

Spring 2018 Research Abstract

The California Vowel Shift (CVS), as described in Figure 1, has been observed across the United States (Labov et al. 2006), including in the West (Fridland et al. 2016) and the Midwest (Kohn & Stithem 2014). However, its spread has been variable by geographic location, age

(D'Onofrio 2016), and ethnicity (Thomas 2007). An integral feature of the CVS is the merger of the COT and CAUGHT classes; while its merger has been theorized to cause the chain-pull reaction of the short-front vowels in Canada, this may not be as clearly the case in California (Kennedy and Grama 2012), and this relationship has not yet been fully explored in Kansas. While

contemporary Kansans seem to have the COT/CAUGHT merger (Strelluf 2014), my previous research indicated older, white Kansans interviewed during the 1960s for the Dictionary of American Regional English did not show a completed COT/CAUGHT merger. However, additional research was needed to broaden the scope of research to include African-Americans, who have historically resisted the merging of these two vowel classes (Thomas 2007).

To add to this data, three interviews from older African-American speakers born between 1896 and 1911, taken in 1983 for the Wabaunsee County Historical Society, were transcribed using PRAAT. FAVE was then used to extract COT and CAUGHT vowels, and using R, the Pillai scores for each speakers' COT/CAUGHT overlap were calculated. A score closer to 1 indicates no overlap (i.e. no merger), while a score of 0 indicates complete overlap (i.e. complete

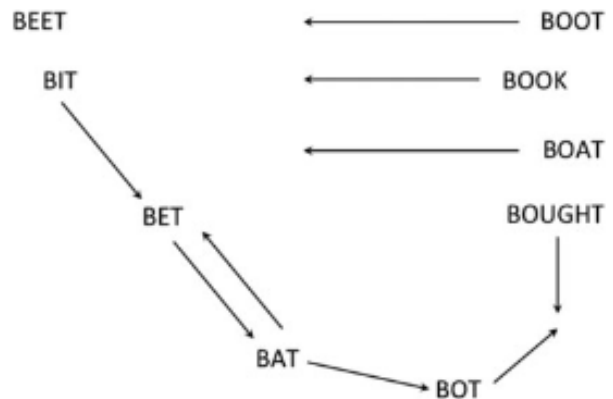


Figure 1: The California Vowel Shift can be evidenced by the merging of the BOT/BOUGHT class, fronting of back vowels, and a chain reaction of the retraction of front vowels, with the exception of pre-nasal BAT (Podesva et al. 2015, p. 159)

merger). Then — due to presently limited access to more diverse recordings — these scores were put into context with Pillai scores from my previous research of the DARE participants, as well as recordings of white Kansans from 2014, to track the progress of the merger in apparent time. As seen in Figure 2, the Wabaunsee speakers did not have the COT/CAUGHT merger, but were no less likely to lack it than the white DARE speakers. When the speakers were ordered from oldest to youngest — with at least 45 years' difference between the youngest DARE speaker and the oldest contemporary speaker, born in 1996 — the merger's presence was variable, with a sharp decline before the contemporary speakers.

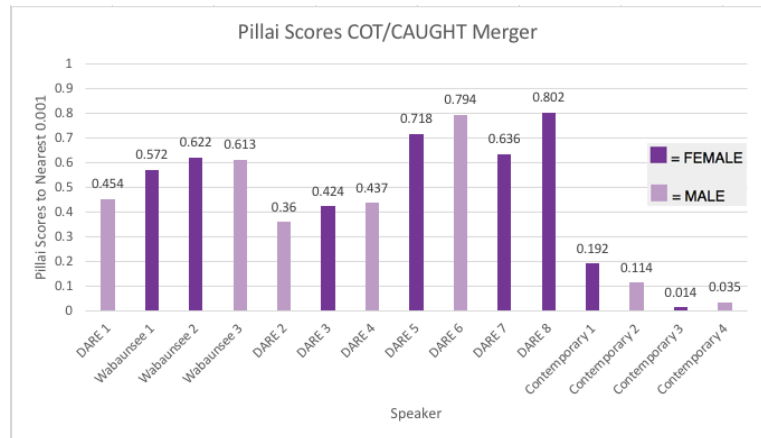


Figure 2: Speaker data from three corpuses (DARE, Wabaunsee County Historical Society, and contemporary speakers from the Kansas Speaks project) are plotted by age. Pillai scores are compared for the COT/CAUGHT merger, with a score of 0 indicating complete merger, and a score of 1 indicating no merger.

This indicates a need for further research to address the gap for

interviews representing the Baby Boomer generation and Generation X, as well as to collect additional recordings from young African-American Kansans throughout the 20th and 21st centuries to see if this pattern still holds. To echo Strelluf's research (2014), future studies could explore the link between conditioning environment in COT/CAUGHT production among the oldest speakers, as the youngest speakers seem to have a phonemically complete merger. Finally, as additional research is recorded, it would be important to analyze these features alongside the short-front vowels to see whether or not their retraction has been caused by the COT/CAUGHT merger in Kansas.

References

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