

Islanders or Mainlanders? The Canadian Shift in the middle class of urban St. John's, NL

MATTHIAS HOFMANN

Chemnitz University of Technology

The variety of middle class speakers in St. Johns conforms to some degree to mainland Canadian English norms, but in complex and distinctive ways (Clarke, 1985, 1991, 2010; D'Arcy 2005; Hollett, 2006). One as yet unresolved question is whether the variety of Newfoundlands conurbation participates in the Canadian Shift (cf. Clarke 2012), a chain shift of the lax front vowels that has been confirmed for many different regions of Canada (e.g. Roeder and Gardner 2013 for Thunder Bay and Toronto, Sadlier-Brown and Tamminga 2008 for Halifax and Vancouver). While acoustic phonetic analyses of St. Johns English are rare, some claims have been made that urban St. Johns speakers do not participate in the shift, based on two or six speakers (Labov, Ash & Boberg 2006; Boberg 2010). Other researchers with larger data sets suggest that younger St. Johns speakers participate in mainland Canadians innovations to different degrees than mainlanders (e.g. Hollett, 2006). The Canadian Shift has not been uniformly defined, but agreement exists that with the low-back merger in place, BATH/TRAP retracts and consequently DRESS lowers. Clarke et al. (1995), unlike Labov et al. (2006), assert that KIT is subsequently lowered. Boberg (2005, 2010), however, emphasizes retraction of KIT and DRESS and suggests unrelated parallel shifts instead.

In this paper, I focus on KIT because of its contested position. In my stratified randomly-sampled data (2,300 KITs, 5,000 other vowels, 34 interviewees, stratified as to age, gender, and socioeconomic status), results from Euclidean distance measures, Pearson correlation coefficients and logistic regression show that (1) young St. Johns speakers clearly participate in the shift; (2) age has the strongest and a linear effect. Continuous modeling of age yields even more significant results for participation in a classic chain shift (6% decrease in lowering per added year; random intercept for word and speaker). My findings also confirm that the change seems to have entered the system via formal styles (cf. Clarke 1991, 2010).