

Changing Phonology, Stable Borders: The Low Back Merger in Northern New York

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According to Dinkin (2009)'s description of the dialectology of New York State, the majority of the state is undergoing sound change toward the low back "*caught-cot*" merger, but the only region in which the merger is well advanced and nearing completion is the North Country, a dialect region at the northern edge of the state near the Canadian border. The western boundary of the North Country dialect region lies between the communities of Ogdensburg and Canton in St. Lawrence County, a sparsely-populated rural county across the St. Lawrence River from eastern Ontario: Canton is in the North Country, while Ogdensburg is in the Inland North dialect region, characterized by the Northern Cities Vowel Shift and largely lacking *caught-cot* merger.

Since the *caught-cot* merger is of relatively long standing in Canada (Boberg 2010), it may be the case that one reason the North Country acquired the merger so much earlier than the rest of the state is its proximity to Canada. However, the reason for the sharp dialect boundary *between* Ogdensburg and Canton is not well established, and is described in Dinkin (2009) as in need of further study.

This paper investigates those two issues by supplementing Dinkin (2009)'s sample with new interviews from St. Lawrence County and neighboring Jefferson County. A total of 52 speakers are examined, from eight communities: four along the St. Lawrence River (from southwest to northeast: Alexandria Bay, Ogdensburg, Waddington, and Massena) and four more, approximately 25 miles south of the first four (Watertown, Gouverneur, Canton, and Potsdam). Aside from location, these communities differ in features such as population, economy, and convenience to Canada. The *caught-cot* merger is examined both through speakers' explicit judgments of mergedness of minimal pairs and through formant measurements of their *cot* and *caught* phoneme(s). Following Strelluf (2016) and Johnson (2015), Bhattacharyya's affinity is used to quantitatively assess degree of phonetic overlap between the two categories.

Robust age correlations indicate that the *caught-cot* merger is progressing in apparent time throughout the sampled area. However, the only dialectological factor that significantly predicts merger is east–west position: the four communities on the east side of the sample are substantially more merged than the four on the west. In particular, north–south position and accessibility of Canadian border crossings do not correlate with degree of *caught-cot* merger. This suggests that the merger, if it entered northern New York by diffusion, may have arrived from the east rather than from the larger Canadian cities to the north, and thus supports Boberg (2000)'s thesis that sound change is blocked from diffusing across the US–Canada border.

The east–west dialect difference does not reflect present-day transportation and communication patterns. But prior to the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway and other canals, Ogdensburg was the easternmost port reachable by ship from Lake Ontario (Hayward 1854:504, Willoughby 1960). The fact that a dialect boundary separates the eastern and western halves of St. Lawrence County at exactly that point suggests that the dialectology was influenced by the availability of water transport in the 19th century: Ogdensburg and points west were linked directly to Lake Ontario and the Inland North region by the navigable portion of the St. Lawrence River, while the eastern part of the

county was not. And, like elsewhere in New York State (Dinkin 2009), these centuries-old transportation patterns remain relevant for dialect boundaries into the present day.

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