On Saying /aw/ in Victoria

John Davison
University of Toronto

The degree of homogeneity in Canadian English is remarkable given distances which, in most parts of the world, would span several language (and even language family) boundaries.¹ The process known as Canadian Raising, for example, is common to middle-class English speakers in all urban centres outside Quebec and Newfoundland (see Chambers, 1973). Given such distances, it would seem natural for processes of language change to create numerous regional differences — and indeed there are differences to be found but they are primarily of a lexical sort. It would seem a good deal less natural for a phonological change to occur throughout the entire dialect area thereby maintaining the homogeneity of the dialect. Nonetheless, Chambers and Hardwick (1986) show that a change in progress in Toronto is also occurring in Vancouver.

The change, as originally described in Chambers (1980), involves the fronting of the onset(s) in the diphthong [aw] and its raised variant [AW]. Speakers tend to front the onset vowel to a greater or lesser degree according to their age and, within age groups, their gender. There is, however, no concomitant change occurring in the other diphthong, [ay], that undergoes Canadian Raising. In Vancouver, there is a competing change involving alternation between [aw] and [o] in the speech of young males particularly.

That such a similar change should be taking place in such distant cities argues strongly that the forces that brought about the homogeneity of Canadian English originally are still functioning to maintain it.
It must be noted that socially, culturally and politically, Toronto and Vancouver have a great deal in common which may account for the change without causing its occurrence elsewhere in the dialect area. They are the two largest cities in their respective regions and each, accordingly, is the cultural, industrial and economic centre of its 'share' of the dialect area. Both are significantly more cosmopolitan than other cities in the area and both have numerous international ties, especially with the U.S. It is interesting, therefore, to compare the results of a study done in a smaller, more conservative, and less politically heteronomous community with those from the Toronto and Vancouver studies.

The present study is based on interviews with middle-class residents of Victoria, B.C. Despite its proximity to Vancouver, Victoria differs drastically from it in most social and political features. With a metropolitan population of less than a quarter of a million, it is about one-sixth the size of Vancouver (and less than a twelfth of Toronto). Whereas Vancouver is highly industrialized with a large, unionized working-class, Victoria's population consists mainly of civil servants, the Armed forces, and shopkeepers. The only major 'private' industry is tourism which has been successful largely because Americans are attracted to this quaint place that bills itself as "a little bit of Olde Englande." But while Americans come to Victoria primarily as tourists, in Vancouver they form an integral part of the city's commercial life on a year-round basis. Vancouverites see Americans at work; Victorians see them at play.

Given these differences, the findings of this study -- that the fronting observed in Toronto and Vancouver is also occurring in Victoria -- provide evidence that the change is a product of something other than just
'big city' features and that it is maintaining the homogeneity of Canadian English.

1. Survey Structure and Method

There are two possible methods of determining that a linguistic change has occurred or is occurring. One is to compare facts about the language at some specific time with appropriate related facts at some later time (a 'real time' study). The other is to establish that certain linguistic behaviour varies consistently with the age of the speaker (an 'apparent time' study). It is this latter method that is employed here and, for the most part, in the Toronto and Vancouver studies as well.²

The survey population consisted of eleven middle-class lifelong residents of Victoria whose parents were native speakers of English.³ This group was carefully selected so as to match the informants in the Toronto and Vancouver studies as closely as possible with respect to age (12, 22 and 46+), social class and linguistic background.⁴

The interview protocol was the same as that used in the previous studies. It consists of a word-list, a reading passage, and a series of questions designed to elicit certain lexical items, opinions on social and political topics, and a fair amount of informal speech likely to contain (aw) tokens.⁵ The interviews of the adults (46+) and young adults (22-year-olds) took place in their homes and the 12-year-olds were interviewed at school. In all, 1,183 (aw) tokens were elicited from eleven speakers, ranging from 91 to 129 tokens from individual speakers.
2. The Variable (aw) in Victoria

There are two ways in which the diphthong (aw) varies in Victoria, just as there are in Vancouver and Toronto. The primary one is the fronting of the onset. The other involves the failure to participate in Canadian Raising by having a low vowel (usually fronted) before voiceless consonants as well as elsewhere.

The tendency to front the onset can be measured by means of the Fronting Index (FI) set forth in Chambers (1980):

\[
\begin{align*}
(aw)-0: & \quad [aw][\text{aw}] \\
(aw)-1: & \quad [aw][\text{aw}] \\
(aw)-2: & \quad [\text{æw}][\text{ew}]^\circ
\end{align*}
\]

The FI for each individual is obtained by assigning one of the three values (0,1,2) to each token produced and deriving an average value for those tokens which is then multiplied by 100. Thus the maximum score on the FI would be 200 — a result obtainable only if all occurrences of (aw) were realized by the (aw)-2 variants, [æw] and [ɛw].

A Non-Raising Index (NRI) is also employed in the study to discover if any relationship exists between the fronting of onsets and a failure to raise the onset vowel before voiceless consonants. The NRI is the same as that used in previous studies and the calculations are similar to those used for the FI. The Index values for the NRI are:

\[
\begin{align*}
(aw)-0: & \quad [\text{aw}], [\text{æw}], [\text{ew}] / \text{[Vce]}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
(aw)-1: & \quad [\text{aw}], [aw], [\text{æw}] / \text{[Vce]}
\end{align*}
\]
3. Results and Discussion

The Toronto and Vancouver studies show three important similarities in (aw) onset fronting in the two cities:

1. Fronting is age-graded;
2. Fronting is gender-graded; and
3. Fronting is environment-graded.

In both cities, younger people exhibit more fronted onsets than their elders; females tend to front more than males of the same age; and the tendency to front is greater in all groups when the vowel does not precede a voiceless consonant. These facts held true in the Victoria study with the single exception that the 12-year-old males exhibited a greater tendency to front in the raising environment (before [-Vce] consonants) than elsewhere.

3.1. Fronting is Age-graded

A glance at the age group lines in Figure 1 and its accompanying tables is sufficient to see that fronting is correlated with age in Victoria. The 12-year-olds, with an average fronting score of approximately 90, have pretty much adopted (aw)-1 as the standard variant, although the males display a certain ambivalence as evidenced in the noticeably lower scores recorded for them in the more formal (word list and reading passage) styles. The 22-year-olds display precisely the sort of ambivalence that can be expected of a transitional group between the conservative adults and the innovative 12-year-olds. While their average score (about 53) seems to indicate ambivalence, it is misleading in a way that averages can frequently be. The breakdown of the 22-year-olds by gender shows that both the male and the females are linguistically similar to different age-groups -- the females
with the 12-year-olds and the male with the adults. With only one 22-year-old male in the sample it is probably imprudent to generalize the result.

Figure 1. Fronting by Age, Gender and Style

Mrs. R.’s scores in Table 2 are worthy of comment. If we count only her word list score, Mrs. R. (see Table 2) is clearly among the non-fronters. However, her scores in the Reading Passage and the Interview Style place her among the fronters. This may seem to suggest that she is making a drastic style-shift to what she takes as the norm in the most formal style. But Mrs. R.’s high fronting scores have nothing whatever to do with the
change. She has a strong tendency to nasalize vowels in more rapid speech and a concomitant tendency to front all nasalized vowels, not only in the diphthongs, but everywhere. Thus her fronting tendency for the vowels in words like sun [sʌn] and gone [gɑn]. As a result, her fronting index is higher even than that of R.S. but R.S.'s fronting in (aw) does not occur anywhere else in her vocalic inventory. Thus the only score for Mrs. R that is relevant to this study is her Word-List score which places her solidly with the non-fronters.

Figure 1 indicates a clear division of the sample population into fronters and non-fronters, with the former above 60 on the index and the latter below 40. For the fronters, the usual vowel is (aw)-1, with occasional instances of back vowels. This would suggest that R.S. (see Table 2) is an early adopter in the vanguard of the change.7

While it would be interesting to do a real time study of the pronunciation of (aw) in Victoria, the apparent time evidence provided here is, I think, sufficient to warrant the assumption that the change observed in the Toronto and Vancouver studies is indeed also occurring in Victoria.

3.2 Fronting is Gender Graded

It is a widely recognized, if not clearly explained, fact that linguistic variation which is moving in the direction of social norm or increased prestige is led by females.8 Figure 2 shows that the females are leading the fronting in all three cities, particularly in Vancouver where 22-year-old females are ahead of 12-year-old males. This same fact seems to hold for the female adults and male 22-year-old in Victoria, but, if we remember that Mrs. R is not really a participant in the change and eliminate her nasal conditioned fronting from the chart, then the adult female's score drops to 12, well below the younger male's score and, somewhat more interestingly,
back more closely in line with the ratio between the three cities indicated for the males in that age-group.

It would seem that fronting is a more recent phenomenon in Victoria than in Vancouver and Toronto. This helps to explain the presence of T.C. (the 22-year-old male) in the non-fronters group, but fails to explain why Victoria's fronters are all ahead of those in Toronto of the same age and gender and lead Vancouver in 2 out of 3. Any attempt to explain the apparently accelerated rate of change in Victoria would be pure speculation.

![Figure 2. Fronting by City, Age and Gender](image)

Figure 2. Fronting by City, Age and Gender

Given the tendency for females to lead in standardizing changes, it would seem that fronting is a change to what is taken to be either a social norm or a more prestigious dialect. In fact, the likely impetus is American English, or at least some dialect(s) thereof, but whatever it may be, it is clearly not some pre-existing variant of Canadian English with fronted onsets, because none such exists.
3.3 Fronting is Environment-Graded

In Chambers and Hardwick (1986), it is pointed out that fronting in all age-
groups is less frequent before a voiceless consonant\(^9\) than elsewhere. 
Figure 3 shows that this holds for the two older groups in Victoria, and, 
further, that these groups have much more in common with their 
counterparts in Toronto than with those in Vancouver. However, in the one 
case where Vancouver and Toronto are most similar -- the 12-year-olds-- 
Victoria is radically different.

![Figure 3. Fronting by Age and Context in Victoria, Toronto and Vancouver](image)

The 12-year-olds in Victoria front nearly equally in both 
environments and tend to favour the raising environment slightly. In fact, 
only one of the 12-year-olds fronts as frequently in the elsewhere 
environment as before a voiceless consonant. It must be remembered, 
however, that the steepness of the line for the Vancouver speakers is due in 
part to the competing change occurring in the raising environment (see 
Chambers and Hardwick 1986). Without that competition, the Vancouver 12-
year-olds may well turn out to be very similar to their counterparts in Victoria.

Unlike the Vancouver and Toronto data, the Victoria data may be susceptible to some sort of explanation involving the splitting of the elsewhere environment. Figure 4 shows raising by age and context on the assumption that there are three, rather than two relevant environments.

![Figure 4. Fronting by Age and Context](image)

The evidence suggests a slight tendency in the two older groups to front more frequently before a voiced consonant than before a word boundary. This is reversed in the 12-year-olds. The reason for this, assuming it is not just an accident, is, at present, outside the realm of even the wildest speculation.

4. Non-Raising in Victoria, Toronto and Vancouver

It was observed in Chambers and Hardwick that while fronting seems to be an approximation to the neighbouring American dialect, there is, currently, no coherent tendency to approximate that dialect through a change in the Raising rule. As has been pointed out, Americans usually maintain a low
onset in (aw) in all environments. If, indeed, fronting is a symptom of an Americanization process in Canadian English, then one would expect to find a similar trend toward non-raising, but if there is such a trend at all, it is only in a very early stage.

Figure 5: Non-Raising in Victoria, Vancouver and Toronto

Figure 5 shows that non-raising is a marginal phenomenon in all three cities -- apart from 12-year-old females in Vancouver -- and that there is no coherent pattern to its occurrence. In Toronto, the 22-year-olds show the greatest frequency of non-raising; in Victoria, the least. Only Vancouver shows signs of age-grading unless we ignore the non-raising index for adult males in Victoria. Victoria would then show a certain degree of age-grading, but the index scores (all below 10) are too low to suggest that any change is occurring.

If, however, we make the assumption that the drastic increase in non-raising in Vancouver's 12-year-old females is indicative of the early stages of a change, then it is possible to say something about the bifurcated gender-grading evidenced in Figure 5. Note that the females in the two
younger groups lead the males in non-raising in all three cities while the female adults are behind the males in all three. If Raising is the social norm or prestige variant for the adults but Non-raising is for the other two groups, then gender grading in all groups shows the females using more of their group's prestige variants. It is, of course, too early to tell whether or not we are looking at a change in its very early stages, but a subsequent study would seem to be indicated.

5. Rounding is Restricted to Vancouver

The mid-back rounded monophthong that Chambers and Hardwick observed in Vancouver "before voiceless consonants in (aw) tokens with very little stress" (p. 37) is taken by them to be incipient regional variation. The Victoria data suggest not only that this is indeed the case but that the region in which the variation is occurring is Vancouver itself. No instances of this variant were observed in the Victoria data. The failure of this competing variant to arise in Victoria provides some evidence that the source of the fronting process in that city is not to be found in the influence of Vancouver dialects alone.

6. Conclusion

The data collected in Victoria bear out predictions made on the basis of the earlier studies in Toronto and Vancouver. The change observed in the earlier studies is not restricted to those two large, highly Americanized cities but is occurring in a smaller, less heteronomous urban area as well. That the change is, nonetheless, a product of a general Americanization of Canadian English is given further support by the fact that its effect in Victoria is clearly not derived from that city's proximity to Vancouver since certain aspects of the Vancouver 'dialect' are absent in the Victoria data.
Notes

1 See Chambers (1980) and Chambers and Hardwick (1986) for a history and discussion of observations on the homogeneity of Canadian English.
2 Chambers and Hardwick make reference to a paper by Gregg (1957) in which "only the standard variants [aw] and [aw]" were recorded in his transcription of the speech of 50 teenagers and young adults from Vancouver. This provides a certain amount of 'real time' evidence for the change.
3 Originally there were to be 12 informants but one 22-year-old male became unavailable and time constraints prevented his being replaced by a suitable informant.
4 One factor that was not eliminated, except for the adults, was the effect of social networks. All four of the 12-year-olds were from the same grade-six class and the three 22-year-olds knew each other. It should be noted that none of the 12-year-olds listed any of the others among their friends, so it is relatively safe to assume that none of the informants is a core-member of any class-sized network or of any smaller one of which any other informant is a member. Nonetheless, it is quite possible that the results obtained in the two younger groups are not entirely representative of Victoria's middle class but, rather, are skewed by the influence of specific networks. If such were the case, however, it could only be more surprising that these groups adhere very closely to the behaviour predicted by the previous studies.
5 A "How do you get there" sort of question, for example, is likely to elicit tokens of down, town, south and house, and, in practice, this question elicited at least three (aw) tokens from every informant.
6 See the following article by Henrietta Hung for a chart indicating the articulatory position of the great vowels.
7 The drop in R.S.'s index may be due to the fact that she does not read particularly well and was, in fact, being more careful with her pronunciation in the reading passage than in the word list where she felt more comfortable.
8 One possible but not necessarily infallible inference from this is that a linguistic change led by females is likely to be more lasting and widespread than one led by males.
9 The incoherence of their results when they attempted to split the elsewhere environment into /∀(∗[-Voc] and /∀(∗# is further evidence that the elsewhere environment is a single unified entity in a phonological process.
References


