

The rhotic and its adjacent vowels: Complex trajectories in Laurentian French

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In the last decades, several sound changes have reshaped the subsystem of pre-rhotic vowels in Laurentian French. Among these, we find cases of neutralization (mid-high and mid-low vowels, front and back low vowels) and a general tendency towards lowering (high and mid vowels). While some of these phenomena have been addressed individually in the past, no systemic analysis of the reorganization has been conducted yet.

Using data from the Phonologie du Français Contemporain database (Durand et al., 2002, 2009; Côté, to appear), I present the first corpus survey of the changes behind the reorganization of the pre-rhotic vocalic subsystem. The sample contains speakers distributed across three age groups and five cities (Hawkesbury, Trois-Rivières, Québec, La Pocatière, Saguenay). The comparison of these groups allows to explore the diachronical (apparent time) and spatial diffusion of the changes. It is found that while some processes are almost complete in the speech of older speakers (neutralization of mid vowels, neutralization of /ɔ/ and /b/), others are still gaining ground in the younger generation (general lowering, neutralization of low vowels). The data also points to the leading role played by Western Québec in the geographical diffusion of changes.

The final part of the presentation focuses on possible causes for the phenomena surveyed. It is shown that many of the changes are synchronous with the loss of apical /r/ in Western Québec (in favor of the dorsal variant). Coarticulation with this newly adopted rhotic consonant is thus explored as a potential trigger for reanalysis. Intra-systemic factors, such as the generalization of diphthongization, are considered as competing (or complementary) explanations.