

Age effects on short-a patterning in Quebec English

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Phenomena observed in minority language communities under intense contact are often interpreted as resulting from either interference from the majority language or a lagging behind in change in progress due to isolation from mainstream communities (cf. Poplack and Levey 2010). In this paper, we examine the patterning of short a (/æ/), a phenomenon which exhibits regional variability within Canada (cf. Boberg 2010) and provides evidence for change in progress in some communities (cf. Labov, Ash, and Boberg 2006). Ontario speakers typically exhibit a pattern of tensing before voiced consonants, and most markedly before nasals, but to a lesser degree than that found in most of the United States. In most other parts of mainstream Canada, the prenasal tensing effect is less marked, although anecdotal evidence suggests that it may be spreading to areas where a prenasal tensing pattern was not previously present. In Quebec, where English is a minority language, Boberg (2004) has noted that the absence of conditioning effects on /æ/, or across-the-board laxing, are salient features of Montreal English. Boberg further demonstrated that some Montreal speakers do exhibit some prenasal tensing, but that the adoption of the nasal patterning exhibits strong ethnicity effects. In particular, those of Anglo-Irish descent are more likely to adopt the nasal pattern than speakers of Jewish or Italian heritage.

In the present study, we examine data from the Quebec English Corpus (Poplack et al. 2006) in order to assess age, region, and ethnicity effects on short-a patterning in a minority English community. This study thus addresses the question of whether the patterns observed previously for Quebec English reflect change in progress, as well as what the minority-community effects on the adoption of change might be. To explore these questions, we extracted data and undertook acoustic analysis of the vowels of 31 speakers. Among these were older and younger speakers from Montreal, representing three major ethnic groups: Anglo-Irish, Jewish, and Italian. In addition, speakers from Quebec City, where Anglophones are even more isolated from the mainstream than in Montreal and represent a significantly smaller segment of the population, were examined.

Surprisingly, the results of the vowel analysis do not indicate change towards a nasal pattern. Rather, the majority of the older speakers, regardless of city or ethnicity, exhibit nasal or continuous short-a patterns. Among the younger speakers, there is evidence of movement away from a nasal pattern, towards a more simplified pattern of across-the-board laxing. Consistent with Boberg's (2004) findings, this effect is seen most clearly among Jewish and Italian Montrealers, while most young Anglo-Irish speakers maintain the nasal pattern of their elders. The results thus indicate that any change in Montreal English is not towards a nasal short -a pattern but rather towards a simpler pattern of across-the-board laxing. We argue that this effect may be due to increased isolation of some Montrealers from mainstream Canadian English, as language legislation in Quebec aimed at strengthening the position of French serves additionally to isolate Quebec's English-speaking minority from mainstream Canadian English.