Mergers, Distinctions and Shifts

Introduction

Say the words “cot” and “caught.” Do they sound the same or different?

Historically, these two words have been pronounced differently. Over the past century, a change causing them to be pronounced the same has been steadily progressing throughout North America. This process has been called the “low-back merger.”

Perhaps counterintuitively, mergers between two sounds like this have little measurable impact on communication. However, they are not without consequences. Usually when the merger happens, cot begins to be pronounced the way caught was. This leaves a phonetic gap in the range of speech sounds utilized in the dialect (1). It also leaves a gap at the symbolic, phonological level, where a specific combination of abstract features is no longer used to represent any vowel (2,3).

First, I developed an acoustically based measure for merger. Since the main impact on communication. However, they are not without consequences. Usually when the merger happens, cot begins to be pronounced the way caught was. This leaves a phonetic gap in the range of speech sounds utilized in the dialect (1). It also leaves a gap at the symbolic, phonological level, where a specific combination of abstract features is no longer used to represent any vowel (2,3).

The acoustic correlates of backness and height are well-established. I used the conventional acoustic measure of backness for the degree of

Conventional Acoustic Measure of Backness

The stats in Tables 12 and 13 report the result of regression and ANOVA analyses. They are meant to distinguish the relative importance of the phonetic gap vs. the phonological gap. The response variables are the phonetic measurements of cut-backing and cut-lowering, with the (properly centered and residualized) phonetic measurements of cot, and the degree of phonological merger (as calculated above) as predictors. For cut-backing, the phonetic gap alone is a significant predictor of the shift. For cut-lowering, the phonetic gap is a significant predictor, but so is the degree of phonological merger.

Conclusion

The previous conclusion of the literature that the low-back merger is the triggering event causing cut-backing and cut-lowering seems well founded, but the larger pattern is more complex. Cut-backing occurs in even in low-back distinction areas, and cut-backing and cut-lowering can co-occur, even though they are both ostensibly consequences of the creation of a single gap.

The tantalizing analysis drawn from the statistics is that cut-backing is a result of the creation of a phonetic gap, whereas cut-lowering is a result of the creation of a phonological gap. If this is true, then it is necessary to clarify on which level of representation a specific language change is triggered and progressing.

References


