

The Canadian Vowel Shift in Antigonish, Nova Scotia

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Background

The Canadian Vowel Shift is a sound change first characterized by Clark et al. (2019) as a simultaneous retraction and lowering of the three front lax vowels, [ɪ] as in bit, [ɛ] as in bet and [æ] as in bat. This sound change has been found across Canada in places such as Montreal (Boberg, 2005), Toronto (Hoffman, 2010), Vancouver (Sadlier-Brown et al., 2008), and St. John's (D'Arcy, 2005). However, Labov et al (2006), argue that English spoken in the Atlantic region of Canada has not undergone this shift. There has been evidence found by Roeder et al., (2013) and Sadlier-Brown et al., (2008) that Industrial Cape Breton and Halifax respectively are undergoing the Canadian Vowel Shift.

Purpose of the current study

Is the Canadian Shift in progress in Antigonish, Nova Scotia? This present study looks at the status of the Canadian Vowel Shift in Antigonish Nova Scotia, a small rural community in north-east Nova Scotia. Unlike most of the previous studies, this one looks at English speakers from a rural, isolated region in Canada and focuses on a region where little linguistic research is occurring. Based on previous findings from similar studies conducted in the province (namely Roeder et al., (2013) and Sadlier-Brown et al., (2008)), it is expected that the Canadian Shift will be found to be in progress in English spoken in Antigonish Nova Scotia.

Methodology

To answer my research question, I carried out an experimental study in which 24 native speakers from Antigonish, NS participated. The participants were evenly split into three age groups (18-34, 35-59, and 60+) with an equal number of men and women in each group. They completed a sentence elicitation task in which they read aloud a list of 55 sentences three times over. Each sentence contained one target vowel ([ɪ], [ɛ], [æ]), that is implicated in the Canadian Shift along with other sentences containing other English monophthongs.

Findings

A series of 6 mixed-effects models investigated the effect of gender and age on F1 and F2 for each of the 3 vowels. The preliminary results showed evidence of retraction for all three vowels since the mean F2 was lower for the youngest age group as compared to the oldest ([ɪ]: $\beta = -140.49$, $p < 0.001$; [ɛ]: $\beta = -115.67$, $p < 0.01$; [æ]: $\beta = -150.24$, $p < 0.05$). On the other hand, there was no statistical evidence for lowering found for any of the vowels involved in the shift. There was no interaction between gender and age found.

Contribution & Next Steps

These results suggest that the CVS is underway in Antigonish, NS. This supports the previous works showing the CVS occurring in Eastern Canada, while also showing that the CVS occurs in a rural community. Further research may be done to examine other smaller, rural communities across Canada to see if the CVS is a feature in Canadian English in rural Canada.

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