Sociophonetic Variation of Northern Ontario English Vowels: 
Canadian Shift in two non-urban communities

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The Canadian Shift (Clarke, Elms & Youssef 1995) is a vowel change in progress that involves the lowering and retraction of front lax vowels in the KIT, DRESS, and TRAP lexical sets (Wells 1982). Canadian Shift is well studied in several urban Canadian communities: Toronto (Roeder & Jarmasz 2009, 2010), Thunder Bay (Roeder 2012), Winnipeg (Hagiwara 2006), Montreal (Boberg 2005, 2008), Halifax and Vancouver (Sadlier-Brown & Tamminga 2008). Studies of regional variation in Canadian English have largely focused on the speech of individual urban centers, and the patterns of variation in these large communities is taken to be the norm for the whole region. How these urban patterns are realized in the vast non-urban hinterland of rural Northern Ontario has yet to be investigated, as do the mechanisms of the spread of change from urban to rural speech communities.

I analyze conversational speech of 12 northern Ontario speakers (6 male, 6 female between the ages of 20 and 84) from Kirkland Lake, a small mining town 585 km north of Toronto, and Temiskaming Shores, a larger agricultural community 160 km north of Toronto1. Participation in the Canadian Shift by speakers in these northern communities is compared to vowel data drawn from spoken vernacular of Toronto in order to test for transmission and diffusion of phonological variation in Canadian English.

A total of 9788 stressed KIT, DRESS, and TRAP vowel tokens were extracted from the speech of the two northern communities and compared to 1416 tokens of spontaneous Toronto speech. Lobanov-normalized F1 and F2 measurements were taken at temporal midpoint of each token using FAVE (Rosenfelder et al. 2011). Separate mixed-effects linear regression models predicting normalized F1 and F2 values for each Canadian Shift vowel class were performed in Rbrul (Johnson 2014). Results of these models showed inconsistent effects by the fixed effect age group across vowel class and community, suggesting that Canadian Shift is largely complete in all three communities. However, significant main effects for fixed effects of sex and community across all vowel classes point to socially motivated regional differences in production. This study presents evidence that the Canadian Shift has spread to remote northern Ontario communities through unbroken transmission across generations, not as a result of diffusion from a southern urban source (Labov 2003, 2007). Though the vowel patterns of two northern Ontario communities are not identical, results support the view that Canadian English in Toronto, Kirkland Lake, and Temiskaming Shores shares a common source brought to the north by the founding populations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The investigation of vowel changes in non-urban communities at considerable distance from their urban source contributes to our understanding of the trajectory of phonological change in Canadian English, and presents a unique opportunity to gain deeper insights into the social and linguistic motivations for regional linguistic variation in Canada.

1 The data on which this study is based were extracted from the Ontario English Dialects Archive funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Tagliamonte 2013-2018; Tagliamonte 2014). It is a compendium of dialect data collected in small towns of Ontario.
References


