

Cape Town English: the southern limit of the Canadian and Californian shifts?

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The old South African English Chain Shift involves the raising of KIT (/ɪ/) DRESS (/e/) and TRAP (/æ/) when compared to Received Pronunciation (Lass and Wright, 1986). Bekker (2009) studied South African English (SAfE) vowels, comparing data he collected to the descriptions and findings of Webb's (1983) acoustic study and the impressionistic descriptions by Lass and Wright, among others. Bekker's findings support Lanham's (1965, 91) prediction of continued raising, with the exception of TRAP lowering. The study at hand set out to test Lanham's prediction and Bekker's findings. It also seeks to test the extent of TRAP and STRUT (/ʌ/) merger as suggested by the auditory perceptions of the researcher. In doing so, 50 young, middle class Capetonians were recorded taking part in sociolinguistic interviews. The participants include 40 white and 10 black speakers (to track post-apartheid social change), who are split evenly for sex. The data was subsequently analysed using the Forced Alignment and Vowel Extraction Toolkit (Rosenfelder et al. 2011) with a slightly modified version of the British English Example Pronouncing dictionary¹. This is the first study on South African English to use FAVE package². Where necessary, linear mixed-effects models were run via the statistical package R.

Analysis shows evidence of innovation involving lowered and centralised KIT. DRESS remains largely raised (though some lowering is also evident), and overlaps to a large extent with KIT. This extreme, unexpected overlap suggests the possibility of a merger³. The lowering and centralising of TRAP results in overlaps with STRUT. Minimal pairs tests show a difference in production and perception: for male speakers casual style tokens overlap to a higher degree than tokens in minimal pairs style. The same holds for female speakers, though the extent of overlap between TRAP and STRUT is higher in both casual style and in minimal pairs, suggesting that females are leading this change. This difference between perception and production suggests a near merger of TRAP and STRUT.

Reversal of the chain shift described by Lass and Wright is underway in the speech of young, middle class English speakers from Cape Town, with potential mergers included. Speakers of English in Canada (Boberg 2005), California (Kennedy & Grama 2012), South-east England (Torgersen and Kerswill 2004), Dublin (Hickey 2013) and Australia (Cox & Palethorpe, 2008) have shown similar trends in vowel lowering and retraction, indicating that South African English in Cape Town is shifting vowels alongside its global counterparts.

References:

¹ With thanks to Laurel MacKenzie.

² Toefy (2014) used FAVE's precursor, Penn Phonetics Lab Forced Aligner (P2FA), pioneering the use of American automatic vowel analysis methods in South Africa.

³ Since this is an unexpected result, minimal pairs testing for these vowels were not done.

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