Phonemic loss in early American English: notes on the origins and the implementation of the Canadian low back merger

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En este artículo presentamos una reconstrucción del proceso de fusión fonológica que afecta a las vocales inglesas /a:/(p.ej. caught, baubble, daughter) y /c/ (p.ej. cod, bubble, dotter) en el inglés canadiense. La fusión de vocales velares es un fenómeno constatado ya desde principios del siglo XIX, fecha en la cual distintos funcionarios británicos trasladados a Canadá realizan observaciones, de carácter más o menos formal. sobre la dificultad de distinguir entre algunos pares mínimos del inglés estándar. Analizaremos aquí una amplia serie de datos históricos (sobre la composición dialectal de estos territorios en los siglos XVIII y XIX) y lingüísticos (basados en el mecanismo de fusión de estas dos mismas vocales ocurrido en la época contemporánea en las variedades del inglés americano habladas en partes del Estado de Pensilvania), para llegar a una reconstrucción del proceso de fusión en el inglés canadiense, que parte de las distintas actitudes lingüísticas hacia las variedades ultramarinas del inglés en la época victoriana.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the question of the origin of Canadian English by analysing the evolution and expansion of one of the major phonological features that differentiates it from British English and General American English: the low back merger of the historical word classes containing short open o (e.g. cod, bobble, dotter) and long open o (e.g. caught, baubble, daughter).

Recent literature on the general internal mechanism of linguistic change, based on the analysis of present-day data, constitutes an impressive source of information on the different ways in which mergers occur and expand. Furthermore, the justified application of the new data to the reconstruction of historical processes of linguistic change has proven an extremely illuminating method of diachronic reconstruction (see a.o. Labov 1975, Milroy 1992). This research results from the combination of historical and present-day data, and from its application to the linguistic and sociolinguistic situation found in 18th century Canada.

1. THE CANADIAN LOW BACK MERGER

Historically speaking, Canadian English is an off-shoot of American English (Bloomfield 1948). However, the continuing influence of Standard Southern British English during Canada´s colonial period developed into a situation of conflict between both linguistic norms. Whereas British English was seen by Canadians as more correct and prestigious, American English was considered honest and homey (Woods 1993, 153). This linguistic duality of early Canada has contributed to the progressive development of the present-day autochthonous variety of American English. Anything that is characteristic of Canadian English usage, as opposed to General American, is considered a Canadianism.

However, it should be noted that most Canadianisms are of British origins, and very few of them are the result of engodenous innovation (Scargill 1974). One of the most significant phonemic features of Canadian English is the merger between the vowels of cot and caught. According to Lass (1987: 286), "the merger covers all Canada, and a belt in the United States¼extending through Central Ohio, Indiana and Illinois¼". Moreover, merging between both historical word classes has occured in eastern New England, western Pennsylvania and the Far West, and is a common feature among foreign-language dominant speakers of English (Dillard 1992: 177).

The first strong evidences of this process of merging date from the early 19th century. The American ortographer Michael Barton, from New York State, criticizes the English spoken in New England where, according to his observations, people make "the sound of o in not, and a in far to be different" (cited by Labov 1994: 317). A more indirect, and less scientific reference to this change in progress is recorded by the Victorian writer Susanna Moodie (born in Suffolk in 1803), in her autobiographical work Roughing It in the Bush, where she reproduces a conversation with the Canadian Betty Frye on the topic of apple sauce (1852: 77):

[1]
>   "We have no orchard to hum, and I guess you´ll want sarce."
>   "Sarce! What is sarce?"
>   "Not know what sarce is? You are clever! Sarce is apples cut up and
>   dried, to make into pies in the winter. Now do you comprehend?"

Moodie´s spelling of *sarce* was meant to indicate to her contemporary British audience that the open vowel /o:/ had been lowered in Canadian English, and that the quality of the new sound (as pronounced by Betty Frye) roughly corresponded to that of Southern British English / a:/ in the words barn, car or bar.

Phonologically, this low back merger has become the most significant feature of Canadian English, and its clearest factor of divergence from General American English usage (Chambers and Hardwick 1986: 26). Moreover, merging between cot and caught items is strongly encapsulated at the border with the United States, as can be seen from the following figure (where the borderline between both countries is represented by Port Huron/Windsor):
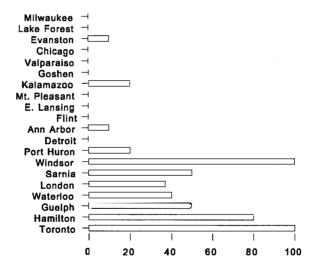

Fig. 1: Percentage informants by city with no distinction between cot and caught (adapted from Zeller 1993: 188)

2. PRESENT-DAY EVIDENCE ON THE AMERICAN LOW BACK MENGER

In order to analyse this important feature of Canadian English from a diachronic point of view, I am going to start by presenting evidence of parallel processes of merging between these two word classes in contemporary American dialects. In one of the most complete and updated apporaches to the low back merger, Herold (1990) focuses on the development of this change in eastern Pennsylvania, where the merged vowel is rapidly expanding at the expense of the two non-merged vowels. According to Herold, the immigration of large numbers of Slavic-speaking coal-miners in the early 1900s produced a massive change in the composition of the speech community, which favoured the development of a new local dialect. Moreover, this merger is now expanding to other communities in the same area, affecting especially the speech of young females.

Although this change is apparently independent from the older western Pennsylvania merger (Labov 1994: 319), its results can be said to be identical, the phonetic range of the new phoneme being roughly equivalent to the union of the range of the two phonemes that merged. Moreover, present-day data allow a reconstruction of the phonetic, lexical and social constraints that affect this change. The process of merging between the two historical word classes containing short open o and long open o opens with the splitting of short open o into two different sounds:

1   Tense /oh/ in closed syllables before voiceless fricatives (cloth, loss) and back nasals (strong, wrong).

2   Lax /o/ in learned or less common words (ping-pong, doff).

When the first of these two sounds joins with the word class of long open o, merged speakers start to produce tokens of the new phoneme, whose quality is intermediate between both varieties of o. This new phoneme expands at a very fast rate, so that it can be completed in a single generation. According to Labov (1994: 324), mergers represent a gain of information, since speakers who still rely on a given phonetic form will repeatedly misunderstand utterances when that form is altered by merging, so that, after a certain period of time, they will cease to attend to this phonemic distinction themselves.

As the following distribution of naturally occurring misunderstandings between these two word classes shows (based on data collected in Philadelphia), two-phoneme listeners have a much larger tendency to linguistic misunderstanding than one-phoneme speakers:

	Listener			
	Two-phoneme		One-phoneme	
Speaker				
Two-phoneme	a	2	b	1
One-phoneme	c	23	d	1

Fig. 2: Misunderstanding rates of /o/ and /oh/ by phonemic system of speaker and listener (Labov 1994: 325)

The previously cited conversation between the Southern British speaker Susanne Moodie and the Upper Canadian Betty Frye (see [1] above) illustrates an early instance of misunderstanding between a two-phoneme listener and a one-phoneme speaker and, in a broader sense, an extensive contact between two phonemic systems that, according to the present-day data presented above, may have produced the sudden collapse of the phonemic distinction made by two-phoneme speakers and the rapid expansion of the merger. In order to project our present-day data on the linguistic situation of 19th century Canada, a closer look at the speech community where this process took place is needed.

3. PROJECTING BACKWARDS I: DIALECT CONTACT IN EARLY CANADA

According to Bloomfield (1948: 59), the English spoken in 19th century Canada was formed mainly by American Loyalists and late Loyalists, whose conservative character and colonial complex molded the country, contributing to the development and maintainance of new social standards (among which was the language itself). Orkin (1971: 52-6) has studied the origins of the newcomers and their patterns of settlement with the following results:

1   Soon after the beginning of the American Revolutionary War in
        1775, thousands of refugees from New England arrived in the
        Maritime Provinces, and a few hundreds of them made their way
        into Ontario.

2   After the end of the war (1783), thousands of Loyalists from
        Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York were evacuated from New
        York City into Quebec and Ontario.

3   After 1791, new vawes of post-Loyalists in search of new lands
        settled in Ontario.

The successive waves of midland American settlers formed the
first permanent population of any size in Ontario, and drove the first English-
speaking wedge into the old Province of Quebec. Obviously, the linguistic
consequences of the loyalist inmigration were especially dramatic in these
two regions, where, differently to the Atlantic Provinces, no previous
English-speaking community existed.

In this situation, it should be expected that early Canadian English
shared many features with the English spoken in western Pennsylvania
and, to a lesser extent, in New England. As the first-generation Canadian
William Canniff puts it in his book The Settlement of Upper Canada (1869:
363):

[2]

        The loyalist settlers of Upper Canada were mainly of
        American birth, and those speaking English, different in no
        respect in their mode of speech from those who remained in
        the States. Even to this day there is some resemblance
        between native Upper Canadians and the Americans of the
        Midland States; though there is not, to any extent, a likeness
        to the Yankee of the New England States.

The issue of linguistic prejudice in 19th century Upper Canada has
been studied by Chambers (1993), who distinguishes four varieties of
English:

1   early Canadian English, developed on the grounds of Midland
        American English,

2   Southern British English, used by British officers and travellers,

3   the regional dialect of New England, known as Yankee English,

4   regional varieties of British English (mainly northern), brought by
        British pioneers arrived by the beginning of the 19th century.

Varieties [3] and [4] were highly stigmatized, and soon assimilated
into variety [1] leaving no trace in the speech of Upper Canadians (Canniff
1869: 363-64). Meanwhile, variety [2] was considered more prestigious and
correct, which contributed to the development of strong split linguistic
loyalties.

4. PROJECTING BACKWARDS II: THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LOW BACK MERGER IN CANADIAN ENGLISH

If early Canadian English is to be considered a `transported' variety
of the early American dialect spoken in the Midland States (mainly in
western Pennsylvania), a common origin should be expected for many of
the linguistic features that are shared by both varieties (but see Blake
1997: 174 for a discussion on the limits of this priciple). In order to
reconstruct the mechanism of the Canadian low back merger, a closer look
at its origins and its spread into Canada is needed.

Coincidential identity of 17th century western Pennsylvania
(Springer 1980) and present-day eastern Pennsylvania (Herold 1990) is
observable in different areas. Firstly, both regions were the target of large
numbers of European inmigrants (from Germany in the first case, from
Eastern Europe in the second), who lacked the phonemic contrast between
the two vowels. Secondly, the merged vowel used by the new foreign-
language dominant speakers influenced the speech of the following
generation of English speakers, so that the distinction was progressively
lost in the whole community.

From the above discussion, one can confidently affirm that the
arrival in Quebec and Ontario of thousands of merged speakers by the end

of the 17th century produced a rapid expansion of the new vowel. As in the eastern Pennsylvania speech community analyzed by Herold (1990), the massive arrival of merged speakers into early Canada produced a situation that strongly favoured the neutralization of the two vowels involved in the change, so that homophony between cot and caught items became the norm in the speech of the following generation of Canadians. In our case, however, it was not only the need to avoid linguistic misunderstanding, but also (and perhaps more importantly) the eagerness of old and new Canadians to adapt their speech to the imported variety of English brought by the American Loyalists, which started to be recognised as the national dialect, that contributed to accelerate the spread of the merge throughout the country, becoming thus a major marker of a developing Canadian identity.

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