /ohr/ in the back chain shift before /r/. Here /ohr/ rises to high position and merges with /uhr/, in *poor*, *moor* etc. (not shown in Figure 7.5).

- (3) /ahr/ → /ohr/ → /uhr/
/oh/ →

The backing and raising of /oh/ in this region is thus part of a systematic chain shift that follows the unidirectional principle that tense nuclei rise along peripheral

tracks (3a of Chapter 6). In the Mid-Atlantic dialect area, /oh/ becomes closely associated with the nucleus of /ahr/, as indicated in Figure 7.5. In either case, the distance between /o/ and /oh/ is steadily increased as part of a unidirectional vowel shift, which is not easily reversed.

Figure 7.5 also shows the front position of /o/ for the Inland North (IN) – the aspect of the NCS which forestalls the low back merger of /o/ and /oh/. Here the enlargement of the distance between /o/ and /oh/ operates in a manner quite different from the Mid-Atlantic raising: /o/ moves strongly forward to fill the position formerly occupied by /æ/, and /oh/ shifts down and to the front behind it. Again, the movement of /o/ is not easily reversed, since it is locked into the larger context of the NCS.⁴

The third type of phonetic differentiation of /o/ and /oh/ occurs throughout the South. Unlike the Inland North and the Midland, the South shows no phonetic differentiation of the nuclei of these two classes, which are both low back vowels. Instead, a back upglide develops over most of the South for 20 to 100 percent of the /oh/ tokens (ANAE, Map 18.8). When the upglide is fully developed, the nucleus is slightly fronted and unrounded, a phonetic form that might be noted phonemically as /aw/. The consequences of this development will appear in the following chapter, which traces the further divergence of linguistic systems.