

STRUT-Raising in British Columbia English: Evidence for a Parallel Canadian Shift

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There is general consensus in Canadian dialectology that an ongoing change is affecting the front lax vowels (/æ/, /ɛ/, and /ɪ/). However, the description of this Canadian Shift pattern varies between studies and regions in Canada, yielding evidence for either a pull-chain shift (Clarke, Elms, & Youssef, 1995) or parallel retraction (Boberg, 2005; Roeder & Jarmasz, 2010). In the initial description of the Canadian Shift, Clarke, Elms, and Youssef (1995) found a pull-chain shift, triggered by the merger of /ɔ/ and /ɑ/, accompanied by the diagonal fronting and lowering of /ʌ/. While many subsequent studies have focused mainly on the behaviour of the front lax vowels, the patterns make different predictions for the rest of the vowel system, including /ʌ/. This paper describes the position of /ʌ/ in British Columbia (BC) English and assesses whether its trajectory in apparent time is more consistent with a pull-chain or parallel retraction account of the Canadian Shift.

/ʌ/-fronting accompanies the Canadian Shift in the pull-chain account (Clarke, Elms, & Youssef, 1995). This fronting pattern is also found in California English, in tandem with the California Shift, a pull chain-shift almost identical to the one described in Canadian English (Eckert, 2008). If the Canadian Shift in BC is best characterized as a pull-chain shift, there is precedent to anticipate /ʌ/-fronting. However, /ʌ/-fronting is not expected in a dialect with the parallel retraction, as the combination of /ɛ/-backing and /ʌ/-fronting would lead to imminent overlap in vowel space. Fronting, or even stability, of /ʌ/ could result in a merger for a region with parallel retraction (Boberg, 2005). In the Northern Cities Shift, which has /ɛ/-retraction, a similar loss of contrast is avoided by backing /ʌ/ (Labov, Ash, & Boberg, 2006). If the Canadian Shift in BC is a parallel retraction, as suggested in Mellesmoen (2016), I hypothesize that /ʌ/ is backing in apparent time as well.

The present study tests the predictions of the pull-chain and parallel shift models in BC English by measuring the F1 and F2 values of the front lax vowels, /ɑ/, and /ʌ/. Sixty-five native English speakers who had lived in BC for at least a decade prior to turning eighteen read a word-list containing all the vowels present in Canadian English. Speakers were between the ages of thirteen and sixty-two, with a mean age of thirty. The results show that /ʌ/ is raising ($p = 0.00585$), while /ɛ/ is backing in apparent time ($p = 2.92 \times 10^{-10}$). Though /ʌ/-raising was not anticipated, it is concurrent with a parallel retraction account of the Canadian Shift. The retraction of /ɛ/ exerts pressure on /ʌ/ to preserve contrast, but /ʌ/ cannot back without risking overlap with /ɑ/ or lower without risking overlap with the retracted /æ/. This yields a push-chain shift, driven by /ɛ/-backing, which results in /ʌ/-raising. This raising is not predicted by the pull-chain shift description, which suggests that the Canadian Shift in British Columbia is best characterized as a parallel retraction.

References

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