Though the fronting of /ɔ/ in European varieties of French has been the subject of considerable attention (eg. Armstrong and Low, 2008; Boula de Mareüil et al., 2010; Martinet, 1969), this phenomenon has not received such interest in Laurentian varieties. However, given the presence of fronted realisations in the 17th century France (Armstrong and Low, 2008), it is possible that fronting could have been implanted in Canadian varieties either during colonisation or more recently. The present study therefore analyses data from the Phonologie du français contemporain project corpus (Côté, 2014; Durand et al., 2002, 2009; www.projet-pfc.net) to examine the process in apparent time across three generations. Since /u/ is the vowel said to show pressure to front cross-linguistically (Labov, 1994) and /o/ has been suggested to be advancing in European varieties (Boula de Mareüil et al., 2010), tokens of those two vowels were extracted in addition to those of /ɔ/, yielding over 23 000 tokens. After being measured in Praat (Boersma and Weenink, 2014), they were analysed using mixed-effect regressions in R (R Core Team, 2014). The results obtained shed light on two main questions to be discussed: (a) whether we can observe diachronic fronting in the dialect, and (b) whether the constraint hierarchies have changed over these three generations.

Regarding the question of change in degree of fronting in apparent time, we do find that, with each generation, all three vowels show significant fronting (p = 0.006 for /ɔ/, p = 0.004 for /o/ and p < 0.001 for /u/). Comparing the vowels’ differences in effect size across generations suggests that /ɔ/ and the two higher vowels behave as two distinct groups. This result is corroborated by differences in significant predictors to support that the vowels are not identical with regards to their patterning, which may explain why only the mid-low vowel’s fronting has been targeted both by research and in native speaker awareness.

The most interesting results are found in the examination of the different generations’ constraint hierarchies. It has previously been found that the dialect may find pitch contours reminiscent of those traditionally restricted to final syllables in non-final contexts (Thibault and Ouellet, 1996) and that the presence of these pitch contours can interact with phonological alternations (Lamontagne, 2014). The most notable shift in the constraint hierarchies corroborates this finding in that, for /ɔ/ – the vowel for which fronting is salient to speakers –, the pitch contour is a significant predictor (p = 0.017).

This paper will discuss the results in detail, examining patterns both between vowels and across generations. The study shows not only that /ɔ/ has fronted in apparent time, as it has in European varieties, but also that /o/ and /u/ front as well. However, it demonstrates that the mid-low vowel’s fronting is distinct not only in its salience in the European context, but also in its degree and in its governing constraint hierarchy. The cross-generational evidence also supports that the dialect may be undergoing a prosodic shift, as evidenced by perceptual and acoustic studies (eg. Paradis, 1985; Paris and Deshaies, 1990; Thibault and Ouellet, 1996).
References