

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION: REGIONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND NATIONAL PATTERNS OF CHANGE IN THE VOWELS OF MELBOURNE ADOLESCENTS

Rosemary Billington
Monash University

The phonetic characteristics of Australian English vowels are changing, but recent investigations into Australian English vowel shifting have primarily utilised data from New South Wales (Cox, 1999, Cox and Palethorpe, 2001). Though early accounts of Australian English asserted regional uniformity in the accent, some regional vowel differences have been found, indicating that regional vowel variation needs further investigation. If regional vowel differences exist, examinations of vowel shifting must consider data from different regional centres in order to accurately assess the nature and extent of vowel shifting, and furthermore to explore the interaction between innovation and regional idiosyncrasies.

The present study provides acoustic data from Melbourne, which is analysed against comparable data sets to further investigate the current features of Australian vowels. 13 female and 9 male adolescents from Melbourne were recorded producing the 18 vowels of Australian English in the /hVd/ phonetic environment. Frequency values were extracted for the first and second formants of these, and mean values were compared with recent data from Sydney (Cox, 2006) and Adelaide (Butcher, 2006), as well as with 1960s New South Wales data (Bernard, 1970). Comparison and analysis were based on formant plots and statistical analysis.

Three hypotheses form the bases of this study: 1) regional differences will be present in the vowels of different Australian states, 2) vowel innovation is likely to exist for Melbourne adolescents, but will interact with regional vowel characteristics, and 3) gender differences will be present in the degree to which Melbourne males and females orient to innovation or regional affiliation in their vowel realisations.

The results indicate that there are clearly identifiable regional characteristics present in the vowels of different Australian states. Melbourne vowels are overall lower and generally more retracted than Sydney vowels, while Adelaide vowels tend to be the highest, and also somewhat more retracted than Sydney. However, these are not absolute differences; each state appears to have a uniquely shaped vowel space.

The regional differences are overt enough to obscure general observations of the vowel shift in Melbourne with the present data, though some indications of Melbourne vowel innovation are found. Females tend towards more supralocal features, and males display more regional characteristics. This study contributes to the exploration of Australian vowel shifting, and illustrates the importance of gender and region in vowel variation and change, highlighting the need to look more comprehensively at regional vowel differences.

BERNARD, J. R. L. (1970) Toward the acoustic specification of Australian English. *Zeitschrift für Phonetik*, 2/3: 113-128.

BUTCHER, A. (2006) Formant frequencies of /hVd/ vowels in the speech of South Australian females. In *Proceedings of the 11th Australian International Conference on Speech Science & Technology*, eds. P. Warren & C. Watson, 449-453.

COX, F. (1999) Vowel change in Australian English. *Phonetica*, 56: 1-27.

COX, F. (2006) The acoustic characteristics of /hVd/ vowels in the speech of some Australian teenagers. *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, 26: 147-179.

COX, F. & PALETHORPE, S. (2001) The changing face of Australian English vowels. IN BLAIR, D. & COLLINS, D. (eds.) *Varieties of English around the world: English in Australia*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 17-44.

OASA, H. (1989) Phonology of current Adelaide English. In Collins and Blair (eds.), 271-287.

Contact: Rosemary Billington, Unit 2/39 Evelyn Street, Clayton, Vic 3168, Australia.
Ph: +61 3 9544 3925 (home), +61 402 620 182 (mobile).
Email: roseybee86@hotmail.com