CANADIAN RAISING: CONTRAST NEUTRALIZATION IN MEAFORD, ON AND VANCOUVER, BC

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Canadian Raising (CR) is the well-studied phonological phenomenon of allophony in which, under specific and seemingly well-defined conditions, the low onsets of the diphthongs /aɪ/ and /aʊ/ are realized in a "raised," mid position. The main condition to which this alternation has long been attributed is an immediately following voiceless consonant; however, other factors such as syllabification, stress and morphological boundaries have been shown to modulate its occurrence. Recent studies have established that, despite earlier predictions of its eventual disappearance in favour of more American norms (Chambers 1980), CR persists in Canadian English (Rosenfelder 2007, Sadlier-Brown 2012) as well as in several regional dialects throughout the US and the UK (Britain 1997, Dailey-O'Cain 1997, Vance 1987). Further, it has been shown that the conditions which compel CR – or at least those in which it is attested – are in fact more complex than traditionally reported (Dailey-O'Cain 1997, Hall 2005).

The current paper examines the extent to which this latter observation is true among speakers in both Meaford, ON, and Vancouver, BC. Hall (2005) suggested that conditions licensing CR among a subset of older speakers in Meaford are less well-defined than previously assumed, and the current paper examines whether the patterns found in Hall (2005) generalize. Additional older speakers from both Meaford and Vancouver, comparable to those in Hall (2005), were recorded producing /aɪ/-containing words in a variety of controlled contexts, and the F1 and F2 of their vowels were measured.

Preliminary results from 11 speakers (6 from Meaford and 5 from Vancouver; see Figure 1) point to several noteworthy trends. First, vowels predicted to have the low variant may surface unpredictably in terms of height, while those predicted to have the raised variant are generally more reliably produced high. This pattern suggests a contrast neutralization rather than allophony, such that the raised and low variants of the vowel actually contrast in "high" environments and are only predictable in "low" environments. Second, the Vancouver speakers show this pattern more clearly than the Meaford speakers, who show somewhat more variability and less predictability. Importantly, across all speakers, on average over twenty percent of words expected to be "low" are in fact raised, and for some speakers that percentage is even greater. While some patterns appear in terms of actual words commonly surfacing in unexpected ways, and certain environmental factors such as preceding segments may offer some explanation for these aberrant realizations, a high degree of regional as well as both inter- and intra-speaker variability suggests that CR may no longer be an entirely predictable process.
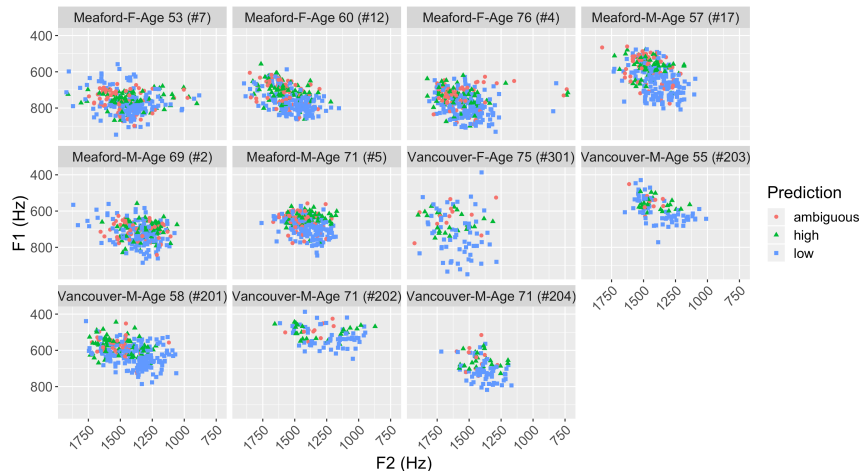

Figure 1: F1 and F2 plots for 11 speakers. Blue squares are tokens that were predicted to have a low variant, green triangles are those predicted to have a high variant, and red circles are those in which competing factors made the prediction ambiguous.

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