

Stability and Change in the Back Vowels in Oregonian English: Ongoing Sociophonetic Investigations on Western Speech

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The Northwest is a fascinating region for sociophonetic and dialectological study, in particular representing a key opportunity for improving our understanding of the processes of dialect leveling and koineization (Kerswill 2003; Trudgill 2006). The states in the region are characterized by some of the most recent English-speaking settlement in North America along with relative homogeneity in current phonetic features (Labov et al. 2006). Yet, early populations came from disparate parts of the U.S. (New England, Central states, Upper North), Europe (Scandinavia, Germany), Asia, and elsewhere. This in-migration from disparate groups of people, coupled with the recency of Western settlement, suggests that massive leveling must have occurred in the region in the recent past (McLarty et al. forthcoming). Further, this recency happily means that the time-scale of many of these changes should be examinable from existent recordings and in the speech of living informants.

In the current paper, we present ongoing work which seeks to understand the status of Oregonian English and its relationship to English in other parts of the Western U.S., paying particular attention to the time-course of changes to the back vowels over the 20th century. We compare contemporary speakers (b. 1955-1993) recorded as part of recent sociolinguistic projects in the state to archival speakers (b. 1890-1914) from the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (DARE) project (Cassidy and Hall 1985-2012). We also draw from other Western and non-Western U.S. data and recent papers on nearby varieties (Becker et al. forthcoming; Eckert 2008; Fridland and Kendall forthcoming; Hinton et al. 1987; Labov et al. 2006; McLarty et al. forthcoming; Wassink 2015).

The paper overviews our project and our goals in general terms, but we focus on two main questions: (a) What aspects of the Oregonian back vowels have remained stable and have changed over the course of the twentieth century, and (b) how do these patterns of stability and change relate to other areas in the U.S.? The back vowels in English are undergoing several major changes across regions of the U.S. (and further across English varieties globally), including the fronting of /u/ and /o/, and the merging of /ɑ/ and /ɔ/. A number of these changes have been documented in the West (e.g. citations above), but numerous open questions remain, ranging from questions about the time-course of the changes, the interrelations and causal factors among the changes, and the extent to which other, less documented changes are robust regional features (e.g. Fridland and Kendall under review report /o/ lowering in Nevada). Overall, we hope our work on Oregonian English can help us better understand processes of sound change in the state, in the larger West, and across other regional varieties, while simultaneously helping us consider larger questions about processes of dialect formation.

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