

Evidence of the Elsewhere Shift in the Inland North

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The Northern Cities Shift (NCS) is a well-known rotation of American English vowels, characteristic of the Inland North dialect area, present in the dialects of approximately 34 million people (Labov, Ash & Boberg 2006). Some reports indicate that the NCS is receding (e.g. McCarthy 2011 in Chicago; Driscoll & Lape 2014 in Syracuse; Wagner et al. 2015 in Lansing), which is surprising as it has been understood to be a change in progress, characterized as having “no evidence of conscious awareness” among speakers (Labov 2010:194). Coupled with an attitudinal study of LOT-fronting and DRESS-lowering (Savage et al. 2015) as well as a perception task examining perceptual boundaries in F2 for LOT, (Nesbitt 2015) our findings suggest Lower Michiganders are, in fact, evaluating and subsequently rejecting the NCS in favor of a different system, namely, the Elsewhere Shift.

Also known as the Canadian/California/Third Dialect Shift, the Elsewhere Shift is mainly characterized by a (near) merger of the low-back vowels LOT and THOUGHT, a nasal TRAP configuration, and the backing of pre-oral TRAP, lowering and/or backing of DRESS and KIT, and the fronting of GOOSE and GOAT, with some regional variations. Evidence of this shift has been found not only in Canada and California (a.o. Boberg 2005; Kennedy & Grama 2012) but across North America, from Ohio (Durian 2012) to Southern Illinois (Bigham 2009) to Kansas (Kohn & Stitham 2015) to Alaska (Bowie et al. 2012). Our findings in Lower Michigan suggest that this shift is now taking place in the Inland North.

Drawing from interviews with 50 speakers from Lansing, MI born from 1908 to 1996, we find that while speakers in Lansing are lowering and retracting DRESS, consistent with the NCS, other components of the NCS are absent. Speakers are adopting components more indicative of the Elsewhere Shift. We find evidence of LOT retracting toward a low-back merger, coronal-initial GOOSE and GOAT fronting, and movement toward a nasal system for TRAP.

With reports of the Elsewhere Shift appearing in unexpected dialect areas across the US, the question becomes: How far will it spread? Labov (2014) has argued that North America is becoming more linguistically diverse, but if current trends continue, we may be witnessing the opposite: dialect leveling on a major scale and the spread of a new *Standard American* dialect in real time.

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