

“Back to front”: The role of ethnicity in back vowel fronting in Toronto English

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Fronting of the back upgliding vowels GOOSE /u/ and GOAT/o/ is an ongoing change in many varieties of English (e.g., Labov, Ash and Boberg 2006, Boberg 2008, Baranowski 2008, Fridland 2008, Haddican et al 2013). Although some studies have explored the role of ethnicity in fronting in American English (e.g., Fought 1999, Fridland 2006, Wong 2014), few have explored this dimension of fronting in Canada (but cf. Boberg 2014). This study adds to that body of work by examining the degree of fronting in speakers from four different ethnic groups in Toronto, an ethnolinguistically diverse urban centre and Canada’s largest city.

The data used in this study come from sociolinguistic interviews with 80 speakers stratified according to sex, ethnicity (British-Irish, Italian, Chinese and Portuguese), generation (1st vs. 2nd/3rd) and age-group (18-30 vs. 45+). We extracted and normalized all fully stressed tokens of /o/ and /u/ in each interview using FAVE (Rosenfelder et al 2011), resulting in over 13,000 tokens for /u/ and over 20,000 tokens for /o/. Taking the Lobanov-normalized F2 measurements as an indication of degree of fronting, we conducted multivariate regression analyses with Rbrul (Johnson 2009), focusing on the contribution of social factors to fronting.

Results reveal that all younger speakers and older British/Irish speakers participate in /u/-fronting (with mean F2 values exceeding 1550 Hz). The young Italians have the least fronted articulation of /u/, with a mean of 1560 Hz. First-generation immigrant groups do not front, with mean F2s between 1505 and 1511 Hz. There is no significant difference between generations for British/Irish women, suggesting that this change has been complete for women for some time.

All groups participate to some degree in /o/-fronting, with mean F2 values ranging from 1290-1406 Hz. For this feature, it is the 2nd/3rd-generation Portuguese who lead, followed by all British/Irish, especially older women, and 1st-generation Italian and Chinese women. 1st-generation Chinese men, all 2nd-generation Chinese and 1st-generation Portuguese lag behind other groups. As with /u/, it is the young Italians, especially men, who have the least advanced realizations of /o/. Overall, women exhibit more fronting in both age groups and across all ethnic groups.

These results have a number of implications. Although 1st-generation speakers lag somewhat in fronting, their articulations of /u/ and /o/ demonstrate some participation in mainstream Canadian English norms. More striking are the differences between 2nd/3rd-generation Torontonians: young Italians, especially men, distinguish themselves from their age cohort by resisting fronting the most. These findings are in line with results for other variables in our corpus and resemble those of Boberg (2014) in Montreal. Young Italian men may use these features to distance themselves from the mainstream and mark ethnic identity in this older and more established immigrant ethnic community.

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