Weakening Resistance: Progress Toward the Low Back Merger in New York State

The *Atlas of North American English* (ANAE: Labov, Ash, & Boberg 2006) identifies three regions of resistance to the widespread merger of /o/ as in *cot* and /oh/ as in *caught*: the Inland North, where /o/ is fronted away from /oh/ as part of the Northern Cities Vowel Shift (NCVS); the coastal Northeast from Providence to Baltimore, where /oh/ is raised away from /o/; and to a lesser extent the South. These areas of “stable resistance to the merger” serve as a challenge to what Labov (1994) calls “Herzog’s Principle”, that mergers expand at the expense of distinctions. But a closer look at change in apparent time calls into question the stability of resistance to the *cot-caught* merger in at least one of these areas, the Inland North.

This paper presents new phonetic data from interviews with 92 speakers in 23 cities and towns in Upstate New York, supplemented with 27 speakers from ANAE’s data set in Upstate New York and adjacent parts of Canada, New England, and Pennsylvania. Across this entire corpus, speakers’ mean F2 for /o/ and Cartesian distance between mean /o/ and /oh/ both show strong negative correlations with year of birth. In other words, /o/ is backing in apparent time and narrowing the phonetic distance between itself and /oh/.

Since Upstate New York overlaps several dialect areas, the 36 or so communities sampled in this study are divided into five sets on phonological grounds: communities where /o/ and /oh/ are already merged or close in perception; communities with /oh/ raised as in the coastal Northeast; communities with strong and dominant NCVS; communities with weaker and inconsistent NCVS; and a fifth residual set. The strong NCVS, weak NCVS, and residual sets all individually exhibit backing of /o/ and approximation of /o/ and /oh/ in apparent time, each with a stronger correlation coefficient than the corpus as a whole shows.

This means that one of the key features of NCVS—the fronting of /o/—is being reversed in New York State’s NCVS communities. This reversal is not, however, part of a wholesale retreat from NCVS: other NCVS features, such as the raising of /æ/ above /e/, show no significant apparent-time coefficients. Indeed, in the weak NCVS communities, /e/ is backing in apparent time along with NCVS, even as /o/ is backing contrary to it. Moreover, /o/ backing is not merely an innovation within the phonological system of the Inland North, as it is found equally in the residual communities where NCVS is absent. The best explanation is that New York’s Inland North and residual areas are both being influenced the presence of *cot-caught* merger in many adjacent regions—contra previous work such as *ANAE* and Boberg (2000) which suggests that NCVS communities are not influenced by the merger in neighboring regions. Although almost none of the speakers in the NCVS regions themselves have the *cot-caught* merger yet in production or perception, the beginning of the merger’s expansion into the Inland North, following Herzog’s Principle, is clear.
References

