

## A Vague Phonological Contrast: /eɪg/ as a Distinguishing Element of BC English

British Columbia (BC) English is often conflated into the general umbrella of Canadian English or studied explicitly to understand its participation in sound change found across the country, such as the Canadian Shift (Sadler-Brown & Tamminga, 2008). However, this does not necessarily reflect the relationship between the province and the country, as many Vancouverites feel a “genuine sense of disconnection from the Rest of Canada” (Coupland 2000: 106). Swan (2015) explored the phonetics of Pacific Northwest English, finding similarities between Seattle and Vancouver in the production of /æ/ before /g/. Wassink (2015) further described the raising of /æ/ before /g/ in Seattle English as causing substantial overlap with a monophthongized /e/ and /ɛ/ in a pre-velar environment. Given the comparable position of pre-velar /æ/ in the dialects, there is reason to predict that the overlap found in Seattle might also be present in BC English. While /æ/ and /ɛ/ are frequently analyzed in Canadian sociophonetic work, due to their participation in the Canadian Shift, the diphthong /eɪ/ is under-described nationally and therefore has not been adequately described in BC English yet. However, given the geographic proximity to Seattle, this variable may prove particularly interesting in BC English, relative to the rest of Canada.

The present study combines perceptual and production data from 67 speakers of BC English between the ages of 13 and 62 (31 male and 36 female), with a mean age of 30, to determine whether the overlap between /eɪg/, /ɛg/ and /æg/ found in Seattle English is also present in BC English and whether this indicates a merger. While the results do confirm the hypothesis that there is considerable overlap between these vowels, the merger in BC English is between /æg/ and /eɪg/, rather than between /ɛg/ and /eɪg/, as in Seattle English (Freeman, 2014). Instead, the BC data suggests that, while /æg/ is raising significantly in apparent time, /eɪg/ is undergoing more drastic lowering. While this is occurring across all participants, it is a male-led change and results in some speakers producing tokens of /eɪg/ lower than /æg/. Fourteen of these participants show evidence for a completed merger by phonological transfer, as defined by Dinkin (2016), where a phonetic rule that caused the lowering of /eɪg/ relative to the rest of the /eɪ/ phoneme has been phonologized, resulting in the abrupt transfer of the /eɪg/ set of words to /æg/. When asked to comment on their dialect in an open-ended question, eleven participants described BC English as different from elsewhere in Canada, without offering examples, while seven expressed that there was nothing distinctive about their speech. However, as the merger differs from Seattle English and is not a change associated with Canadian English as a whole, it may be a distinctive element of BC English that serves to distinguish it from Pacific Northwest and Canadian English as a whole.

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