

Canadian Shift as “Push” Chain

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Since being described by Clarke, Elms, and Youssef (1995), the “Canadian Shift” has been identified as affecting a broad geographic distribution of North American Englishes. The Canadian Shift involves the unconditional merger of the vowels in words like LOT and THOUGHT and the lowering and/or backing of the front short vowels in words like TRAP, DRESS, and KIT. When treated as a “chain shift,” the merger of LOT and THOUGHT is often proposed to be the initiating element, with the backward movement of LOT occurring as part of the merger. This backing pulls TRAP lower and backer in vowel space, which in turn pulls DRESS lower, which in turn pulls KIT lower (e.g., Gordon 2006, 2011).

This research examines relationships among the elements of the Canadian Shift in a Midland community—Kansas City—to explore the elements’ structural relationships and ordering. It draws on acoustic measurements of 22,516 tokens of THOUGHT, LOT, TRAP, DRESS, and KIT, taken from sociolinguistic interviews with 50 Kansas Citians born between 1955 and 1999.

Results show that the proposed first two elements of the Canadian Shift—the LOT-THOUGHT merger and TRAP retraction—are present in Kansas City. The LOT-THOUGHT merger reaches completion within the apparent-time sample, while TRAP retraction is a robust and active change. Linear models show a correlation between TRAP retraction and the LOT-THOUGHT merger, as anticipated by Gordon (2006, 2011). However, results also show that the position of LOT in vowel space does not account for TRAP retraction, agreeing with Gorman’s (2012) denial of a causal relationship between the LOT-THOUGHT merger and TRAP retraction.

The third and fourth elements of the Canadian Shift—DRESS and KIT lowering—are also present in Kansas City, but results show that these vowels reached their lowered, shifted positions prior to 1955. Productions are stable in apparent time. This suggests a completed change, rather than a change-in-progress resulting from TRAP retraction. Furthermore, linear models reveal strong structural connections between DRESS and KIT lowering and TRAP retraction as a result of TRAP “catching up” to the position of DRESS. In other words, the retraction of TRAP reestablishes a structural relationship with a lowered DRESS in speakers’ vowel systems, rather than the lowering of DRESS reestablishing a structural relationship with a retracted TRAP.

These findings show that the Canadian Shift is a well-established sound change in Kansas City, suggesting that the community may be moving away from the Midland vowel system described in Labov, Ash, and Boberg (2006) and orienting toward regions like the West or Canada. More significantly, though, they show that a key stage of the Canadian Shift—the lowering and/or backing of TRAP and DRESS—is not operating as a “drag chain” with TRAP as the initiating element, but as a “push chain” with DRESS as the initiating element. This offers an alternative account for the ordering of elements in the Canadian Shift in at least one community, which may have consequences for other communities undergoing this sound change.

References

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