

Canadian English /æ/: regional and social variants

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This paper reports on regional and social variation in the phonetic realization of /æ/, or “short-a”, the vowel of bat, bad, band and bag, in Canadian English. Labov (1991) called /æ/ one of the two “pivot points” of North American English, determining larger patterns of vowel shifting in the sound changes that serve to differentiate regional varieties; consequently, Clarke, Elms and Youssef (1995) discovered that retraction of /æ/ was a key component of the Canadian Vowel Shift. Labov, Ash and Boberg (2006) showed that Canadian English is characterized by a “continuous short-a system”, in which allophones of /æ/ form a phonetic continuum along the low-front trajectory of the vowel space, from low-front bat to raised and fronted band, but without a clear separation of the pre-nasal allophones from the rest of the distribution. While this characterization fits some Canadian speakers well, further research with a specifically Canadian focus, reported in Boberg (2008, 2010), finds that it is a simplification, obscuring important regional and social differences.

For the present paper, word list productions of 86 Canadian English speakers, a considerably larger sample than those available to previous research, were analyzed acoustically. F1/F2 measurements were obtained for 16 tokens of /æ/, together with other vowels, from each speaker: 4 pre-nasal tokens, 3 before /g/, 3 before /r/ and 6 others. A multivariate statistical analysis was then carried out in SPSS to identify regional and social (ethnic) effects on formant frequencies.

Four distinct Canadian short-a patterns emerged from this analysis: in Western Canada, /æ/ is raised equally before /n/ and /g/; Ontario has more advanced raising before /n/ but less before /g/; Quebec English shows almost no raising, even before /r/, which conditions regular raising elsewhere, but striking differences were found among the major ethnic groups that make up the Montreal English-speaking community; in the Maritimes, traces of raising before /d/, similar to that of the American Atlantic seaboard, are found. This makes short-a one of the most subtle indicators of regional phonetic differentiation across Canada, despite apparently simple previous accounts of the variable.