

# How 'general' is General Canadian? Vowel production in Winnipeg

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In this paper, I address the apparent homogeneity of Canadian English (cf. Chambers, 1998) through an acoustic characterization of Winnipeg English vowels, and by contrasting the Winnipeg vowel production norms with previous descriptions of “general” phonetic and phonological features of Canadian English (notably Canadian Shift and Canadian Raising). Despite differences between the Winnipeg sample and other reports of Canadian English, comparison of these data with acoustic data from other North American English dialects reveals the essential ‘Canadian’ character of the Winnipeg vowel space. Most descriptions of Canadian English vowels are based on impressionistic (and especially transcription-based) analyses of stylistically diverse underlying data. It is difficult to compare the results of different studies under these conditions. Previous acoustic work has either been secondary to transcriptional reporting (e.g. Clarke et al, 1995; Meechan, 1999) or has focused on a particular sociolinguistic variable without offering a general characterization of the vowel space (e.g. Esling and Warkentyne, 1993). The acoustic model of vowel production among anglophone Winnipeggers was developed following common experimental-acoustic procedures (e.g. Peterson & Barney, 1952; Hillenbrand et al., 1994). Native monolingual English speakers were recorded reading from a randomized script containing multiple repetitions of keywords presented in a frame. Keywords were selected to illustrate 15 ‘basic’ vowel phonemes of English (/i, ɪ, e, ε, æ, ɑ, ɔ, o, ʊ, u, ʌ, ɹ, aɪ, aʊ, ɔɪ/). When possible, real words of the “hVd” and “hVt” shape were used. The goal was to produce a dataset which could be directly compared with available acoustic studies, and which would allow for investigation of vowel duration and other dynamic aspects of Canadian English vowels. Examination of the Winnipeg vowels suggests that Canadian Shift (CS, as proposed by Clarke et al, 1995) is not occurring in Winnipeg. Though Winnipeg speakers show complete merger of ɑ/ɔ (suggested as the trigger of CS), as yet neither the retraction of the /æ/ vowel (which Esling & Warkentyne, 1993, offer as typical of the Vancouver vowel system) nor the concomitant lowering of the front lax vowels seems to have followed as a result. Comparison of the Winnipeg data with comparable data from southern California (remeasured from data collected for Hagiwara, 1995, 1997) reveal that the ɑ/ɔ merger, while complete in both dialects, results in a different configuration of vowels—as traditionally described, the Canadian vowel in ‘hot and ‘odd’ is typically a low back round vowel (IPA [ɒ]), which is both more rounded (and/or more back) and slightly higher than low back unround [ɑ] typical of the southern Californians. While very slight lowering of lax vowels and (among women) retraction of /æ/ both occur in southern California (as suggested by Hinton et al, 1987; and Luthin, 1987), these are absent from the Winnipeg sample. Based on these results and the presence of Canadian Raising, I argue that Winnipeg English is a variety of Canadian English, but distinct from better described varieties. Differences between reported production norms in others areas and those observed in Winnipeg suggest it may be necessary to refine the notion of “General Canadian” away from the relatively extreme (and distinctive) form of the language spoken in Toronto and Vancouver.

## References

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