

Sounding Canadian from Coast to Coast: Regional accents in Canadian English

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From a continental perspective, Canadian English exhibits two remarkable phonetic patterns. Canadian Raising (Chambers 1973), the non-low articulation of low diphthongs before voiceless consonants, has been the subject of extensive discussion in theoretical phonology. The Canadian Shift (Clarke, Elms, and Youssef 1995), the lowering and retraction of the short front vowels as a consequence of the low-back merger, has reshaped our view of the phonetic taxonomy of North American dialects. Together, these variables help to define what it is to sound Canadian. Yet until recently, neither has been studied with a national set of acoustic data: observations have generally been limited to auditory impressions and to certain regions of the country. The exact phonetic character and regional distribution of these key variables are therefore not well understood.

This paper presents the results of a new study of regional and social variation in the phonetics of Canadian English. The data are from acoustic analyses of the speech of undergraduate students who grew up in communities from coast to coast. They offer a first view of regional phonetic variation on a nationwide basis. While all Canadian regions exhibit raising of /au/ to some degree, the precise articulation of the raised vowel is an important regional indicator, ranging from front of center in Ontario to back of center on the Prairies. Region interacts with gender: where the vowel is front, men have the most advanced tokens; where it is back, men have the most retracted tokens. The Canadian Shift is also variably implemented: Ontarians and women are more advanced in the retraction of /æ/ than Prairie or Atlantic Canadians and men.

Some of the strongest regional and gender indicators in Canadian English concern neither of the well-known variables just mentioned. The fronting of /u:/, for example, is led by women and by Ontario and British Columbia; the Prairies and the Maritimes are more resistant to it. The raising of /æ/ before nasals is well advanced in Ontario and the Maritimes, but strongly resisted in Quebec, together with the tensing of /æ/ before /g/. Finally, the Maritimes and, to a lesser extent, Ontario share a relatively front articulation of /ar/ with New England and the Northern United States, which differentiates them markedly from Western Canada, where this vowel is articulated much further back. The fronting of /ar/ is strongest among Maritime men.

References

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