A very northern California shift? The vowel system of southcentral Alaska

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Very little is known about the phonetic details of English as spoken in Alaska, and what we do know is generally limited to very isolated varieties (e.g., Vandergriff 1980), or to individuals who happen to be from Alaska (e.g., Purnell, Rainy, & Salmons 2009). This lack of in-depth knowledge holds in national surveys, as well: Only two surveys were conducted in Alaska for the Dictionary of American Regional English (Cassidy & Hall 1985–2013) and The Atlas of North American English (Labov, Ash, & Boberg 2006) included just two Alaskans. To fill this gap, we conducted a pilot study of English as spoken in southcentral Alaska, home to a sizable majority of the state’s population.

We recorded 30 Alaskans (11 from the urban core of Anchorage, 5 from outlying suburbs of Anchorage within the municipality, 12 from the neighboring Matanuska-Susitna Borough, and 2 from Haines). All speakers were white and had lived in their home locations since at least the age of four. The respondents were recorded reading “Comma gets a cure” (Honorof, McCullough, & Somerville 2000) and a word list. To get a comprehensive picture of the vowel systems, midpoint measurements of all of the canonical vowels of English were taken for each speaker, for a total of 9,417 tokens.

Our analysis found that southcentral Alaskans generally exhibit the cot-caught merger and a short-a split (with pre-nasal tokens raised, sometimes extremely, and other tokens retracted). Many speakers also show lowering of /ɛ/, moderate fronting of /u,o,ʌ/, and fronting and lowering of /ʊ/. Further, these shifts were strongest in and around Anchorage, with less evidence for them in the northern exurbs. An analysis of the data with any eye toward Hagiwara’s (2006; see also Boberg 2011) discussion of the differences between the Canadian Shift and the California Shift leads us to conclude that southcentral Alaska, particularly Anchorage, is participating in the California Shift (though without lowering of /ɪ/). We do note, however, that southcentral Alaska (and particularly Anchorage) had different English-language settlement patterns than much of the rest of Alaska, and so these results cannot be assumed to hold for other regions of the state.