The relationship between the high and mid back vowels in Oregonian English

Jason McLarty (*University of Oregon*) & Tyler Kendall (*University of Oregon*)

Fronting of /u/ and /o/ is described as a feature of the Northern California Vowel Shift (Eckert n.d.; Fought 1999; Luthin 1987; Thomas 2001, 2011) and, also, more generally, West Coast varieties of English in the U.S. (Labov et al. 2006; Luthin 1987). The *Atlas of North American English* (*ANAE*; Labov et al. 2006) describes the Western U.S. as one large dialect region, which exhibits "low homogeneity" throughout the region. The high and mid back vowels contribute to this lack of homogeneity, with /u/ generally fronted but /o/ fronted to varying degrees. In fact, in the *ANAE* the only speakers who front /o/ to a centralized position (characteristic of advanced speakers) are located in Southern California. The further north and east one goes from Southern California, the less advanced /o/ becomes along the F2 dimension. Recent work on Oregonian English has suggested that both /u/ and /o/ are indeed fronted, but details differ across studies. Conn (2003) and Ward (2003) find both /u/ and /o/ fronted in Portland, OR, with women leading, as well as the most conservative speakers being also the oldest suggesting a change in progress. More recently, Becker et al. (2013) find that all speakers in the Portland metropolitan area front both /u/ and /o/, with males leading, suggesting that the fronting of these vowels may no longer be a change in progress. To date, this work has not otherwise focused on the greater time-course of the changes.

Utilizing contemporary speakers from the Willamette Valley region of Oregon and comparing them to archival recordings from *DARE* (Cassidy and Hall 1985-2012) of Oregonians born in the late 19th and early 20th century this paper examines the high and mid back vowels in an attempt to better understand their relationship to one another in Oregonian English and the time-course of these changes. We ask three main questions: 1: Is the fronting of the high-back vowels in Oregonian English a change in progress as suggested in Conn (2003) and Ward (2003), or is it complete (or at least near completion) as indicated by Becker et al. (2013)? 2: Can archival recordings help us better understand the time-course of the change, especially with respect to /o/ fronting? 3: Lastly, we examine the extent to which the fronting of /u/ and /o/ is related; that is, is there an implicational relationship between /u/ and /o/ where speakers who lead in /u/ fronting also lead in /o/ fronting? Data from archival speakers indicate that these fronting processes were, at most, just beginning for speakers born in the late 19th century. Younger contemporary speakers exhibit the highest degree of both /u/ and /o/ fronting, whereas archival speakers demonstrate some degree of /u/ fronting, but not /o/ fronting. We also find a relationship between /u/ and /o/, where speakers who are the most advanced in fronting /u/ also appear to be leading in the fronting of /o/. Overall, this work helps us better understand the phonology of English in the Western U.S. and dialect formation processes more generally.

References

Becker, Kara, Anna Aden, Katelyn Best, Rena Dimes, Juan Flores and Haley Jacobson. 2013. Keep Portland Weird: Vowels in Oregon English. Paper presented at *NWAV 42.* Pittsburgh, PA.

Cassidy, Frederic and Joan Hall. 1985-2012. *The Dictionary of American Regional English*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Conn, Jeff. 2002. An investigation into the western dialect of Portland Oregon. Paper presented at *NWAV 31*. San Diego, CA.

Fought, Carmen. 1999. "A Majority Sound Change in a Minority Community: /u/-fronting in Chicano English". *Journal of Sociolinguistics 3*(1): Pp. 5-23.

Labov, William, Sharon Ash and Charles Boberg. 2006. *The Atlas of North American English*. Mouton de Gruyter.

Luthin, Herbert W. 1987. "The story of California (ow): the coming-of-age of English in California". In Denning, K.M. et al. (eds.) *Variation in Language: NWAV-XV at Stanford*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Department of Linguistics. Pp. 312-324.

Thomas, Erik R. 2001. *An Acoustic Analysis of Vowel Variation in New World English.* Publication of the American Dialect Society 85. Durham, NC: Duke University Press

Thomas, Erik R. 2011. *Sociophonetics: An Introduction*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ward, Michael. *Portland Dialect Study: The Fronting of /ow, u, uw/ in Portland Oregon*. Master's Thesis. Portland, OR: Portland State University.