Cross-border convergence in loan phonology: Foreign (a) in North American English

Charles Boberg (*McGill University*)

One of the most important sources of phono-lexical variation in Modern English is the set of loan words whose primary-stress vowel is spelled with the letter <a>, either in the source language or in its Romanized form (e.g., *façade*, *Iraq*, *lava*, *macho*, *pasta*, *plaza*, *taco*, etc.), a variable labeled 'foreign (a)' in previous research. Boberg (1997, 2000) showed that national varieties of English differ in their patterns of assigning foreign (a) tokens to appropriate native phonemes, which include /ey/ (FACE), /æ/ (TRAP) and /ah/ (PALM). More recently, Boberg (2009) found that, whereas American English tends to favor assignments to /ah/, Canadian English traditionally favors /æ/, but also uses an additional category of uncertain phonemic status that is phonetically intermediate between /æ/ and /ah/. The present paper uses a new and much larger set of data to take a closer look at these inter-phonemic assignments, adds a perceptual dimension by examining minimal pair judgments, and investigates change in progress with a real-time comparison between the newer and older data sets.

Data for the present paper come primarily from acoustic analysis of one hundred foreign (a) words and one hundred native words read by 92 participants: 61 Canadians and 31 Americans. Analysis of the native words generated a basic picture of the native phonemic system of each participant, including the principal targets for loan word assignment, /æ/ and /ah/. The foreign (a) tokens were then classified as /æ/, /ah/ or intermediate based on their F2 values: those within the top third of the F2 range between native /æ/ and /ah/ were classified as /æ/; those in the bottom third as /ah/; and those in the middle third as intermediate.

The analysis confirms that the frequency of both /æ/ and intermediate nativizations is higher among Canadians: Canadians produce over twice as many /æ/ assignments and marginally more intermediate vowels, whereas Americans use about 50 percent more /ah/. Despite these national differences, the Canadian and American patterns are closely related, with inter-token variability governed by similar factors ($R^2 = 0.677$, $p < 0.005$). The real-time comparison with the older data, moreover, finds that the patterns are converging, with Canadian use of /æ/ declining over time in favor of intermediate nativizations and /ah/. Strikingly, an analysis of sex within the Canadian sample shows this shift to be a rare example of a male-led change: men produce 52% /ah/ and 24% /æ/, against 36% /ah/ and 37% /æ/ for women, a difference significant at $p < 0.001$. While the external model of American English suggests that this is a change from above, making male leadership especially unusual according to Principle Ia of Labov (1990: 213), a closer consideration of its cultural context suggests that American English may have covert rather than overt prestige for Canadians, running counter to an established norm of anti-Americanism prevalent in mainstream, middle-class Canadian culture. This might help to explain its association with male speech. [Words = 483]

References:

Boberg, Charles. 1997. *Variation and change in the nativization of foreign (a) in English*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.

Boberg, Charles. 2000. Geolinguistic diffusion and the US–Canada border. *Language Variation and Change* 12: 1–24.

Boberg, Charles. 2009. The emergence of a new phoneme: Foreign (a) in Canadian English. *Language Variation and Change* 21/3: 355–380.

Labov, William. 1990. The intersection of sex and social class in the course of linguistic change. *Language Variation and Change* 2: 205–254.