The Phonology of the Canadian Shift Revisited: Thunder Bay & Cape Breton
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Variationist sociophoneticians generally agree that the low-back vowel merger (LOT/PALM/THOUGHT) was the catalyst of the Canadian Shift—a vowel change affecting the front lax vowels in Canadian English. While we concur with this initial hypothesis, this paper questions the further assertion that subsequent change has been purely phonetic. Relying on insights provided by Modified Contrastive Specification theory (Dresher, Piggott & Rice 1994) and the Contrastive Hierarchy approach (Dresher 2009), we propose instead that the low-back merger triggered a change in the phonological specification of the TRAP vowel, resulting in under-specification of the TRAP vowel for the feature [+/-back]. Vowel Dispersion theory (Lijencrants & Lindblom 1972, Schwartz et al 2007) provides a complementary framework for understanding the observed phonetic pattern of KIT, DRESS and TRAP lowering/retraction in the F1/F2 acoustic space that accompanied the phonological reconfiguration.

This hypothesis is supported by word list data from 59 speakers—29 from Cape Breton, Nova Scotia (14 Men, 15 Women) and 30 from Thunder Bay, Ontario (13 Men, 17 Women). Our findings indicate a strong similarity between Cape Breton speakers and Thunder Bay speakers with regard to the mean normalized acoustic vowel space. Given the vast distance between these two cities (over 1800 miles) and their disparate histories, the observed similarity suggests a common theoretical explanation. The proposed explanation is compatible with observations on cross-linguistic typology.

Roeder (to appear) provides evidence that the profile of the Canadian Shift in Thunder Bay is similar to that attested in urban southern Ontario, where the Canadian Shift was first attested (Clarke et al 1995). While historical settlement patterns and regular contact between Thunder Bay residents and speakers from urban southern Ontario may explain this similarity, the similarity between Thunder Bay and Cape Breton seems unlikely. Cape Breton has a different settlement history than inland Canada and the dialects of Eastern Canada are isolated from the dialects of inland Canada, separated by the mainly French-speaking province of Quebec and the New England states. As recently as 2010 it has been reported that the Canadian Shift does not occur in Cape Breton English (Kiefle & Kay-Raining Bird, 2010; also Labov et al 2006) and that the low-back merger is variable in the community. In contrast, our data shows a full merger among all Cape Breton speakers and front lax vowel lowering and retracting in apparent time.

These findings lead us to propose that the Canadian Shift is in fact a predictable consequence of the low back merger (a merger completed or incipient in the input dialects of both Cape Breton and Ontario English) and that a Canadian Shift-like pattern will occur in any North American speech community in which LOT/PALM and THOUGHT merge. Recent observations of Canadian Shift-like patterns in California (Aiello 2009), Illinois (Bigham 2009), and Ohio (Durian 2008, 2009) support such a hypothesis.